

# Al-Ghazālī's Reading of the Fourth Gospel

Vali Abdi<sup>1</sup>, Eirini Avraam Artemi<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

Throughout their long history of theological debates, both Christians and Muslims have studied and challenged one another's beliefs and Scriptures. From the ninth century onward, Muslims have studied the Bible and criticized Christian Trinitarian doctrines. Similarly, al-Ghazālī, a famous Muslim philosopher and theologian wrote a treatise to challenge the divinity of Jesus. Since in his view Christians have identified Jesus with God in accordance with the fourth Gospel, he focuses on this Gospel and interprets it in a way to refute the divinity of Jesus. He suggests a metaphorical interpretation of this Gospel, and therefore, studies all of its complicated verses in figurative, rather than literal, terms. By doing so, he concludes Jesus was a human being, not a divine being as Christians believe.

**Keywords:** al-Ghazālī, metaphor, interpretation, Gospel, Jesus.

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1. Assistant Professor, Department of Comparative Religions and Mysticism, Faculty of Theology and Islamic Studies, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran. Email: [v\\_abdi@ferdowsi.um.ac.ir](mailto:v_abdi@ferdowsi.um.ac.ir) (Corresponding Author).

2. Lecturer, Hellenic Open University, Greece.



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## Introduction

Islam as a monotheistic religion emerged in an environment in which worshippers of stars, idolaters, polytheists, Christians, and Jews were living together. As time passed, Muslims and Christians began to study and learn about each other's doctrines. Particularly, in the ninth century, Christians and Muslims were for the first time introduced to one another's teachings and formed attitudes that are influential even today (Thomas and Barbara 2009, 569; Abdi 2019, 8). Thus al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) is the last thinker in the line of Christian-Muslim dialogical setting. After the eleventh century, the tolerable atmosphere and dialogical heritage gradually disappeared, giving way to hostility and dogmatism. For instance, the way Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) approaches non-Muslims and even non-Sunnites is a good witness to our claim.

It should be noted here that we do not concentrate on al-Ghazālī's theological or philosophical ideas, which are addressed by numerous works. We will instead explain his understanding of the fourth Gospel. As a Muslim thinker, al-Ghazālī read his monotheistic ideas into the passages of the fourth Gospel and regarded Jesus as a human being. Further, al-Ghazālī uses his mystical worldview in his interpretation of the Gospel as well. He refers to Sufi hermeneutical methods to refute anthropomorphism and to justify God's transcendent being. As a result, he uses both philosophical-theological and mystical methods to interpret the Gospel, and therefore, draws a different conclusion. For him, the Christian Scripture does not affirm the divinity of Jesus.

Finally, the way al-Ghazālī studies Christian Scriptures is very interesting, for he like a modern Biblical scholar focuses on his methods, by which analyzes the texts. His approaches and methods are not as polemical as the title of his treatise suggests, but are hermeneutical, which can be useful even today. Surprisingly contrary to his predecessors, al-Ghazālī does not try to show that Christians have distorted their Scriptures but to clarify the fact that they have misinterpreted their Bible. In the following pages, to clarify the difference between his reading of the Gospel and that of Church Fathers, we briefly will refer to interpretive doctrines of Cyril of Alexandria as the main representative of mainstream Christianity.

## **Chronological Review: Muslim Thinkers and the Fourth Gospel**

The fourth Gospel has played an important role in the history of Christian-Muslim controversies. On the one hand, Muslims have regarded the word Παράκλητος (*paraklētos*) in the Gospel according to John (14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7, 20, 22) as a clear witness to the prophethood of Muhammad the prophet (Montazery & Karimpur, 2018, 114). On the other hand, they have used the same Gospel as the main source to challenge the Trinitarian doctrines. The majority of Muslim apologists based on John 20:17<sup>1</sup> have refuted the divinity of Jesus and considered him merely as a human being (Accad 2003, 201, 202, 206, 209, 210).

