«WHAT IS MAN»: PSALM 8:4-5
IN JEWISH, CHRISTIAN AND MUSLIM EXEGESIS IN ARABIC*

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Medieval religious polemics are not only to be found in theological tractates. They often informed, in subtler ways, exegetical attitudes. The following pages attempt, through a limited case-study, to recover the traces of dialectical relations between different religious systems as reflected in their reading of the same Holy Writ.

In the Talmud we read:

Rabbi Judah said in Rab's name: When the Holy One, blessed be He, wished to create man, he [first] created a company of ministering angels and said to them: Is it your desire that we make man in our image? They answered: Sovereign of the Universe, what will be his deeds? Such and such will be his deeds, He replied. Thereupon they exclaimed: Sovereign of the Universe, «What is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou thinkest of him?» [Ps. 8:4]. Thereupon He stretched out His little finger among them and consumed them with fire. The same happened with a second company.3

Through the setting of God's consultation with the angels, the midrash seeks to explain the plural of «our image» in Gen. 1:26. Ps. 8:5 is represented

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1 The Hebrew (rezonkhem na'ale adam be-talmeni) keeps intact the «Let us make man in our image» of Gen. 1:26.

2 Sanh. 38b, quoted according to Soncino translation. There are several versions of this consultation with the angels, see Midrash Tehilim... Shokker Tov, ed. S. Buber (New York 1947), 73, 78; The Midrash on Psalms, trans. William G. Braude, New Haven 1959, vol. 1, 120, 127.
here as the response to the outraged angels to the suggestion of making man in 
theirs’ (i.e. God and the angels’) image.

In this juxtaposition of Ps. 8:5 and Gen. 1:26 we found already the 
assumption that the two biblical passages should be read together. This 
understanding is shared by all the Judeo-Arabic commentators. Sa’adya, in his 
Summa Theologica, says:

Our Lord taught us through His prophets that He had given man priority over all his 
creatures, as He said: «And rule over the fish of the sea and the fowl of the air» [Gen. 
1:26], and in accordance with what He said in Psalm 8,3 «O Lord our Lord, how excellent 
thy name in all the earth» to the end [of the psalm].

Sa’adya does not deem it necessary to spell out the connection between Ps. 
8 and Gen. 1. Obviously he thinks in particular of Ps. 8:7-9: «Thou hast put 
all things under his feet... the fowl of the air and the fish of the sea». But it is 
also clear that Sa’adya sees Ps. 8 in general as reflections on Gen. 1.

The same interpretation is given by the Karaite Yefet ben ‘Elî (10th cent.), 
who says:

«Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; Thou hast put all things 
under his feet». In this he refers to what is mentioned thereafter, i.e., the animals, and he 
divided them in two, land and sea [animals]. This is similar to God’s saying in the 
beginning of the creation of Adam: «and rule over the fish of the sea».

For Yefet, however, the similarity of Ps. 8 to Gen. 1 goes beyond the rule 
over the animals.

When he mentioned the marvels of God’s workmanship in the heavens and what is therein, 
i.e., the moon and the stars... he came back to say of man: «What is man, that Thou art 
mindful of him?», meaning: Is his rank anywhere near that of your noblest creatures, 
that You should remember him amongst them, and [that] You should make him form resemble

8 Yefet (cited n. 6), fol. 32a, line 5.
9 Ibid., fol. 31b, lines 8 ff.
10 Ibid., and see H. Ben-Shammai, Shitot ha-Mahshava ha-dati scheh abî-Yasuf Ya’qûb 
298; vol. II, 235. Yefet’s understanding of the word Elohim here as «angels» is a 
 commonplace among commentators and hardly needs any reference. It is, however, worth 
 noting that the notorious liwi ha-Balkhi saw this verse as supporting his theory of a 
creator-angel: «He said that the meaning of ‘God said: let us make man’ is that the angels 
said ‘let us make man’, and therefore it is said ‘in our image, after our form’, because man 
resembles the angels, as it is said: ‘Thou hast made him a little lower than Elohim’, literally: 
‘Thou hast made him a little lower than God’, that is to say, He did not give him creating 
power and the ability to bring forth things ex nihilo» (ibid., 53, 238).
11 On his biography and writings, see S. Stroumsa (ed. and trans.), Dâwûd ibn Marwân 
S. STRUMSA

