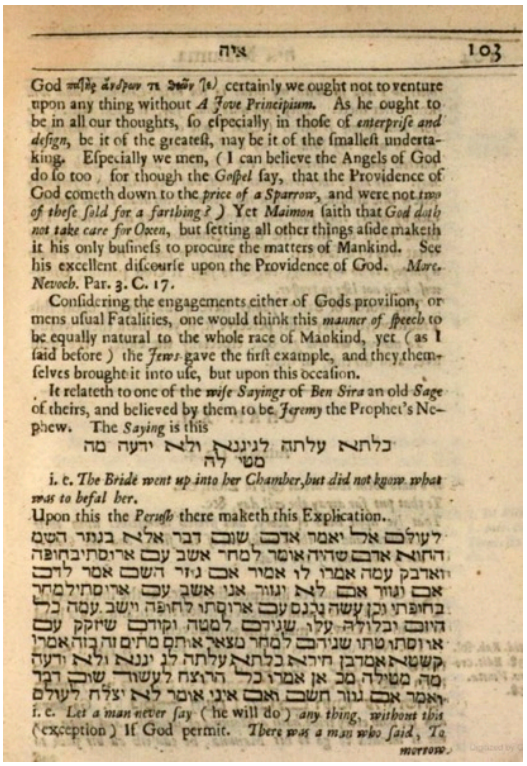
Shlomo Zuckier, 2023

Reconstructing “God-Willing” Across Judaism, Islam, and Christianity in John Gregory’s "Notes and Observations (1646)"



איה 103

God πλὴϛ ἀνάγκων τῶν ἄνωθεν (a) certainly we ought not to venture upon any thing without *A Jove Principium*. As he ought to be in all our thoughts, ſo eſpecially in thoſe of *enterpriſe and deſign*, be it of the greateſt, nay be it of the ſmalleſt undertaking. Eſpecially we men, (I can believe the Angels of God do ſo too, for though the *Goſpel* ſay, that the Providence of God cometh down to the *price of a Sparrow*, and were not *two of theſe ſold for a farthing?*) Yet *Maimon* ſaith that *God doth not take care for Oxen*, but ſetting all other things aſide maketh it his only buſineſs to procure the matters of Mankind. See his excellent diſcourſe upon the Providence of God. *More. Nevoch.* Par. 3. C. 17.

Conſidering the engagements either of Gods proviſion, or mens uſual Fatalities, one would think this *manner of ſpeech* to be equally natural to the whole race of Mankind, yet (as I ſaid before) the *Jews* gave the firſt example, and they themſelves brought it into uſe, but upon this occaſion.

It relateth to one of the *wiſe Sayings* of *Ben Sira* an old *Sage* of theirs, and believed by them to be *Jeremy* the Prophet's Nephew. The *Saying* is this

כלתא עלתה לגינגא ולא ידעה מה
סטי לה

i. e. *The Bride went up into her Chamber, but did not know what was to befal her.*

Upon this the *Peruſh* there maketh this Explication.

לעולם אל יאמר אדם שום דבר אלא בנתר השם
דהא אדם שהיה אומר למחר אשב עם אריסתי בחופה
ואדבק עמה אמרו לו אמור אם ניזר השם אמר לה
אם ונזור אם לא ונזור אני אשב עם אריסתי למחר
בחופתי וכן עשה נבנס עם אריסתו לחופה וישב עמה כל
היום ובלולה עלו שניהם למטה וקודם שיזקק עם
אריסתו טחו שניהם למחר מצאו אותם מתים זה בזה אמרו
קשטא אמרבן חיכא כלתא עלתה לה ינגא ולא ידעה
מה מטילה מכ אן אמרו כל הרוצה לעשות שובן דבר
ואמר אם נזור חשם אם איני אומר לא יצלח לעולם

i. e. *Let a man never ſay* (he will do) *any thing, without this* (exception) If God permit. *There was a man who ſaid, To*

morrow.

The expression “God-willing” may seem ubiquitous in Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, but in fact it has a history, and that history can teach us a great deal about the co-production of piety among these three religions. The phrase was first enjoined upon believers in a passage from the New Testament, James 4:13-15, in which James prescribes that any future plans be predicated on God’s willingness. It was adopted by Islam and then by Judaism, with each community of faith providing its own prooftexts and history for the practice of uttering the phrase. The intertwining of these histories is evident in a fascinating text produced in 1646 by English bishop and orientalist scholar John Gregory.