The first known Muslim text that deals with the fourth Gospel is from the pen of Ali ibn Rabban al-Tabari (d. 850 CE): *al-Radd 'ala al-Naṣārā* (Refutation of the Christians). He repeatedly quoted from the Gospels to clarify the view that Jesus was a human being and subordinated to God, that synoptic Gospels did not consider Jesus as a divinity, and that Nicene Creed based on the fourth Gospel regarded Jesus as true God from true God (Beaumont 2008, 181). Although al-Tabari quotes from John's Gospel, he is careful not to mention those phrases that support the divinity of Jesus. To criticize the Nicene Creed and the divinity of Jesus, al-Tabari refers to some Johannine texts, including John 17.3; 20.17; 14.24; 14.31. For him, Jesus' sayings are clearly in contradiction with the Nicene Creed. The purpose of the author was to challenge those verses in the Gospel of John that allegedly assumed the divine nature of Jesus and the incarnation of the Word (Beaumont 2008, 182-83, 194).

Al-Nāshi' al-Akbar (905) a Mu'tazilites scholar also challenged Christian Trinitarian doctrines and rejected the divinity of Jesus the Christ. To refute the divinity of Jesus, al-Nāshi' refers to the fourth Gospel 20:17, in which Jesus distinguishes himself from God the Father. It should be noted that Christian apologists such as John Chrysostom (d. 407) and Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428) have used the verse under discussion to show that Jesus was both human

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1. "Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'; "Λέγει αὐτῇ Ἰησοῦς Μή μου ἄπτου, οὐπω γὰρ ἀναβέβηκα πρὸς τὸν Πατέρα· πορεύου δὲ πρὸς τοὺς ἀδελφούς μου καὶ εἰπὲ αὐτοῖς Ἐναβαίνω πρὸς τὸν Πατέρα μου καὶ Πατέρα ὑμῶν καὶ Θεὸν μου καὶ Θεὸν ὑμῶν".

(Ὁ ἄνθρωπος) and God (Ὁ Θεός) (Accad 2003, 201, 202, 206, 209, 210). Later on, in the Abbasid period, Christian polemicists, including Timothy the Nestorian (d. 823), interpreted the above verse in the context of mainstream Christianity to clarify two aspects of Jesus; i.e. his humanity and divinity (Newman 1993, 175, 181, 178-79). Nevertheless, al-Nāshi' considers it a clear proof-text to show Jesus' humanity; i.e. Jesus was merely a human being. In his viewpoint, the verse shows Jesus was not God Himself because He reported to his disciples that he would ascend to his Father. Finally, he recommends Christians to regard Biblical proof-texts (e.g. Mat 28:19) about the divinity of Jesus in a way that confirms his humanity. More precisely speaking, for al-Nāshi', Christians should regard Jesus' complicated and divine Biblical titles (e.g. Son of God) in metaphorical terms (Thomas 2008, 58, 60; al-Nāshi' al-Akbar 2006, 230-35).

Hasan Ibn Ayyub (d. 986), another Mu'tazilite thinker, also criticized both the doctrine of Trinity and the Christian understanding of their Holy Book. For him, even Mat 28:19<sup>1</sup> does not refer to the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus, but represents the grace and blessing of the Holy Spirit. Additionally, al-Hasan uses other Biblical verses, including John 6:38; 20:17; Hebrews 1:3; Mat 1:1, 16:16; Luck 22:29 to show that Jesus was a human being, that he was other than God and was not God Himself, that he was a prophet like other messengers, and that he was a servant of God. For this reason, al-Hasan reiterates that Christians because of their misinterpretations have identified Jesus with God. He then concludes that all allegedly divine attributes of Jesus in the Gospels should be viewed in allegorical terms, rather than in their literal meanings<sup>2</sup> (Ibn Taymiyya 1999, 158-63).

