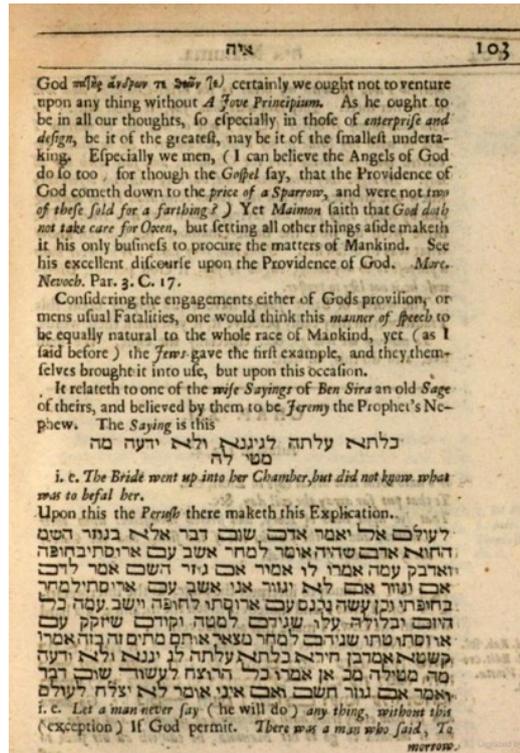Shlomo Zuckier, 2023

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

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 <u>Johannes Drusius,</u> 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

God πάντας ἀνθρωπον τὲ Φεῶν (ᵌ) 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 לגיננא ולא ידעה מה
מטי לה

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

Upon this the *Peruse* there maketh this Explication.

לעולם אל יאמר אדם שום דבר אלא בנזר הטם
החוא אדם שדיה אומר למחר אשב עם ארוסתי בחופה
ואדרבק עמה אמרו לו אמר אם ניר השם אמר להב
אם ונוזר אם לא ינוזר אני אשב עם אריסתילמחר
בחופתי וכן עשה נרנם עם ארוסתו לחופה וישב עמה כל
היום וכלולה עלו. שניהם למטה וקורם שיזקק עם
ארוסתו מתו שניהם למחר מצאו איחם מתים זה בוה אמרו
קשטא אמרבן חירא כלתא עלתה לג ינגא ולא ידעה
מה, מטילה. מכ אן אמרו בכל הרוצח לעשור שוב דבר
יאמר אם נזור חשם ואם 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*

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.