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Controversies on the Creation of Man in Abraham ibn Ezra’s Exegesis*

1. Introduction

The verses dealing with the creation of the first human being(s) in Gen 1:26–27 are two of the most controversial verses in the whole Bible. The plural forms that appear in God’s speech in these verses troubled the Jewish exegetes because they may question the idea of the unity of God and his divine transcendence. Medieval Jewish exegetes offered different solutions to the theological problems posed by these verses. In his two commentaries on Genesis, Abraham ibn Ezra (1089–1165) collected a significant number of interpretations of earlier Jewish exegetes on the creation of man. It is worth noting that I use the word “man” here instead of “human being” because medieval rabbis, Ibn Ezra among others, often followed the rabbinic idea that God in Gen 1:26–27 created a two-

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faced man, and later separated the woman from that man. In this paper, I will analyze the interpretations quoted by Ibn Ezra in the name of other authors, and try to identify his sources. I will also study Ibn Ezra’s own interpretations, and evaluate how these interpretations are representative of the controversies and polemics among Medieval Jewish exegetes on the creation of man.

2. The Meaning of the Verbal Form \( \text{נעשה} \)

Abraham Ibn Ezra began his two commentaries on Gen 1:26 by quoting an anonymous opinion, according to which the verbal form \( \text{נעשה} \) is not the qal imperfect plural form of the verb \( \text{עשה} \) ‘to make’, as is traditionally rendered, but a nifal participle similar to “what was prepared \( \text{נעשה} \) for each day” (Neh 5:18). In fact, this interpretation was offered because both forms are identical in the vocalization.

Abraham ibn Ezra probably here referred to the Karaite exegete Jeshua ben Jehuda, also known as Abu l-Farag Furqan b. Asad, who lived in Jerusalem in the second half of the 11th century. Ibn Ezra mentioned him in his introduction to his commentary on the Pentateuch as a representative of Karaite Bible exegesis, together with Anan, Benjamin al-Nahawendi and Sahl ben Masliah.

Although Jeshua ben Jehuda suggested the idea that the verbal form \( \text{נעשה} \) is a pluralis majestatis, a plural of majesty, he proposed to interpret it as a nifal participle similar to Neh 5:18. According to him, the verse means “man is made in our image, after our likeness” and refers to the image and likeness of the angels. Jeshua ben Jehuda maintained that this meaning fits better with the idea that the angels were ignorant of the existence of man, because they did not have the capacity of knowledge. In consequence, they could not

have been invited to participate in the creation of the first man. For this reason, the interpretation of “let us make man” in the plural has no sense in this case.\(^3\) Then, it seems that the intention of Jeshua ben Jehuda’s interpretation was to avoid the idea that the angels participated in the creation of man.

The interpretation of the word נַעֲשֶׁה as a nifal participle was also quoted by the Karaite Jephet ben Eli:

Some commentators explained נַעֲשֶׁה as a noun (participle) and interpreted the verse “man was made”. This is because forms like נִנְבַּה, נִנְרַמֵּה, and נַעֲשֶׁה have two meanings. One of them is a noun (participle) as in “to God who appeared (גָּאַרְא הַנִּרְאֶֹה) to you” (Gen 35:1), “he was oppressed, he was afflicted (נַעֲנֶֹה)” (Isa 53:7), “to the house that was built (הַנִּבְנֶֹה)” (1 Chr 22:19). [...] The second meaning of נַעֲשֶׁה, נִנְבַּה, and נִנְרַמֵּה is the imperfect. Thus one could interpret נַעֲשֶׁה אָדָם as “Let man be made”\(^4\).

Abraham ibn Ezra rejected this interpretation by using a grammatical argument: if נַעֲשֶׁה were a nifal participle, the verse should have read, יָאִמר אֲלֵהָ התַּנְשֵּׁה אָדָם “and God said: Let man be made.”