Emphasizing the metaphorical interpretation of the Gospels can also be found in 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Hamadānī's *Tathbīt* (d. 1025). On the one hand, he believes Christians have distorted their Scriptures to affirm the divinity of Jesus (e.g. Matt 28:19), and on the other hand, he asks Christians to interpret their Holy Book metaphorically. He exceeds his Mu'tazilites predecessors in mentioning Johannine verses such as John 5:30, 36-37; 12:44; 14:24; 17:25 to repudiate the divinity of Jesus. As a result, he draws on an allegorical reading

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1. "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"; "πορευθέντες οὖν μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, βαπτίζοντες αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ Πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ Υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ Ἁγίου Πνεύματος".

2. At his brother's request, he wrote a treatise titled *al-Radd 'ala al-Naṣārā*, which is preserved through Ibn Taymiyya's work.

of the Bible to establish Jesus as a servant and a prophet (‘Abd al-Jabbār 1966, 1:96, 104-108, 112-14, 117, 123).

*Al-Radd al-jamīl li-ilāhiyyat ‘Īsā bi-ṣarīḥ al-Injīl* (A fitting refutation of the divinity of Jesus from the evidence of the gospel) is a detailed polemical treatise attributed to a great Muslim philosopher, jurist, theologian, and Sufi, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111). The treatise includes three chapters and is mainly dedicated to a rejection of the divinity of Jesus. Some scholars raise doubts concerning the authorship of *Refutation* because al-Ghazālī has not cited *al-Radd al-jamīl* in any of his well-known works. Additionally, throughout the treatise, there are references to the Coptic version of the Gospels, which led some other scholars to believe that the *Refutation* belongs to an Egyptian Coptic milieu (Beaumont & Friemuth 2016, 1-4). However, there are various quotations from Muslim sources throughout the *Refutation* such as the Quran and Sufi traditions. For this reason, the treatise seems to come from a Muslim pen. Therefore, even before al-Ghazālī, Muslims studied and interpreted Christian Scriptures in general and the fourth Gospel in particular. However, in comparison to his predecessors, al-Ghazālī has dedicated a treatise to John’s gospel, studied the Gospel as deep as possible, gained a comprehensive knowledge of Biblical traditions, and put forward a new method for the interpretation of the Holy Bible: figurative interpretation. Moreover, he does not accuse Christians of corrupting or distorting their Holy Book but recommends them to read and interpret it with a different method.

## **The Refutation of the Divinity of Jesus**

Al-Ghazālī, in the first place, quotes various Biblical verses and reads his ideas into them to demonstrate the humanity of Jesus. John 10:30 is the first text that al-Ghazālī cites to refute the divinity of Jesus: “I and the Father are one”<sup>1</sup>. In this passage, Jesus seemingly describes himself as one with God. However, from al-Ghazālī’s viewpoint, by referring to the Old Testament Jesus recommended the Jews to regard his words in metaphorical terms (Beaumont & Friemuth 2016, Arabic text, 100). To clarify his understanding of the aforementioned passage, al-Ghazālī refers to an Islamic tradition in which God says “whenever I love my servant I will be the ear with which he hears, the eye with which he sees, the tongue with which he speaks, and the hand with which he strikes.” According to al-Ghazālī, none of these expressions shows that God is

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1. ἐγὼ καὶ ὁ Πατὴρ ἓν ἐσμὲν

present in such bodily members, but rather it shows that a faithful servant can be in close relation with God (Beaumont & Friemuth 2016, Arabic text, 100; Daylami 1992, vol. 1, Hadith 292470).