of a Syriac Christian commentary to Genesis,\textsuperscript{12} and it is quite possible that the claim mentioned by Yefet appeared in that commentary. Most of the Kitāb al-Khalīqa, however, is lost,\textsuperscript{13} and the extant parts of al-Muqammīs's work\textsuperscript{14} include no reference to the ranking of man and angels. But from the analysis of al-Muqammīs's theological book, ' Ishrān Maqāla, we may learn how he came to this view. Al-Muqammīs apparently converted to Christianity, and for many years studied with Christian teachers in Nisibis.\textsuperscript{15} The philosophical and theological education which he acquired during those years served him as a model when, after returning to Judaism, he endeavored to put together a Jewish system of theology and exegesis. Yet, he was not always thorough in his remodeling, and the resulting Jewish theology bears clear marks of its Christian origin.

In all probability it is this Christian background which accounts for al-Muqammīs's unusual view of the angels' lower rank.

For all Christians, the words of Genesis "in our image" were understood as referring to Jesus and the Trinity.\textsuperscript{16} Since Ps. 8 was interpreted, probably very early, as reflecting on Gen. 1, it was also understood as referring to Jesus. It is thus understood already by the author of Hebrews, who quotes it at some length:

> For unto the angels hath He not put in subjection the world to come, whereof we speak. But one in a certain place testified, saying, What is man, that Thou art mindful of him? or


\textsuperscript{13} One fragment of this book was identified by Haggai Ben-Shamai in the Cambridge collection of the Cairo Geniza, see Genizah Fragments No. 15 (April 1988), 3. The fragment, TS Ar. 52.184, represents parts of the fifth and the sixth chapters of the Kitāb al-khāliqa. On the Syriac-Christian echoes in this fragment, see S. Stroumza, The Impact of Syriac Tradition on Early Judaism-Arabic Bible Exegesis, forthcoming in "Aramaic and Arab Cultures: Encounter and Birth, Proceedings of the Aram Society Second International Conference".

\textsuperscript{14} These include most of his theological book, ' Ishrān Maqāla (see Stroumza, op. cit.) and some fragments of his polemical book, al-Radd ʿalā al-Nasāʾir min Tarīq al-Qiyās, the edition of which is under preparation by P. Fenton.


\textsuperscript{16} See Col. 3:10, and Saʿida's polemic with the Christians in this context, Saʿida's Commentary on Genesis, 51, 253, and Zucker's notes there.

Thus these imply some preeminence of humanity over others, since it is to humans and not to angels that the world-to-come was promised. But there is also no other preeminence: the words "Son of man" do not only denote humanity; they also refer in particular to Jesus Christ. The author clearly means that Jesus, the Son of Man, was made a little lower than the angels through death, as part of his mission. He presents this view as an exegesis of Ps. 8:4-7. The verses themselves are quoted according to the LXX in the rexius repetens...

Thus we still find in the Greek New Testament «What is (i) man...».

In the Syriac and in the Christian Arabic translations, however, the identification of the "Son of Man" with Jesus is often read into the Biblical verse, and Ps. 8:4 is translated: «Who is the man...».\textsuperscript{17} This rendering suppresses the ambivalence of the Hebrew verse, which is turned into a simple question. Instead of a feeling of the unworthiness of human beings, and astonishment at the world's subjection to these humble creatures, these Eastern Christian translations state that the Son of Man is remembered and crowned, and that everything is subjected to him. According to this Christian...
interpretation, the grace of God does not consist in giving the son of man more dominion that he deserves, but in lowering the Son of Man, "that he by grace of God should taste death for every man".20

Whether in fact "the divine Logos... humbled himself and became man" or whether "Christ was promoted in this way" depended on the particular denomination of each writer.21 Generally speaking, however, it was assumed that "the Son of Man" as the Logos was of a higher rank than the angels, and that through his subjection to death he was lowered "a little", i.e., for a little while.22

Now, when al-Muqammis returned to Judaism, he probably rejected the interpretation of Ps. 8 as referring to the Son of Man (i.e., Jesus).23 But it is quite plausible that he retained the notion that a son of man (i.e., a human being) is nobler than the angels.

Not only the ambivalence of the term "son of man" (which we have seen used by the author of Hebrews), but also other aspects of al-Muqammis's Christian education could lead him to support such a view. Following his Christian philosophical education, al-Muqammis calls man a "microcosm".24

The Christian theologians understood this term as saying that human beings share some traits with animals and some with angels.25 Paradoxically, it is the presence of animal traits which makes humanity more comprehensive than angelic nature, and makes man superior to the angels. This conception of man as a microcosm Yefet presents as the explanation of the view which sees man as superior to the angels.26 It stands to reason that here, too, as in his commentary on Psalms, Yefet refers to al-Muqammis.27

To sum up, it seems plausible that al-Muqammis's view of man's preeminence over the angels was a leftover from his Christian period.

