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Essays in Honor of Marvin H. Pope



Edited by

JOHN H. MARKS and ROBERT M. GOOD

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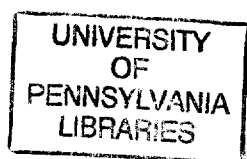
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WHAT IS MAN THAT YOU HAVE BEEN MINDFUL OF HIM? (ON PSALM 8:4-5)*

JEFFREY H. TIGAY

One of the most evocative passages in Psalms—a book which I had the privilege of studying with Professor Pope more than a decade ago—is Ps. 8:4-5:

כי אראה שמך מעשי אצבעותיך
ירח וכוכבים אשר כוננתה:
מהאנוש כי תזכרנו
ובן־אדם כי תפקדנו:

When I behold your heavens, the works of your fingers,
the moon and stars that you set in place:
what is man that you have been mindful of him,
mortal man that you have taken note of him . . . ?¹

Through centuries of repetition these verses have come to seem self-understood, as has their connection to each other. But the logic of that connection, variously expressed in modern translations by commas, semicolons, colons, and hyphens, is less than obvious. Some translators and exegetes have tried to make the connection more explicit. Saadia, in his translation, introduced a transitional אקול, “I say,” at the beginning of verse 5,² just as Moffatt introduced the verse with “I say.”³ Commentators similarly supplied such transitional phrases as אני תמה בלבי, “I wonder in my mind” (Rashi),⁴ or, “nun fällt es ihm [i.e., the psalmist] aufs Herz” (Gunkel).⁵ Contemplating the heavens thus prompts the psalmist to wonder why God has shown such regard for

man. But what is it about the heavens and about man that prompts such a question? The Targum⁶ rendered v. 5: “מה בר נשא מטול הדכר עוברי עובדי עובדיו (= MT מעשי אצבעותיך)”, suggesting that a contrast between God’s works and man’s prompts the speculation. Most treatments of the psalm have contrasted God’s works with man himself, stressing the grandeur of the heavens and the lowliness of man. Saadia,⁷ in avoiding the anthropomorphism of “the works of your fingers,” rendered עמלך אלבאהר, “your brilliant (i.e., dazzling, splendid) works.” Meiri⁸ paraphrased: כשאני רואה שמך וגו’ אני מכיר שפלותי, “When I behold your heavens, etc. I recognize my lowliness . . .,” while Ibn Ezra⁹ explains: מה אנוש כי תזכרנו דרך בזוי והטעם: אהר שיש לך בריאות גדולות ונכבדות מהאדם איך שמת לב “‘What is man that you have been mindful of him’ is deprecatory, and the reasoning is: Since you have creations greater and more glorious than man, how did you take thought to give him honor?” Modern commentators similarly speak of the vastness and splendor of the heavens, many adding that these testify to the majesty and greatness of their Maker. Thus Kirkpatrick paraphrases vv. 4-5: “The contemplation of the heavens in all their splendour forces the Psalmist to wonder that God should choose so insignificant a thing as man for the object of His special regard.”¹⁰

But is it man’s insignificance and lowliness which are expressed in the question “What is man that you have been mindful of him . . . ?” In slightly varying forms

* It is a great pleasure to take part in this tribute to Professor Pope and to express thereby my gratitude for all that I owe him, both intellectually and personally.

1 Translation based on *The Book of Psalms* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1972): 8 (henceforth: *NJV*). In v. 4, the singular מעשה is the reading of most of the current masoretic Bibles (e.g., מקראות גדולות, Letteris, Cassuto, Koren, Snaith), whereas Leningrad Codex B19, printed in BH³ and BHS and the Dothan edition, reads מעשי; cf. Targum.

2 Y. Kafih, תהלים עם תרגום ופירוש הגאון רבינו סעדיה, (Jerusalem, 1966): 64.

3 James Moffatt, *A New Translation of the Bible* (New York and London: Harper, 1950): 609.

4 I. Maarsen, *Parshandatha. The Commentary of Rashi on the Prophets and Hagiographs, Part III. Psalms* (Jerusalem, 1936; reprint, Jerusalem: Makor, 1972): 8; Kimhi’s comment is similar; see A. Darom, הפירוש השלם, ר’ רוד קמחי (רר’ק). תהלים על תהלים (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1971): 26 top.