In his attempt to refute the doctrine of Union and the divinity of Jesus, al-Ghazālī focuses on John 17:11 as a sound proof-text: “Holy Father, protect them by Your name, the name You gave Me, so that they may be one as We are one.”<sup>1</sup> For him, this passage is a metaphor, just like the previous one. In other words, if his union with God is the reason for his divinity, then his disciples should be regarded as gods and this is not only shameful but also violates any rational principles (Beaumont & Friemuth 2016, Arabic text, 104). To validate his interpretation, al-Ghazālī refers to Paul’s letters as well (1 Cor 6:17) and interprets John 17:17-22 in allegorical terms. He reemphasizes that this passage is also a metaphor; i.e. as Jesus’ deeds being in agreement with God’s will (Beaumont & Friemuth 2016, Arabic text, 106). After citing several Biblical passages, al-Ghazālī concludes that the Union logically requires any harmony and connection between body and soul, but such relation does not fit God. Furthermore, the Christian understanding of the Union implies that God has been affected by bodily passions.

## **The Separation between God and Jesus**

Al-Ghazālī, in the second place, concentrates on the verses that explicitly or implicitly indicate a kind of difference between God and Jesus. By doing so, he seeks to show that Jesus was not God and that Jesus subordinated to God. The way al-Ghazālī interprets the verses is interesting in itself. He believes John 12:44 (“Then Jesus cried out, whoever believes in me does not believe in me alone, but in the One who sent Me”<sup>2</sup>) differentiates between Jesus and God Himself. That Jesus made obedience to himself as obedience to God and designated his commands as God’s orders testifies to a sharp separation between himself and God. In other words, he was not God but did his deeds were in accordance with His will. Additionally, 1 John 4:12-14 shows such words should not be taken literally, but rather in metaphorical or allegorical terms. All human activities of Jesus, such as his sleep, speech, and suffering, indicate his humanity and, above all, Matt 27:46<sup>3</sup> shows he was not God

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1. ... Πάτερ ἅγιε, τήρησον αὐτοὺς ἐν τῷ ὀνόματί σου ᾧ δέδωκάς μοι, ἵνα ᾧσιν ἐν καθῶς ἡμεῖς.

2. Ἰησοῦς δὲ ἔκραξεν καὶ εἶπεν Ὁ πιστεύων εἰς ἐμὲ οὐ πιστεύει εἰς ἐμὲ ἀλλὰ εἰς τὸν πέμψαντά με

3. “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

(Beaumont & Friemuth 2016, Arabic text, 108, 112). Moreover, al-Ghazālī regards 1 John 4: 12-14 as clear evidence that Jesus was not God and that even he refers to a sharp difference between himself and God. Consequently, such passages should be interpreted metaphorically; otherwise, the disciples should be regarded as sons of God as well.

To sum up, al-Ghazālī admits that some of these passages refer to the union between Jesus' associates and God but such phrases do not entail that they are divine. Likewise, Jesus should not be regarded as God. For him, the fact that Jesus was unaware of the time for figs and the exact hour of the end of times (Mark 11:12-14; 13:32) attests to the fact that he was not a divine being (Beaumont & Friemuth 2016, Arabic text, 108, 112, 122, 126). John 17:1-3 clearly shows that Jesus confined divinity to God and attributed humanity to himself (Beaumont & Friemuth 2016, Arabic text, 118). Moreover, Paul makes it clear that Jesus was subject to God, like all other creatures, and was a human being (1 Corinthians 15:28; 1 Timothy 2:5). Other Johannine verses such as 14:1; 8:26; 8:39-40 make a clear separation between Jesus and God. All these passages refer to the humanity of Jesus, his submission to the will of God, his position as a messenger, and his metaphorical interpretation of himself (Beaumont & Friemuth 2016, Arabic text, 122, and 126).

### **The refutation of the Union according to Christian Sects**

It is worth noting that those Christian sects that did not accept the conciliar creeds were condemned and labeled as "heretics" by mainstream Christianity, and inevitably left the Byzantine Empire and settled in the Arabian Peninsula or the Persian Empire. These so-called "heretical" sects mainly included the Melkites (Greek orthodox Christians who adhered to the Council of Chalcedon), Nestorians (the followers of Nestorius who refused the doctrine of Theotokos), and Jacobites (who wrote and spoke in Aramaic and Syriac and did not accept the Council of Chalcedon). As a result, Muslims were familiar with the doctrines of these three sects (Abdi 2019, 7; Artemi 2012, 213). Thus al-Ghazālī refuted the divinity of Jesus as believed by these three sects.

