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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:

כ אלא אֶשְׁתָּה שֵׁם אֱלֹהִים
יְהוָ֖ה פְּגוֹזָה אֵלַי
פָּרָֽתָ֖ם יִשְׁתַּבֵּר
עָרָֽיָ֖ים יִסְדַּה

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 ... ?

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 נַעֲלֵי
to, “I say,” at the beginning of verse 5, just as Moffatt introduced the verse with “I say.” Commentators similarly supplied such transitional phrases as ‘אָ֖משׁוֹר נבֵֽלֶת “I wonder in my mind” (Rashi), or, “nun fillt es ihm [i.e., the psalmist] aufs Herz” (Gunkel). 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 Targum rendered v. 5: "What is man that you are mindful of his works?
The additional echoes v. 4's מְשַׁמֵּרָה אֱלֹהִים (= MT מְשַׁמֵּרָה אֱלֹהִים), 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, in avoiding the anthropomorphism of "the works of your fingers," rendered מְשַׁמֵּרָה אֱלֹהִים, "your brilliant (i.e., dazzling, splendid) works." Meiri paraphrased: "רְבֵֽיעַ נֵבֶלֶת, "When I behold your heavens, etc. I recognize my lowliness ...", while Ibn Ezra explains: "כְּאָֽדֶר יִשְׁתַּבֵּר רָ֖מִים בַּלֹּ֔א עָרָ֖יָֽים יִסְדַּה
c how great are your works which you have revealed to me ..." 'What is man that you have been mindful of him' is depreciatory, 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." 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: NVI). In v. 4, the singular form is the reading of most of the current masoretic Bibles (e.g., Aleppo, Letteris, Cassuto, Koren, Schochet), whereas Leningrad Codex B19, printed in BH1 and BHS and the Dothan edition, reads פָּרָֽיָ֖ם יִשְׁתַּבֵּר; cf. Targum.

2 Y. Kaffa, חַלְגֶּלֶת הַתּוֹלְם יִקוֹם וּתְהַוֵּי אָדָם וולְהָם פָּרָֽיָ֖ם יִשְׁתַּבֵּר (Jerusalem, 1966): 64.


7 Saadia (N 2).


9 In ספרי תרנויות ad loc.

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

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)\(^{13}\)

... 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)\(^{14}\)

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.

(Eccles 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.

Recent studies by Greenfield and Paul\(^{16}\) 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 śems šāmān (Ps 89:30); ... 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 star in this sense in the Bible,\(^{18}\) but the Pyrgi inscription speaks of 3nt 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 (קדושה) 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 (משמש, כבש) the day and night. Conceivably the psalmist was aware of

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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 "עליך ירוש.

19 KAI 277:10.

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

21 For מתי ויהי as the divine and royal radiance see M. Weinfield, "The Creator God in Genesis 1 and in Second Isaiah, Tarbiz 37 (1968): 131-32 (Hebrew).

22 Ps 136:8-9 construe משמש as a noun (meaning "ruler") as shown by the plural מֵמשָׂשִׁים 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, 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, and

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

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 את־שמש 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 the title, in the first, middle, and last verses of the psalm (excluding the title).