3. In Our Image, After Our Likeness

In his second commentary on Gen 1:26, Ibn Ezra quoted an interpretation in the name of Jeshua ben Jehuda, according to which the expression in our image, after our likeness are the words of Moses.\(^5\) This interpretation had already been quoted by Jephet ben Eli:

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\(^5\) In his first commentary on this same verse, he quotes this interpretation anonymously.
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A certain commentator said that our master Moses, be peace upon him, related to the children of Israel that the Lord of the worlds said: “Let Adam be made in our own image, according to our likeness.” So the expression in our image, after our likeness is what Moses, peace be upon him, said of himself and of other human beings.6

P. Fenton pointed out that Jephet ben Eli was the first exegete who quoted the interpretation that it was Moses who introduced the expression in our image, after our likeness to refer to himself and to the people he was addressing. These are not God’s words, but Moses’ words as part of his redaction of the Pentateuch. The principal advantage of such interpretation is that it eliminates the problem of attributing an image to God.7

Although in his first commentary on Gen 1:26, Ibn Ezra made no objection on this interpretation, in his second commentary he affirmed: “If this is correct, what is then the meaning of God created man in His image (Gen 1:27)?” In other words, Ibn Ezra admitted that even in the case that the words in our image, after our likeness (Gen 1:26) might be considered to be Moses’ words because of the use of the possessive our, the expression God created man in His image (Gen 1:27) does not evade the problem of attributing an image to God. In Ibn Ezra’s view, the possessive his cannot be applied to any other but God. An apparent solution to this last problem was quoted by Ibn Ezra anonymously in his first commentary:

They explained that the pronominal suffix his in and God created man in his image (Gen 1:27) refers to a man, and interpreted that in the expression בצלם אלהים (Gen 9:6) God is connected to made in the sense: “for God made man with an image.”8

In his commentary on Gen 1:27, Rashi tried to avoid interpreting בצלמו (in his image) as referred to God’s image and proposed to

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6 Ali ben Suleiman, The Arabic Commentary, 118.
8 A similar observation is found in his second commentary.
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render it as “in the form that was made for him.” The northern French exegete, Samuel ben Meir, Rashbam (11th–12th c.), specifically stated that the word בצלמו (in his image) means “in a man’s image,” and added, “which is the image of Elohim, i.e., of the angels.” M. Lockshin remarked that Rashbam explained the apparent redundancy, בצלמו בצלם אלהים, by interpreting that the first word, בצלמו, does not refer to God’s image, but to man’s image. In addition to this, he considered that the expression בצלם אלהים is a specification of what image is that, i.e., the image of the angels. Rashbam did not interpret the word אלהים in the sense of God but in the sense of angels.

Joseph Bekhor Shor, who lived in northern France in the 2nd half of the 12th century, based largely on Rashbam’s exegesis. In his own explanation on Gen 1:27, he also interpreted that the word בצלמו means “in man’s image” and added that בצלם אלהים ברא אותו is an expression of threatening meaning to say that God “created man in the image of a judge and a law-giver.”

It seems that Abraham ibn Ezra referred to the northern French exegetes, and particularly to Rashbam, when he quoted that בצלמו means “in man’s image.” However, he probably misunderstood Rashbam’s intentions that he did not interpret בצלם אלהים in the sense of “in God’s image” but “in the angels’ image.” Ibn Ezra then proceeded to reject the interpretation that בצלמו means “in man’s image” by providing the following arguments:

How can the pronominal suffix his in the expression in His image (Gen 1:27) refer to man? If this were the case, then man had an image before he was created! What would be the meaning of whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall that person’s blood be shed (Gen 9:6) if man was created with an image? Furthermore, all living creatures have an image!

First, Ibn Ezra used the logical argument that it is impossible that man was created with an image of himself, for that image could not exist before the creation of Adam. Second, he provided a Scriptural verse in which the expression בצלם אלהים proves that such interpretation is absurd. In Gen 9:6 we read, *whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of Elohim (בצלם אלהים) He created man.*\(^{11}\) According to the interpretation quoted by Ibn Ezra, it is absurd to claim that the reason that the person who kills another person will be punished is that man was created with the image of a man. However, the warning that God will take revenge of the person who spills the blood of another human being, as stated in Gen 9:5–6, makes sense if the reason explicitly stated in the sentence כי בצלם אלהים עשה את האדם is interpreted in the sense that God created man in the image of the angels, which is Ibn Ezra's interpretation of the word Elohim.

Ibn Ezra’s statement that “all living creatures have an image” reinforced the absurd of interpreting that the reason for the prohibition of killing human beings is that they were created with the image of man. Ibn Ezra probably meant to say that all living creatures have an image and, if human beings are permitted to kill animals, the reason for the prohibition of killing other human beings must be that they are different from the animals in that they were created in the image of the angels.