Al-Ghazālī, in the third place, goes on to refute the doctrine of Union as believed by these three Christian sects. He, in the first place, records the Jacobites' understanding of the Union to the effect that there is a link between the body of Jesus and the divinity. However, for al-Ghazālī, the fact that Jesus is composed of two natures automatically challenges his divinity because it

lacks simplicity. In other words, the combination of divinity and humanity do not square with the divine being (οὐσιᾶ), for the former is marked by simplicity but the latter is characterized by plurality (Beaumont & Friemuth 2016, Arabic text, 128, 132). According to Melkites, there is no mixture between the humanity of Jesus and the essence of God. On the one hand, they lay emphasis on the Union, and on the other hand, they exclude the divinity from crucifixion because the humanity of Jesus united with universal humanity that has no objective existence but only exists in mind. Further, al-Ghazālī proposes a logical syllogism: “The Messiah was crucified, and nothing of that which was crucified was divine, therefore nothing of the Messiah was divine” (Beaumont & Friemuth 2016, Arabic text, 138, 140ff). Accordingly, the union of divinity and humanity in Christ results in divine suffering.

For Nestorians, the Union occurred in the will (*al-mashiyya*) and there is no separation between the will of God and that of Jesus. However, for al-Ghazālī, such an explanation violates their Scripture because it is said “take away the cup this from me; yet not what I will, but what you will” (mark 14:36, 15:34). This verse indicates a clear distinction between the two wills. In another case, during his crucifixion, Jesus said: “my God, my God why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27: 46). Such cases show that the will of Jesus was different from that of God because he did not know the reason for his crucifixion (Beaumont & Friemuth 2016, Arabic text, 146).

### **Jesus’s Titles do not imply his Divinity**

For al-Ghazālī, the titles that Christians apply to Jesus should be interpreted metaphorically, not literally. As a result, Jesus’ title ‘God’ does not indicate his divinity. To justify his construal, al-Ghazālī quotes a handful of Sufi sayings. Some Muslim Sufis such as al-Bastami (d.874) and al-Hallaj (d.922) have expressed paradoxical sayings during their ecstatic experiences and referred to themselves as divine beings. For example, al-Hallaj said: “I am God, and there is nothing in my robe except God,” and al-Bastami said: “Glory be to me, how great is my status!” In al-Ghazālī’s perspective, such sayings should be taken figuratively, rather than literally. Taking these words in the literal sense would oppose sound reason (Beaumont & Friemuth 2016, Arabic text, 150). Likewise, by referring to the Holy Bible, al-Ghazālī concludes the title “lord” does not imply the divinity of Jesus, rather it means an owner such as the lord of the house or lord of the property. Such implications are mentioned in psalms 82:6; exodus 7:1; 1 Cor 8:5-6. For him, the above verse



(1 Cor 8:5-6) explicitly remarks “we have only one God”. These indicate that he does not assign to himself any attributes of God (Beaumont & Friemuth 2016, 152, 153).

According to al-Ghazālī “Sonship” of Jesus does not affirm his divinity. For instance, in Exodus 4:22-23 it is said: “Say to Pharaoh, if you do not send my firstborn son to worship me in the desert, I will surely kill your firstborn son.” Al-Ghazālī believes that the phrase “my son” here refers to the children of Israel. In other cases, the titles “my father,” “your father” (John 20:17), “my son” (psalm 82:6; Luke 6:35-36; 1 John 5:1) should be interpreted in metaphorical terms. As these verses show, Jesus considers God as superior to himself, the will of Jesus is subject to that of God, he frequently respects his Father. In the Old Testament, David the king (Psalm 103:13) clarifies such a metaphorical understanding of Fatherhood by saying: “As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him” (Beaumont & Friemuth 2016, Arabic text, 152, 154).

