Perhaps the most important period in Church history, when an Old Testament text became the focal point of a theological debate was the Iconoclastic Controversy in 8th–9th century Byzantium. This text is the Second Commandment, the “negative” counterpart of the First Commandment. For more than a hundred years people argued over how to worship the One God of the First Commandment in a “correct way,” and in order to have correct worship it is necessary to know precisely whom and how to worship. Both parties answered the question of “whom” to worship in traditional terms of the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon (451), yet the question of “how” to worship was answered differently. The ritual difference between the Iconodules and the Iconoclasts, that is, whether one accepted the veneration of images or not, corresponded to the difference of epistemological approaches which answered the question “how.” The analysis of the theological arguments of both parties allows us to expose the similarities and differences on the deeper level of epistemologies. This article will present a certain aspect of the Iconoclastic debate, namely, the interpretation of the “correct” approach to the divinity in the context of the Second Commandment, as a case study, revealing a fascinating interplay of arguments and texts from the New Testament, Patristic writers and classical philosophy that revolved around the Old Testament verse as around the hub of a wheel.

For setting the case in a wider context, one important question relating to the methodological setting of the following argument needs to be raised. What exactly was Byzantine Iconoclasm? Many modern researchers consider it primarily a social and political movement initiated by the Emperors to solve their “practical” needs of comprehensive reform of the Byzantine State and society with theological argumentation developed at later stages (by the 750s), as the only “ideological” language the Byzantines could understand. In this case the occasion

1 “Iconoclasm was always an anomalous doctrine, without strong theological roots or clear theological implications” (W. Treadgold, A Concise History of Byzantium
for initiating Iconoclasm in the late 720s was precisely the crude and literal understanding of the Second Commandment by the uneducated former general Leo III (717–41). This “social” trend of studies in Iconoclasm is partly preconditioned by a sheer lack of authentic sources on the Iconoclast side, and the fragmented state of those we have. Given the lack of proper “theological” sources on the Iconoclast side and discarding the trustworthiness of the Iconodulic sources as ideologically biased as far as their representation of the Iconoclasts is concerned, a scholar is forced to focus on “non-theological” aspects of such sources as the numerous Lives of the saints or Chronographies, inevitably deriving from them “non-theological” data and conclusions. Moreover, even with those sources that we have, we can see a seemingly “evolutionary” development of the arguments in the Controversy from simple scriptural ones based upon a literal understanding of the Second Commandment, through more complicated Christological arguments reaching a very complex philosophical argumentation at the latest stages of the Controversy. If this is the case, any attempt at “theological” investigation becomes an ad hoc examination of a secondary and necessarily a patchwork theology created by a few court theologians and serving non-theological purposes. Not a very inspiring task.

Fortunately this is not the case. We have an invaluable source safely dated to the initial period of the Iconoclastic Controversy – Apologetic Treatises against Those Who Calumniate Divine Images by John of Damascus2 – that allows us to reconsider the present view. If we examine closely the first two treatises written in the first years of the Controversy, against the foreground of the later Iconoclastic sources, we may see that John of Damascus refutes both some forms of Christological and philosophical arguments of the Iconoclasts, attested to in the later period.3 What does this mean? If the sophisticated theological stratum in Iconoclastic argument existed from the outset of

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