As mentioned before, Ibn Ezra quoted the interpretation that in the sentence בצלם אלהים ברא אותו, the word בצלם is not in the construct state to אלהים, but אלהים is the subject of the verb ברא. Against such explanation, Ibn Ezra argued the following in his second commentary on this verse:

> If this were the case, how does Scripture repeat the word twice? Moreover, this interpretation contradicts the punctuator who joined בצלם אלהים ברא אתו. If it were as they affirm, it should have been punctuated with a zaqef or with any other similar accent. Even if they make us shut our mouths, what is then the meaning of Ezeki-

\(^{11}\) This translation is based on Ibn Ezra’s rendering of this verse.
el’s words, “something that seemed like a human form” (Ezek 1:26)?

First, Ibn Ezra wanted to prove that it is absurd to render the sentence בצלמו בצלם אלהים ברא him in his image, with an image, God created him, by repeating the word צלם twice. Second, if that were the case, the word בצלם אלהים should have been punctuated with a disjunctive accent. However, צלם is punctuated with a merkha, which is a conjunctive accent, and proves that בצלם אלהים is a construct state that cannot be interpreted otherwise. Third, Ezekiel’s vision of the throne of glory in which he saw “something that seemed like a human form” contradicts those who try to prevent from connecting God or the heavenly beings with the possession of an image.

4. Saadiah Gaon’s Interpretation on the Creation of Man

4.1. In the Image of God
After quoting the aforementioned interpretations on the creation of man anonymously, Ibn Ezra then cited Saadiah Gaon’s interpretation by his own name. He first cited Saadiah Gaon’s explanation on the expression in our image, after our likeness:

Saadiah Gaon interpreted the expression in our image, after our likeness in the sense of the dominion [of man on earth.] He explained in the image in the sense that God saw in His wisdom that [this image] was good [for man.] He said that Scripture connects image to God in order to stress the glorified state of man. Similarly, Scripture states, “they had to leave His land (מארצו)” (Ezek 36:20), because “the earth (הארץ) is the Lord’s and all that it holds” (Ps 24:1).

Saadiah Gaon translated Gen 1:26 as “And God said: We shall make man in our form, after our likeness in dominion; they shall rule over the fish of the sea...” and Gen 1:27 as “and God created man in His form, in an estimable form to rule He created him...” In his own explanation on these verses, Saadiah Gaon stated that form
and likeness in these verses had to be interpreted not literally, but allegorically in the sense of “form and likeness of action.”\(^{12}\) Man can thus be compared to God figuratively in the sense that he can act over the earthly beings as well as God can act over the whole universe.

In his commentary on Genesis, Saadiah Gaon gave two explanations on the meaning of in our image, after our likeness:

The first explanation is that in our form, after our likeness as well as “in the form of Elohim” are said as a form of singling out and raising to distinction, i.e., just as God created all parts of the earth and raised one land to distinction saying of it: “This is My land,” as it is written: “I will bring you to My land” (Ezek 38:16), and also “they shall not be able to remain in the land of the Lord” (Hos 9:3).\(^{13}\)

According to Saadiah Gaon, the use of possessive pronouns referred to God in the Bible does not imply that God possesses the things on which these pronouns are attached, but it is a way to stress the special status and distinction of such things over the rest. In other words, the Bible speaks of the form and likeness of God in the creation of man, not because God possesses a form and a likeness, but to distinguish man from the rest of the created beings. Saadiah Gaon specified that such a form is the most adequate to express the glorified status of man. In Saadiah Gaon’s view, both Ezek 38:16 and Hos 9:3 speak of the land of God, not in the sense that He possesses the land of Israel, but to stress the importance of this land over the rest of the territories. He then cited other biblical examples: “Mountain of the Lord, Mount Bashan” (Ps 68:16), “I will make all My mountains a road” (Isa 49:11), “for My house shall be called a house of prayer” (Isa 56:7), and “the mountain of the Lord’s


\(^{13}\) Saadiah Gaon, Commentary on the Book of Creation, 112.
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house shall stand firm above the mountains” (Isa 2:2). Similar explanations can be found in his Book of Beliefs and Opinions.\textsuperscript{14}

The second explanation provided by Saadiah Gaon on in our image, after our likeness is expressed as follows:

The second explanation is that God made him in his likeness in the sense of dominion and rulership, not in the sense of the mold or the likeness of the face. This is like one who says: “Today such is in the form of a teacher” and “such is in the form of a heretic,” referring not to the form of the body but to his status and position. From among all other beings God made man in the position of a master over everything just as He, may He be exalted, is a ruler over everything. What supports this is that it says: “they shall rule the fish of the sea” (Gen 1:26), where it informs us that man resembles God in the aspect of “and they shall rule” over others. Therefore, David says “You have given them dominion over the works of your hands” (Ps 8:7), and before that: “You have made him little less than God” (Ps 8:6). This means that God deprived him of the ability to create, bringing out anew, and the like.\textsuperscript{15}

In this paragraph, Saadiah Gaon elaborated on the sense in which man resembles God: man has dominion over the earthly beings as well as God has dominion over everything. Saadiah Gaon then cited Ps 8:7 as a proof of man’s dominion over the created beings. Ps 8:6, however, demonstrates that man is different from God in his inability to create or produce something completely new.\textsuperscript{16}


\textsuperscript{15} Saadiah Gaon, Commentary on the Book of Creation, 112–113.

\textsuperscript{16} Ps 8:6 was translated by M. Linetsky as “You have reduced him a little from the level of angels.” He remarked that this implies that, according to Saadiah Gaon, the angels have the ability to create, which is in direct contradiction to his criticism of Benjamin al-Nahawendi, who maintained that an angel created the world. In my opinion, the translation “You have made him little less than God” fits better with the sense given by Saadiah Gaon.
In his quotation of Saadiah Gaon’s explanation on this verse, Abraham ibn Ezra combines his two interpretations into a single one. No criticism against Saadiah Gaon was given by Ibn Ezra, probably because he agreed at least in part with him. In fact, Ibn Ezra’s own interpretation on the similitudes between man and God, as deduced from the expression *in our image, after our likeness*, resemble those of Saadiah Gaon, as shall be shown later.

4.2. The verbal form נעשה as a plural of majesty

In his first commentary on Genesis, Abraham ibn Ezra quoted Saadiah Gaon’s interpretation on the word נעשה:

Saadiah Gaon also said that the word נעשה is in plural, as is normally used by kings. Similar cases are “we will give (נכתבה) you that one too” (Gen 29:27), “we will now tell (נאמר) the king its meaning” (Dan 2:36), and “I can thus defeat them and we drive them out (נכה) of the land” (Num 22:6).\(^\text{17}\)

In his commentary on Genesis, Saadiah Gaon interpreted the plural form נעשה let us make man as a plural of majesty, i.e., a plural form with a singular meaning, which is normally used by people having a status of power:

*Let us make man* is used in plural for aggrandizement and honor, as is the practice of the language of the Arabs that the king, the official and the distinguished person say: “We commanded”, “we said”, and “we did”, and so Laban says “we will give you that one too” (Gen 29:27), and Amazia “Have we appointed you a counselor to the king?” (2 Chr 25:17).\(^\text{18}\)

Saadiah Gaon used this argument in the context of his polemics with the Christians, who interpreted this expression as a proof of

\(^{17}\) A similar quotation is given by Ibn Ezra in his second commentary on this same verse.

the Trinity. In his *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, he used a similar argument in the same polemical context:

The language of the children of Israel gives a distinguished person license to say: “Let us do”, and “let us make”, although he is singular in number. Thus Balak said: “perhaps, we can defeat them” (Num 22:6). Similarly Daniel said: “Such was the dream, and we will now tell the king its meaning” (Dan 2:36). Manoah too said: “Let us detain you and prepare a kid for you” (Judg 13:15), and there are many similar expressions in Scripture.\(^{19}\)

Abraham ibn Ezra criticized some of the examples given by Saadiah Gaon to illustrate the grammatical phenomenon of the plural of majesty by affirming that “these witnesses are false witnesses.” Regarding the case of Gen 29:27, he affirmed in his first commentary:

“We will give (וְנִתְנָה) you” (Gen 29:27) is a *nifal* form like “and the city is given (נִתְנָה)” (Jer 32:24). The *waw* attached to the verb changes the past to the future, as is the case with every verb in the past. The meaning is: “she will be given to you”.\(^{20}\)

Regarding the case of Dan 2:36, Ibn Ezra affirmed in his first commentary:

The expression נאם קדם מלכה (Dan 2:36) is Aramaic. How would Daniel dare to speak in such haughty terms before Nebuchadnezzar who was “king of kings” (Dan 2:37)?