### **Johannine Texts that Obviously Indicate Jesus’s divinity**

Those Christians who lived under the Muslim rule and introduced the doctrine of the Trinity to their Muslim audience tried to explain the Trinity in the framework of Islamic theology (*kalam*). Therefore, they introduced the hypostases as God’s attributes (Abdi 2019, 11). Like other Muslim theologians, al-Ghazālī raised objections against such teachings. By focusing on John 1:1-3, al-Ghazālī refers to the Trinitarian doctrine. For Christians, God is one in essence and three in hypostases, at the same time, they view the hypostases as His attributes. Therefore, the phrases at the beginning of the fourth Gospel do not indicate the divinity of Jesus at all. The “word” at the beginning of John’s Gospel refers to God’s attribute of knowledge. According to the above verse, in the beginning, God was eternally knowing one and His attribute i.e., knowledge was His indispensable quality (Beaumont & Friemuth 2016, Arabic text, 160). Al-Ghazālī raises doubts about John 1:6-10. The Christian construal of the verse as evidence for Jesus’s divinity is not reasonable. “Jesus’ being in the world”<sup>1</sup> should be either as divine or as human or as a third entity (neither divine nor human). Al-Ghazālī dismisses the latter

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1. Al-Ghazālī adds the word “always” to his interpretation of the verse: “Always having been in the world.”

two horns, and prefers the divine over the other two alternatives. For him, this part of the verse cannot confirm his humanity because a human being cannot exist before the creation of the world. As a result, it describes a divine being. However, the divinity should not be regarded as a witness to Jesus for in other parts of the same gospel (John 9:5) the word “light” is mentioned in the sense of “guidance” (Beaumont & Friemuth 2016, Arabic text, 164). According to al-Ghazālī instead of the passage: “The word became flesh” (John 1:14), in the Coptic version it is said: “the word made body”, as a result, the hypostasis of the word that has been identified with God made body; that is, created Jesus. Consequently, the above verse does not affirm the divinity of Jesus. The Christians interpretation of John’s Gospel made it inevitable to talk about three gods: fatherhood, sonship, and proceeding. Therefore, the way they understood the verses deviated from the true path of monotheism. Additionally, al-Ghazālī (based on Q 5:73) challenged the relationship between attributes and essence as well. For him, if the three hypostases share the same essence, then they must share the same attributes as well (Beaumont & Friemuth 2016, Arabic text, 164, 170).

Al-Ghazālī reiterates that (John 8:56-58)<sup>1</sup> should also be interpreted metaphorically because Abraham did not know the day of his birth let alone that of Jesus. For al-Ghazālī, the verb “seeing” in this verse means “knowledge,” thus “Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day” means Abraham knew Jesus would come to guide the humankind and to show them the true path. Such notions can be found in 1 Corinthians 2:7; Acts 2:22 (Beaumont & Friemuth 2016, Arabic text, 172, 174).

By citing the Quran (3:58; 4:171; 38:75), al-Ghazālī interprets John 14:8-12 as follows: since humans cannot see God personally, Jesus described himself as a mediation between God and worshippers, and his sayings and deeds were in accordance with God’s commands. No one can see God personally and physically, but a prophet like Jesus can serve as a mediation between Him and His servants. Interestingly, Paul affirms such an interpretation in his letter (I Timothy 2:5). Moreover, if he were God the Father, he would not say: “I am going to my Father.” Consequently, the verse must be interpreted in figurative terms (Beaumont & Friemuth 2016, Arabic text, 178, 180).

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1 . Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.” So the Jews said to him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was I am”.