Yefet, who mentions al-Muqammis's views, rejects them without mentioning their Christian background. Sa'adya, who openly polemizices with the Christians in his commentary on Genesis,28 refrains from mentioning them in his commentary on Ps. 8:7, which he translates: "And You have made him to rule over all those from among your creatures which You have subjected under his feet".29 He explains: "And I did not render 'You have made him to rule over your creatures' in a general way, because the greater celestial sphere and what is therein is included in God's works, and (yet) man is not ruling over it. Therefore I rendered it as specific."30

Sa'adya does not mention the angels, but it seems that it was his intention to exclude some heavenly bodies (and creatures) from the realm of the "son of man" — in opposition to the Christian view kept by al-Muqammis, a view already reflected in Heb. 3:5-9, and according to which everything is subjected to the Son of Man.

This implicit opposition is made explicit in an anonymous Jewish anti-Christian work in Arabic. The author states that Adam was superior to Jesus because he was created by the sheer will of God, whereas Jesus was soiled in a woman's womb. In the course of this argument, the author quotes a

21 The interpretation of "a little" (qalltan) as an adverb denoting time is apparent in the explanation of 'Ammâr al-‘Baghî, who says: "He means that through death He had made him lower than the angels, and then he mentioned the greatness of the dominion afterwards" (Kitâb al-Burâk, p. 76). But the Arabic Commentary of Ibn Jiqatilla has the same word, qalltan, in a quantitative meaning: "You have made him a little lower than the rank of the angels, because he is a living, rational [being] like them, except that he is mortal and [they] are immortal... Now death, by which he differs from the angels, is one word, and the life and rationality which he shares with them are two, and the one is less [laqall] than two"; see J. Finkel, Perûsh R. Moshe ben Shmuel ha-Kohen ibn Jiqatilla 'al Tehillm, ha-mizmorim 3, 4 and 8, "Horev" 3 (1996/37), 158.
22 Unless we adopt the suggestion that al-Muqammis had some Jewish-Christian connections, and assume that it was as a Jewish-Christian that he wrote his books. See S. Pines, The Jewish Christians of the Early Centuries of Christianity According to a New Source, "Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities" 2 (1966), 47, n. 176; Stroumsa, op. cit., 18-19.
23 'Ālam ṭuḥrîr; see Stroumsa, op. cit., 156-159.
24 See, for example, E. Platt, Une cosmologie chrétienne, "Mêlanges de l'Institut d'études orientales" 15 (1982), 85-86, 103-104; P. B. B. Shah, Vingt traités philosophiques et apologétiques d'auteurs arabes chrétiens du IXe au XIVe siècle, Cairo 1929, 97.
25 In his commentary to Gen. 1:26-27, see Ben-Shammay, op. cit., vol. II, 102:10-14.
27 See above, n. 16.
28 Wa-salatathu min khâla‘lîka ‘alâ kull man ja‘altahu taḥṣa qadamî, Commentary on Tehillm, ed. Qâfîb, 54.
29 Ibid.
paraphrase of Ps. 8:6-8.  

Here again, Ps. 8:5 is connected to Gen. 1:26. On the other hand, we can see the polemicist's awareness of a Christian interest in these two verses. Therefore, it is precisely these verses which he chooses to use as a refutation of Christology.

The complex trajectory of Ps. 8:5 between Jewish and Christian theologians which we have followed had also a Muslim epilogue. Al-Ṣinṭāq, a Muslim apologist, searched the Bible for proofs for Muḥammad's prophecy. Amongst them he quotes Ps. 8:5, in its Eastern Christian rendering: «Who is the Man of whom You are mindful?» The answer being: Muḥammad.

Now the Christian apologists thought it essential to show some similarity between God and man. But both Jewish and Muslim theologians emphasized the absolute difference between created and creator. The idea of a man created in «God's image» does not appear in the Quran, and many Muslims found this idea appalling. That a Muslim should have recourse to Ps. 8 (with its reference to «God's image»), in its Christologized translation, is an outstanding example of the free (indeed, at times, the wild) exchange of ideas between the three monotheistic religions in the Arabic cultural world.

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