The text, a commentary on the New Testament entitled *Notes and Observations upon some passages of Scripture*, enlists historical research in the work of religious exhortation, invoking Jewish and Muslim practice and tradition as it spurs Christians to heed this passage in James.

Gregory (possibly drawing from Johannes Drusius, an earlier British Orientalist) notes the “custome among the Jewes, especially and first to begin all things *with God*,” specifying three expressions Jews use – “if God will” (אם יחפוץ האל), “if the Name please” (אם ירצה השם) and “If the Name determine so” (אם יגזור השם), and even pointing out the

frequent acrostic, איה, which stands for all three expressions, and serves as the title of his chapter (as seen on the headers of the relevant pages).

Gregory then turns to Islam (among "the men of the East"), noting the *Bismillahi*, the standard practice of invoking God's name prior to Muslim study. He notes that both Arabs and Persians use the term אן שא אללה, which he spells in Hebrew letters and translates as *Si Deus voluerit* (if God wills).

Having established the ubiquity of the expression, the bishop moves to a diachronic mode, seeking to reconstruct its history. He asserts that "From the Orientall part of the World this manner of speech descended downe upon all the Inhabitants of the Earth," seeing it in the Greek σὺν θεῷ and the Latin *Deo volente*.

This ubiquity and this history yield a normative conclusion: all believers should adopt a similar practice:

> "Indeed it were very much, if we men of what Nation soever under Heaven, should go about anything without this seasonable condition of *Gods helpe*… certainly we ought not to venture upon anything without *A Jove principium*. As he ought to be in all of our thoughts, so especially in those of *enterprise* and *designe*."

Gregory paraphrases Acts 17:28 and Paul's teaching there that God plays a role in every human action. He then notes a debate between the *Gospell*'s view that God's providence affects even a sparrow (channeling Matthew 10:29) and the Maimonidean view (*Guide* 3:17) that animals are excluded from divine providence. Despite that debate, all are agreed that God "procure[s] the matters of Mankinde" and should be acknowledged accordingly.

Given the strong Christian tendency to understand its norms as authorized by Hebrew scriptures, it is not surprising that Gregory puts his historical scholarship to the work of establishing a prophetic origin to this teaching. "The Jewes gave the first example, and they themselves brought it into use." He cites the Aramaic Alphabet of Ben Sira, a medieval Jewish text composed in a Muslim context, but presenting itself as having been authored by Ben Sira--"beleeved by them to be *Jeremie* the Prophets Nephew"—in biblical times. The Alphabet tells the story of a groom who refused to say "God-willing" about his plans to be with his bride that evening, resulting in the death of both bride and groom. The bishop concludes: "*Whosoever hath a purpose to doe any thing ought to say* If God permit, *Otherwise he is not like to prosper*."

Gregory's historical reconstruction is flawed. Ben Sira is not the source for the passage in James but rather its descendant, born through the mediation of Muslim texts. And σὺν θεῷ was common in Greek literature (e.g., Sophocles and Plutarch) before any biblical influence.

But his effort presents a fascinating model for a concurrent process of scholarship and constructive theology. Gregory asserts the Jewish sources of James' teaching and the exemplary zeal of Muslim and Jewish practitioners in its implementation. He does not do so in order to discredit Muslims and Jews or to argue the superiority of Christianity. Rather he offers his history as an inspiration for all believers to better appreciate the role of God in the world. His message is explicitly framed as relevant for all nations under Heaven: an example of a historical study of sectarian co-production put to the work of a cross-religious message.

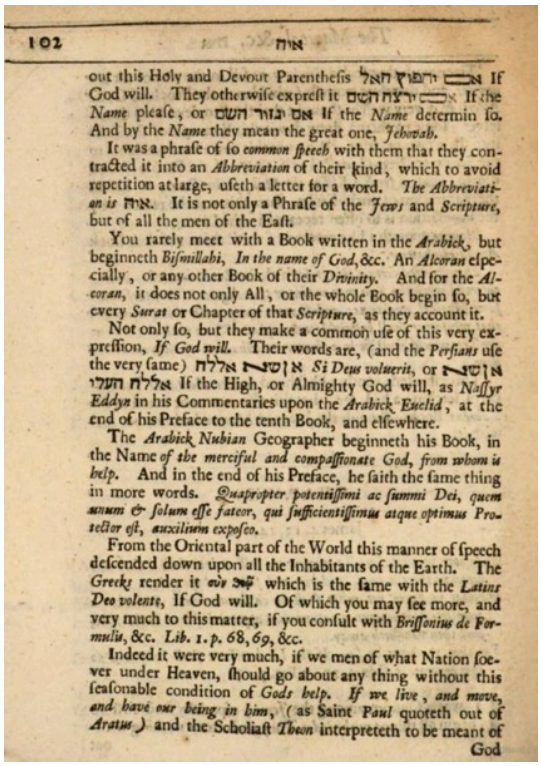
Further reading:

Matar, Nabil. "Islam in the defence of the Anglican Church: John Gregory (1607–1646)." *Journal of Islamic Studies* 34, no. 1 (2023): 76-97.

A. Hamilton, 'Gregory, John (1607–1646)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), accessible at https://www.oxforddnb.com/display/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-11467

Jillian Stinchcomb, "Ben Sira as a Baby: The Alphabet of Ben Sira and Authorial Personae,"*Ancient Jew Review* , January 16, 2018, accessible at

http://www.ancientjewreview.com/articles/2018/1/12/ben-sira-as-a-baby-the-alphabet-of-ben-sira-and-authorial-personae



102 אוח

out this Holy and Devout Parentheſis אם יחפוץ האל If God will. They otherwiſe expreſt it אם ירצה השם If the *Name* pleaſe, or אם יגזר השם If the *Name* determin ſo. And by the *Name* they mean the great one, *Jehovah*.

It was a phraſe of ſo *common ſpeech* with them that they contracted it into an *Abbreviation* of their kind, which to avoid repetition at large, uſeth a letter for a word. *The Abbreviation is* אוח. It is not only a Phraſe of the *Jews* and *Scripture*, but of all the men of the Eaſt.

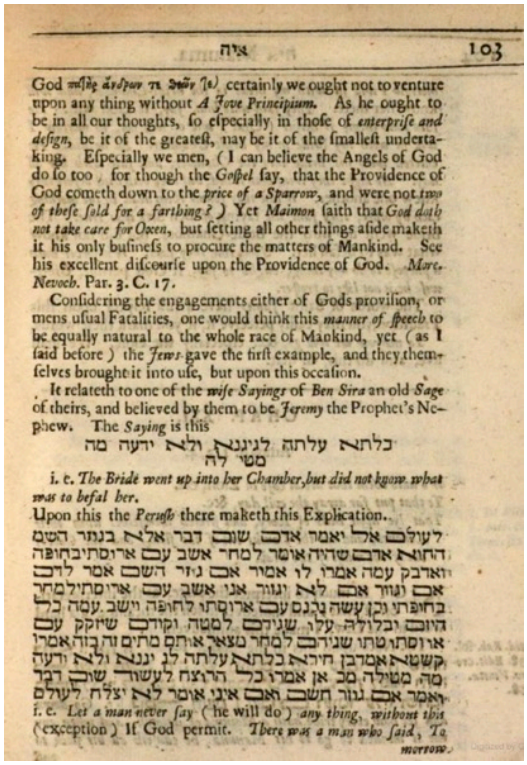
You rarely meet with a Book written in the *Arabick*, but beginneth *Biſmillahi, In the name of God*, &c. An *Alcoran* eſpecially, or any other Book of their *Divinity*. And for the *Alcoran*, it does not only All, or the whole Book begin ſo, but every *Surat* or Chapter of that *Scripture*, as they account it.

Not only ſo, but they make a common uſe of this very expreſſion, *If God will*. Their words are, (and the *Perſians* uſe the very ſame) אן שא אללה *Si Deus voluerit*, or אן שא אללה תעלי If the High, or Almighty God will, as *Naſſyr Eddyn* in his Commentaries upon the *Arabick Euclid*, at the end of his Preface to the tenth Book, and elſewhere.

The *Arabick Nubian* Geographer beginneth his Book, in the Name *of the merciful and compaſſionate God, from whom is help*. And in the end of his Preface, he ſaith the ſame thing in more words. *Quapropter potentiſſimi ac ſummi Dei, quem unum & ſolum eſſe fateor, qui ſufficientiſſimus atque optimus Protector eſt, auxilium expoſco.*

From the Oriental part of the World this manner of ſpeech deſcended down upon all the Inhabitants of the Earth. The *Greeks* render it אν θεὸς which is the ſame with the *Latins Deo volente*, If God will. Of which you may ſee more, and very much to this matter, if you conſult with *Briſſonius de Formulis*, &c. *Lib. 1. p. 68, 69*, &c.