## **The Miracles of Jesus from al-Ghazālī's Viewpoint**

Christians have considered Jesus' miracles as a sign of his divinity. For example, Theodore Abu Qurrah (d. ca. 829) a Melkite theologian after comparing Jesus' miracles with those of Moses and other Israelite prophets, concludes that Jesus unlike his precedents performed the miracles only by his own power, whereas other prophets performed through God's will and power<sup>1</sup> (Newman 1993, 306; Mark & Friemuth 2016, 45-46). On the contrary, for Muslim theologians, Jesus' miracles did not signify his Divinity. For instance, according to al-Māturīdī (d. 944) God performed miracles through Jesus, i.e., Jesus like other prophets such as Moses was dependent on the action and will of God (al-Māturīdī 1986, 210).

In the same vein, for al-Ghazālī the performance of miracles cannot prove the divinity of Jesus, other prophets have also performed various miracles but they have not been considered as divine beings, not to mention that their miracles were more powerful than those of Jesus. Moses, for example, changed the staff into a snake (Exodus 4: 3, 7:10), indeed he gave life to an unanimated thing. In other words, it is true that Jesus raised the dead but Moses made alive what had no life. Dividing the sea (Ex 14: 21) and putting the hand into the cloak and its being the leprous like the snow (Ex 4:6) are other miracles attributed to Moses in the Holy Bible. Moreover, it is said that Elijah and Elisha also raised the dead (1 Kings 17:17-19; 2 Kings 4: 18-37) and Joshua stopped the sun (Joshua 10:13). However, for al-Ghazālī none of these miracles prove that those prophets were Divine beings because all of them performed the miracles by God's providence, not by their own power (Beaumont & Friemuth 2016, Arabic text, 97). Consequently, for al-Ghazālī, the miracles of Jesus do not indicate his divinity. Finally, by citing numerous Biblical testimonies (e.g. John 8:40, 11:41-42, 12:49, 17:17; Matthew 24:36, 26:39, 27:46; Mark 13:32, 15:34; Acts 2:22) al-Ghazālī goes on to suggest the humanity of Jesus and highlights the fact that he made his miracles in God's permission.

## **The Doctrine of Union and the Divinity of Jesus in Christian Theology**

As demonstrated before, al-Ghazālī in the first place uses some Johannine verses to repudiate the Union as believed by Christians. However, Christian

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1 . Hypothetical Discussion between Jacobite Monk and an Amir of Jerusalem (c 800 AD).

theologians cited Biblical evidence and comprehensively debated about the divinity of Jesus and Incarnation. Therefore, in Christian theology, there were attempts to explain the relationship between Father and Son. In his letter to Colossians (1:15), St. Paul identifies the Son as the “image of invisible God” (εἰκὼν τοῦ Θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου) and the same statement can be found in the letter to the Hebrews (1:3) as well, in which Son is the “reflection of God’s glory” (ἀπαύγασμα τῆς δόξης). Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444) explains the consubstantiality of Father and Son by using biblical words of the apostle Paul such as *the express image of His person, the perfect imprint, the Light-being, the out-raying or radiance of the divine* (Hebr. 1:3, Rom. 1:23, 8:29, Cor. I 11:7, 15:49, Cor. II 3:18, 4:4). By insisting on the consubstantiality of God the Father and God the Son, Cyril cannot bear that “some people (i.e. Arians and Nestorians) are foolish enough to bring down the Word and Only Begotten Son of God from his supreme station. They reduce Him from equality with God the Father by denying his consubstantiality and refusing to crown him with a perfect identity of nature” (Cyril of Alexandria 1994, SC 97, 306, PG 75, 1256C. Cf Artemi 2013a, 17:53). Furthermore, in the prologue to the fourth Gospel (1:1ff), Jesus is identified as the pre-existent logos (Λόγος). Irenaeus of Lyons (d. 202) believes that the unique identity of the Second Person as the divine Logos gives him the ability to reveal God, both before and during the Incarnation (Irenaeus 1885, 4.6.3). In each case, the justification of the unique revelatory role of the Second Person is his full knowledge of the Father, which Irenaeus supports by drawing on Logos theology (Lashier 2012, vol. 66, 2012, 356). Finally, in the period of the Church Fathers and throughout Ecumenical Councils, the consubstantiality of Jesus was chosen as the main principle of faith. Cyril of Alexandria reemphasizes that the Son is co-eternal and consubstantial with Father (Artemi 2017, vol. 96, t. 22). He uses allegories such as the sun and the light to clarify the doctrine of Homoousios (ὁμοούσιος). Although Son is begotten (γεννημένος) beyond place and time, he is eternal and shares the substance of God the Father, he is the light from the light of Father (φῶς ἐκ φωτός τοῦ Πατρὸς), and there is no separation between them (Artemi 2012, 210-13ff).