5 H. Gunkel, *Die Psalmen* (fünfte Auflage; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1968): 28

6 Quoted from מקראות גדולות (New York: Pardes, 1951): 5a. The reading in P. de Lagarde, *Hagiographa Chaldaice* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1873): 4 is the same.

7 Saadia (N 2).

8 Y. Hakohen, פירוש לספר תהלים. חברו רבי מנחם ב”ר, שלמה המאירי (Jerusalem, 1960): 28.

9 In מקראות גדולות *ad loc.*

10 A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms* (Cambridge Bible; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1957): 39, cf. 35-36. Similarly Gunkel (N 5): 28; C. A. and E. G. Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms 1* (ICC: Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1952): 63-64; E. J. Kissane, *The Book of Psalms* (Dublin: Browne and Nolan, 1964): 34; H.-J. Kraus, *Psalmen. I. Teilband*³ (BKAT XV/1; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag des Erziehungsvereins, 1966): 69; H. P. Chajes, ספר תהלים (in series נביאים וכתובים עם פירוש מר”י, ed. Abraham Kahana; reprint, Jerusalem:

“What is man” became a topos in the Hebrew Bible and apocryphal / pseudepigraphical literature,¹¹ and it expressed not man’s insignificance but, as a rule, his mortality and transitoriness:¹²

ה' מהדארם ותרעהו כן-אנוש ותחשבהו:
ארם להבל רמה ימיו כצל עובר:

O Lord, what is man that you should care about him,
mortal man, that you should think of him?

Man is like a breath;

his days are like a passing shadow.

(Ps 144:3–4)¹³

... לא לעלם אחנה חרל ממיי כיהבל ימי:
מה-אנוש כי תגרלנו וכי תשית אליו לבר:

... I shall not live forever.

Let me alone, for my days are a breath.

What is man, that you should rear him,
that you should pay any mind to him?

(Job 7:16–17)¹⁴

τί άνθρωπος καὶ τί ἡ χρῆσις αὐτοῦ;
τί τὸ ἀγαθὸν αὐτοῦ καὶ τί τὸ κακὸν αὐτοῦ;
ἀριθμὸς ἡμερῶν ἀνθρώπου
πολλὰ ἔτη ἑκατόν·

ὡς σταγὼν ὕδατος ἀπὸ θαλάσσης καὶ ψῆφος ἄμμου,
οὕτως ὀλίγα ἔτη ἐν ἡμέρᾳ αἰῶνος.

What is man, of what worth is he?
the good, the evil in him, what are these?

The sum of a man’s days is great
if it reaches a hundred years:

Like a drop of sea water, like a grain of sand,
so few are these years among the days of eternity.

(Ecclus 18:6–8)¹⁵

That Ps 8:5 expresses man’s transitoriness is confirmed by the contrasting theme of permanence in the preceding verse, for that is what the heavenly bodies symbolize.

Makor, 1970): 14–15; B. D. Eerdmans, *The Hebrew Book of Psalms* (OTS 4; Leiden: Brill, 1947): 117; B. S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970): 153; I. L. Seeligmann in VTS 1 (1953): 156.

11 Seeligmann (N 10): 156.

12 The exception is 4 Ezra 8:34–35, which refers to man’s sinfulness and his need for mercy. A different motif beginning “what is man” appears in Job 15:14, with differently phrased parallels in 4:17 and 25:4.

13 Translation from *NJV*, 146.

14 I have intentionally translated the verse more literally than did Prof. Pope (*Job*³ [AB 15; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973]: 58) in order to highlight the similarity with Ps 8:5 and 144:3.

15 Translation from *The New American Bible* (New York: P. J. Kenedy, 1970): 964.

Recent studies by Greenfield and Paul¹⁶ have shown that throughout ancient literature the heavens, moon, and stars, as well as the sun, served as similes for length of days, permanence and eternity. These similes appear in Sumerian, Akkadian, Ugaritic, Phoenician and Punic, Aramaic, Egyptian and Latin, as well as Hebrew literature.¹⁷ From the Bible itself one may cite such usages as “forever” // “like the days of the heavens” (Ps 89:30); “That your days and the days of your children may be multiplied as the days of the heavens above the earth” (Deut 11:21); “It shall be established forever, as the moon” (Ps 89:38). Similar usages in other literature are cited by Greenfield and Paul. There is no unambiguous use of the stars in this sense in the Bible,¹⁸ but the Pyrgi inscription speaks of *šnt km hkkbm* . . . , “years like the stars.”¹⁹

The logic connecting verses 4 and 5 is therefore: when the poet contemplates the heavens and their host, he is reminded of their permanence and then of man’s transitoriness,²⁰ and he wonders that the Lord has taken note of so transitory a creature, going to the extent of making him nearly divine, adorning him with “glory and majesty,”²¹ and making him ruler over all God’s creatures.