Indeed it were very much, if we men of what Nation ſoever under Heaven, ſhould go about any thing without this ſeaſonable condition of *Gods help*. *If we live, and move, and have our being in him*, (as Saint *Paul* quoteth out of *Aratus*) and the Scholiaſt *Theon* interpreteth to be meant of God



אית 103

God πάσης ἀνάγκης τε θεῶν ἔα) certainly we ought not to venture upon any thing without *A Jove Principium*. As he ought to be in all our thoughts, ſo eſpecially in thoſe of *enterpriſe and deſign*, be it of the greateſt, nay be it of the ſmalleſt undertaking. Eſpecially we men, (I can believe the Angels of God do ſo too, for though the *Goſpel* ſay, that the Providence of God cometh down to the *price of a Sparrow*, and were not *two of theſe ſold for a farthing?*) Yet *Maimon* ſaith that *God doth not take care for Oxen*, but ſetting all other things aſide maketh it his only buſineſs to procure the matters of Mankind. See his excellent diſcourſe upon the Providence of God. *More. Nevoch.* Par. 3. C. 17.

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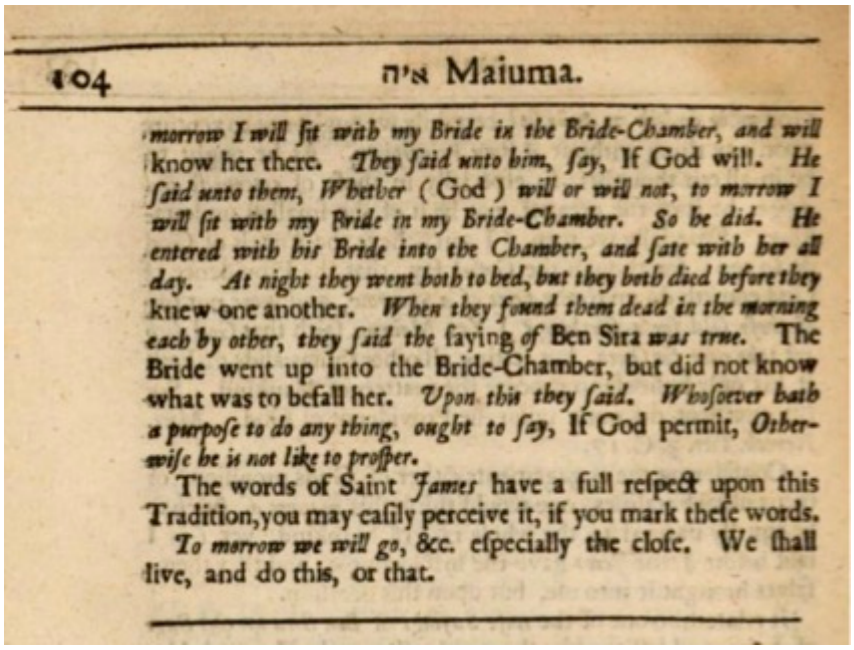
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הרואה אדם שהוא אומר למחר אשב עם אריסתי בחופה
וארבק עמה אמרו לו אמור אם ניזר השם אתר לדם
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i. e. *Let a man never ſay* (he will do) *any thing, without this* (exception) If God permit. *There was a man who ſaid, To morrow.*



104 אית Maiuma.

morrow I will ſit with my Bride in the Bride-Chamber, and will know her there. *They ſaid unto him, ſay,* If God will. *He ſaid unto them, Whether* (God) *will or will not, to morrow I will ſit with my Bride in my Bride-Chamber. So he did. He entered with his Bride into the Chamber, and ſate with her all day. At night they went both to bed, but they both died before they* knew one another. *When they found them dead in the morning each by other, they ſaid the* ſaying *of* Ben Sira *was true.* The Bride went up into the Bride-Chamber, but did not know what was to befall her. *Upon this they ſaid. Whoſoever hath a purpoſe to do any thing, ought to ſay,* If God permit, *Otherwiſe he is not like to proſper.*

The words of Saint *James* have a full reſpect upon this Tradition, you may eaſily perceive it, if you mark theſe words. *To morrow we will go,* &c. eſpecially the cloſe. We ſhall live, and do this, or that.

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