

«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?¹ 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.²

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'ase adam be-zalmenū*) 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... Shokher Tov*, ed. S. Buber (New York 1947), 73, 78; *The Midrash on Psalms*, trans. William G. Braude, New Haven 1959, vol. I, 120, 127.

here as the response to the outraged angels to the suggestion of making man in «their» (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. 1:28], and in accordance with what He said in Psalm 8,³ «O Lord our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth» to the end [of the psalm].⁴

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 'Eli (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 he⁵ 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».⁶

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,⁷ that You should remember him amongst them, and [that] You should make his form resemble

theirs...?⁸

Yefet alludes here to «our form» of Gen. 1:26, and this reference is made explicit in the following lines:

And his words: «and Thou hast crowned him with glory and honor» refer to the form of his body, and «the glory» is the upright posture, like the angels'... and «the honor» is the beauty of traits, and his glory is the resemblance to the form of the angels, and this is the meaning of God's saying: «Let us make a man in our image».⁹

Like the midrash in Sanhedrin, Yefet understands the words «our image» as meaning: the image of the angels. Yet Yefet leaves no doubt as to the limits of man's resemblance to the angels: it is only physical. In the ranks of creation man is lower than the angels:

And his words: «and Thou hast made him a little lower» indicate that the angels are higher, as to their rank, than man. This refutes David ben [sic] Marwān, peace upon him, who claimed that man is nobler [ajall] than the angels.¹⁰

Dāwūd ibn Marwān al-Muqammiš (fl. 9th cent.), whom Yefet attacks here, was the first Jewish theologian to write in Arabic.¹¹ Among his writings was a *Kitāb al-Khalīqa*, an Arabic rendering (probably a Judaized translation)

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-Maḥshava ha-datit shel abū-Yūsuf Ya'qūb al-Qirqisānī ve-Yefet ben 'Eli*, Ph. D. Thesis, Hebrew University of Jerusalem 1978, vol. I, 298; vol. II, 235. Yefet's understanding of the word *Elohīm* here as «angels» is a commonplace among commentators and hardly needs any reference. It is, however, worth noting that the notorious Ḥīwī ha-Balkhī 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 *Elohīm*', 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, 258).

11 On his biography and writings, see S. Stroumsa (ed. and trans.), *Dāwūd ibn Marwān al-Muqammiš's Twenty Chapters ('Ishrūn Maqāla)*, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1989, 15-35.

3 The edition has incorrectly «Psalm 5».

4 *Al-Mukhtār fi'l-Amānāt wa'l-i'tiqādāt* IV:1, ed. J. Qāfiḥ, Jerusalem n.d., 151.

5 On the identity of the author(s) of Psalms according to Yefet, see U. Simon, *Arba' Gishōt Le-Sefer Tehilim*, Ramat Gan 1982, 73 ff.; and its review by H. Ben-Shammai, «Qiryat Sefer» 58 (1983) 400, 402-403.

6 MS Paris, *Bibliothèque Nationale*, Hébr. 286, fol. 31a, lines 9 ff.

7 *Ayna ṭabaqatuhu min ṭabaqati makhlūqātika al-'ulyā*.

of a Syriac Christian commentary to Genesis,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,¹³ and the extant parts of al-Muqammiš's work¹⁴ include no reference to the ranking of man and angels. But from the analysis of al-Muqammiš's theological book, *Ishrūn Maqāla*, we may learn how he came to this view. Al-Muqammiš apparently converted to Christianity, and for many years studied with Christian teachers in Nisibis.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-Muqammiš'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.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

12 See Ya'qūb al-Qirīṣānī, *Kitāb al-Anwār wa'l-Marāqib*, ed. L. Nemoy, New York 1939-43, vol. I, 44, lines 14-15.

13 One fragment of this book was identified by Haggai Ben-Shammai 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-khalīqa*. On the Syriac-Christian echoes in this fragment, see S. Stroumsa, *The Impact of Syriac Tradition on Early Judaeo-Arabic Bible Exegesis*, forthcoming in «Aram» (Syriac and Arab Cultures: Encounter and Birth, Proceedings of the Aram Society Second International Conference).

14 These include most of his theological book, *Ishrūn maqāla* (see Stroumsa, *op. cit.*) and some fragments of his polemical book, *al-Radd 'alā al-Naṣārā min Ṭarīq al-Qiyās*, the edition of which is under preparation by P. Fenton.

15 See Qirīṣānī, *Anwār*, vol. I, 44, lines 10-13.

16 See Col. 3:10, and Sa'adya's polemic with the Christians in this context, *Sa'adya's Commentary on Genesis*, 51, 253, and Zucker's notes there.

the son of man, that Thou visitest him? Thou madest him a little lower than the angels; Thou crownedst him with glory and honour, and didst set him over the works of thy hands: Thou hast put all things in subjection under his feet. For in that He put all in subjection under him, He left nothing that is not put under him. But now we see not yet all things put under him. But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man.¹⁷

These words imply some preeminence of humanity over angels, since it is to humans and not to angels that the world-to-come was promised. But there is also another 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 *textus receptus*. Thus we still find in the Greek New Testament «What is (ti) man...».¹⁸

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...».¹⁹ 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

17 Heb. 2:5-9.

18 See *The Septuagint Version with Apocrypha*, Grand Rapids, Mich., 1972, 702. It should, however, be noted that for both the LXX and the New Testament, there is also a MS version which reads: «Who (tis) is man».