In reading the psalm closely one can detect a possible implication that the psalmist would have expected God to assign such rule (תמשילהו) to the heavens, moon, and stars, because of their permanence, rather than to a transitory creature like man. Would this constitute an echo of Gen 1:16 and 18 (cf. Ps 136:9)? Those verses state that the sun and moon are to rule (למשלת, למשלת)²² the day and night. Conceivably the psalmist was aware of

16 J. C. Greenfield, “Scripture and Inscription: The Literary and Rhetorical Element in Some Early Phoenician Inscriptions” in *Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William Foxwell Albright* (H. Goedicke, ed.; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1971): 266–68; S. M. Paul, “Psalm 72:5—A Traditional Blessing for the Long Life of the King,” *JNES* 31 (1972): 351–55. Note also F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1973): 18, n. 33.

17 For an example in Greek see M. Weinfeld, “Covenant Terminology in the Ancient Near East and Its Influence on the West,” *JAOS* 93 (1973): 198–99, n. 109.

18 In Dan 12:3b the simile of stars refers primarily to shining, like the parallel firmament in v 12a, but perhaps it also partakes of the eternity expressed in the concluding phrase לעלם ועד.

19 *KAI* 277:10.

20 The logic was perceived by A. Weiser, *The Psalms* (Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1952): 143.

21 For הורר והדר as the divine and royal radiance see M. Weinfeld, “The Creator God in Genesis 1 and in Second Isaiah,” *Tarbiz* 37 (1968): 131–32 (Hebrew).

22 Ps 136:8–9 construe ממשלת as a noun (meaning “ruler”) as shown by the plural ממשלות in v. 9; see M. J. Dahood, *Psalms III* (AB 17a; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970): 266.

that concept—perhaps even of those verses or others like them—and was for that reason prompted to wonder why the “authority” of the heavens, moon, and stars was not more extensive, covering the living creatures as well. This would reflect a sense of the falsity of astrology or of heavenly-astral-lunar cults. The account of the creation of the luminaries in Gen 1:14–19 has sometimes been taken as a polemic against such cults,²³ but it would be going too far to see such a polemic in the psalm. Polemic is very difficult to demonstrate unless it is explicit,²⁴ and

it would seem in the present case to overload a lyrical psalm. The poet’s contemplation of the nighttime²⁵ sky has moved him to exclamation and wonder,²⁶ not to argument.²⁷

23 S. D. Luzzatto’s *Commentary to the Pentateuch* (P. Schlesinger, ed.; Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1965): 11–12; U. M. D. Cassuto, *Commentary on the Book of Genesis Part I* (I. Abrahams, trans.; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1961): 43.

24 Note Kaufmann’s refutation of Cassuto’s polemic interpretation of Gen 1:14–19: Y. Kaufman, *מכבשונה של היצירה המקראית* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1966): 232.

25 Most commentators have reasoned from the mention of moon and stars and the absence of the sun that the psalmist was looking at the sky at night; see, for example, Kimḥi (N 4): 25; Briggs and Briggs (N 10): 61 top; Kissane (N 10): 34; Kraus (N 10): 66. Indeed, were the psalm not based on a visual experience there would be no obvious reason for the omission of the sun, which would surely have been mentioned were the psalmist simply reflecting in the abstract. Some scholars, on the other hand, emend שמיך to שמש; see Gunkel (N 5): 30 (emendation rejected); Kissane (N 9): 34; H. L. Ginsberg, “Some Emendations in Psalms,” *HUCA* 23 (1950–51): 98.

26 Note the threefold repetition of בַּחַדָּה, in the first, middle, and last verses of the psalm (excluding the title).

27 For an Akkadian lyric prayer inspired by contemplation of the nighttime sky see *ANET* 390–91 and A. L. Oppenheim, “A New Prayer to ‘the Gods of the Night,’” in *Analecta Biblica* 12/III (1959): 282–301.