### **The Gospel of John in the Christian Setting**

Contrary to Muslim thinkers in general and al-Ghazālī in particular, Christian apologists have regarded the fourth Gospel as authentic evidence to show Jesus’s eternality and divinity. Cyril of Alexandria viewed the majority of the afore-mentioned verses as proof-texts to confirm both the divinity and the dual

nature (i.e. divine and human) of Jesus. On his interpretation, the verses under discussion show the unity of Will between Father and Son. Furthermore, for him John 17:11 comprises two themes: Jesus humiliated himself and became human for the sake of us, and at the same time, he possessed a divine element in himself. In other words, Cyril interprets the verse as an approval of Jesus's dual nature: a total man who remained total God (Artemi 2012, 214ff; Artemi 2017, 96:22). While al-Ghazālī adduced John 12:44 to draw a distinction between Father and Son, the archbishop of Alexandria reads the same verse as indicating that Jesus was God by nature, that he issued from God the Father because of his consubstantiality with God (Cyril 1885, 162). For him, Jesus is the Incarnate Logos and this is something that Cyril gives great emphasis, and for this reason, he clarifies that Mary, the Holy Virgin Mother for Christians, should be called Theotokos (Artemi 2013b). In another case, although al-Ghazālī drew on Biblical passages (especially John 17:1-3) to make a separation between God and Son, Cyril drew on the same text to identify Jesus with God. In Cyril's viewpoint, the afore-mentioned verse in no way shows that the Son lacked glory, but indicates: "how very necessary his own glory was to the Father, that he might be known consubstantial with Him" (Cyril 1885, 480, 481). For Cyril of Alexandria, the verses under discussion describe Jesus as higher than a mere mediator. According to his interpretation, the divine nature cannot be subject to corporeal vision. However, Jesus is the true image of God, he is in the likeness of his Father, and more importantly, he shares the same essence as that of the Father. As a result, only the Son—who is only-begotten—can manifest the Father (Cyril 1965a, 18, PG 75, 308BC; Cyril 1965b, vol. II, 120, lines 11-22, PG 71, 897AB).

## **Conclusion**

The way al-Ghazālī studies the Gospel and interprets it testifies to his deep knowledge of Christian Scriptures. Contrary to his Muslim predecessors, al-Ghazālī focuses on those Johannine passages, which were considered by Christians as proof-texts to the divinity of Jesus. By doing so, he recommends Christians to read their Scriptures in metaphorical terms. For al-Ghazālī, the Holy Book is full of figurative phrases, but none of them should be taken literally. By an allegorical interpretation of the Bible, al-Ghazālī refutes the divinity of Jesus, the Trinity, the Union, and finally, he views Jesus as a human being. According to him, had Christians read their Gospels in metaphorical terms, they would not have identified Jesus with God. To sum up, in al-Ghazālī's view, those Biblical passages that are clear and understandable

should not be interpreted, but those verses that are ambiguous and contradict pure reason must be interpreted in metaphorical terms. However, Christian apologists such as Cyril of Alexandria have read the same gospel as confirming the divinity, eternality, and consubstantiality of Son. Although both al-Ghazālī and Cyril have used the same gospel as their proof-text, different prejudices led them to draw different conclusions: the former understands Jesus as a human being, the latter regards him as a true God. Finally, whether one can consider al-Ghazālī as a forerunner of Biblical scholarship requires further studies.

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