19 See, by way of examples, for the Syriac (ܐܢܫܐ), Harvard MS Syr. 74, fol. 5v, col. 2; compare *The New Testament and Psalms in Syriac*, London 1919, and L. Pivot, *L'oeuvre exégétique de Théodore de Mopsueste*, Rome 1913, 243; and for the Arabic (*man al-rajul alladhī dhakartahu*), see M. Hayek, 'Ammār al-Baṣrī, apologie et controverses', Beirut 1977: *Kitāb al-Burhān*, 76; and Harvard MS Syr. 74, fol. 5v, col. 3 (in Garshunī). The Jewish Arabic translators keep, of course, the reading «what is a man». Thus Sa'adya: *Mā al-insān idh ja'alta lahu dhikrah* (Tehilim 'im Targūm u-ferūsh... Sa'adya, ed. J. Qāfih, Jerusalem 1966, p. 54) and Yefet ben 'Elī: *Ayy shay' al-insān idh tadhkuruhu* (J.J.L. Borgès, *Rabbi Yapheth ben Heli Bassorensis Karaitae in Librum Psalmorum Commentarii Arabici*, Paris 1846, p. 45).

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».

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.²⁰ 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.²¹

Now, when al-Muqammiš returned to Judaism, he probably rejected the interpretation of Ps. 8 as referring to the Son of Man (i.e., Jesus).²² 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-Muqammiš's Christian education could lead him to support such a view. Following his Christian philosophical education, al-Muqammiš calls man a «microcosm».²³ The Christian theologians understood this term as saying that human beings

20 See Milton V. Anastos, *The Immutability of Christ and Justinian's Condemnation of Theodore of Mopsuestia*, «Dumbarton Oaks Papers» 6 (1951), 131.

21 The interpretation of «a little» (*qalīlan*) as an adverb denoting time is apparent in the explanation of 'Ammār al-Baṣrī, 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» (*Kitāb al-Burhān*, p. 76). But the Arabic Commentary of Ibn Jiqatīla has the same word, *qalīlan*, 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 [*aqall*] than two»; see J. Finkel, *Perūsh R. Moshe ben Shmuel ha-Kohen ibn Jiqatīla 'al Tehilīm, ha-mizmorīm 3, 4 and 8*, «Horev» 3 (1936/37), 158.

22 Unless we adopt the suggestion that al-Muqammiš 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 ṣaghīr; see Stroumsa, *op. cit.*, 156-159.

share some traits with animals and some with angels.²⁴ 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.²⁵ It stands to reason that here, too, as in his commentary on Psalms, Yefet refers to al-Muqammiš.²⁶

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

Yefet, who mentions al-Muqammiš's views, rejects them without mentioning their Christian background. Sa'adya, who openly polemicizes with the Christians in his commentary on Genesis,²⁷ 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».²⁸ 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».²⁹

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-Muqammiš, 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

24 See, for example, E. Platti, *Une cosmologie chrétienne*, «Mélanges de l'Institut d'études orientales» 15 (1982), 85-86, 103-104; P. Sbath, *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-Shammai, *op. cit.*, vol. II, 102:10-14.

26 As suggested by Ben-Shammai, *ibid.*, vol. I, p. 299 n. 186.

27 See above, n. 16.

28 *Wa-salattahu min khalā'iḳika 'alā kull man ja'altahu taḥta qadamihi*, *Commentary on Tehilīm*, ed. Qāfiḥ, 54.

29 *Ibid.*

paraphrase of Ps. 8:6-8.³⁰ 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-Ṣinhājī, 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.³¹

Now the Christian apologists thought it essential to show some similarity between God and man.³² 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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30 Léon Schlosberg (ed.), *Qiṣṣat Mujādalat al-Usquf*, Vienna 1880, and French translation, *Controverse d'un évêque*, Paris 1888. On the possible connections of this book with al-Muqammiš's *Kitāb al-Ḍarā'a*, see S. Stroumsa, *Qiṣṣat Mujādalat al-Usquf: A Case-Study in Polemical Literature*, in *Proceedings of the Third International Conference on Judaeo-Arabic, Cambridge, June 1987* (forthcoming). A new edition of this Arabic text and of its Medieval Hebrew versions is under preparation by Daniel Lasker and myself.

31 Abū al-'Abbās al-Ṣinhājī, *Kitāb al-Ajwiba al-fākhira 'an al-as'ila al-fājira*, quoted by I. Goldziher, *Über Muhammedanische Polemik gegen Ahl al-Kitāb*, ZMDG 32 (1878), 377.

32 See, for instance, Yaḥya b. 'Adī, *Maqāla fī al-Tawḥīd*, ed. Khalil Samir, Jounieh - Rome 1980, 171-174.

Riassunto

Il confronto tra le interpretazioni cristiana, giudaica e musulmana di Sal. 8,4-5 (letto in riferimento a Gen. 1,26) permette di rilevare la singolare circolazione nei tre ambiti culturali di precise concezioni cristologiche. In campo giudaico, l'attestazione più significativa è quella di al-Muqammiš (fl. IX sec.), che riaffermava la superiorità dell'uomo sugli angeli - un chiaro esempio del retaggio della sua esperienza cristiana.