According to Ibn Ezra, it makes no sense that Daniel uses a plural of majesty when speaking to the king of Babylon, a person of a higher rank than him. In his second commentary, Ibn Ezra gives a different interpretation on this same verse:

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\(^{20}\) A similar argument was given in his second commentary on Genesis.
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NA'AMAR HODE MILCA (Dan 2:36) is not Hebrew. However, it is possible to interpret it as an expression of humility. Daniel said that human beings were unable to know the dream, they could only interpret it: "we – I and others – can interpret it."

Ibn Ezra in this case interpreted the word נאמר in Dan 2:36 not as a plural of majesty, but as an actual plural implying a plural subject: Daniel and others. Regarding the case of Num 22:6, Ibn Ezra stated in his first commentary:

"We drive them out (כוה") (Num 22:6) refers to him and his army, although it may be an infinitive, like "clearing (נקה) he does not clear the guilty" (Exod 34:7). [The latter interpretation is supported by the fact that] Scripture employs the phrase "they were not hurt (נס)" (Exod 9:32), and a verb cannot come in the pual unless it also comes in the piel.

Two possibilities of interpreting the verbal form כוה in Num 22:6 different from a plural of majesty were given by Ibn Ezra. According to the first one, כוה is an actual plural which implies a plural subject: Balak and his army. Balak said to Balaam that he and his army would drive the people coming from Egypt out of their land. According to the second one, כוה is an infinitive which means that Balak said, "I will defeat them to drive them out (כוה") of the land." In order to support this last possibility, Ibn Ezra cited the infinite form כוה (Exod 34:7) which has a grammatical structure exactly like כוה. To reinforce his argument, he also quoted the case of יבז (Exod 9:32). Ibn Ezra assumed that if יבז is the pual of the root ובז, and "a verb cannot come in the pual unless it also comes in the piel," then the form כוה in Num 22:6 proves that it is the piel infinitive of the root ובז.

In his second commentary on Genesis, however, only the possibility that כוה is an infinitive is offered by Ibn Ezra:

21 A similar case is in Jer 46:28.
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The word נכה (Num 22:6) is an infinitive, like “clearing (זכה) he does not clear the guilty” (Exod 34:7), because it is clear that its root is נכה. A similar case is “the wheat and the spelt were not ruined (nçוכו)” (Exod 9:32).

The reason to sustain that נכה in Num 22:6 is an infinitive is that its root cannot be other than נכה. Ibn Ezra quoted the case of Exod 9:32 to prove that the נכה of נכה (Num 22:6) is not the affirmative marking the first person plural form, but one of the radical letters of the root נכה.

From Ibn Ezra’s observations, it can be deduced that the examples of plurals of majesty provided by Saadiah Gaon did not convince him of the existence of such grammatical characteristic in the Hebrew Bible. On the contrary, he preferred to interpret them in a more obvious way: they are actual plurals. In the case of נעשה (Gen 1:26), he arrived to the conclusion that it is an actual plural verbal form with a plural implicit subject.

Saadiah Gaon, however, was not the only Medieval Jewish exegete who interpreted נעשה as a plural of majesty; in fact, this is the most common solution among the Karaite exegetes who interpreted this verse. Jacob al-Qirqisani (10th c.) explained נעשה exactly as Saadiah Gaon. He even provided the same examples cited by Saadiah Gaon to prove that the plural of majesty is commonly used in the Bible. According to Al-Qirqisani, the plural our in the expression in our image, after our likeness is also a plural of majesty. Similarly to Saadiah Gaon, he later explained that this expression means that man is similar to God in his dominion over the earth. Al-Qirqisani made these observations also as a rejection of the Christian interpretation of Gen 1:26 as a reference to the Trinity.22

The explanation of נעשה as a plural of majesty is also the solution proposed by the Karaite exegete and grammarian Ali ben Suleiman (11th–12th c.).

The Karaite grammarian Abu al-Faraj Harun (11th c.) dealt with the question of the plural נעשה (Gen 1:26) in a chapter dedicated to analyze the use of the letters א, י, ת and נ when used specifically with verbs. After explaining that the letter נ marks the first person plural form, and that א marks the first person singular form, Abu al-Faraj Harun explained the cases in which a נ is used instead of an א:

In some cases נ can take the place of א at the front of a future verb, when the speaker is a person of majesty and importance. This applies both to God, the Exalted One, and to human beings, for example “let us make (נעשה) man” (Gen 1:26), “let us go down (נרדת) and confound (ונבלה) their speech there” (Gen 11:7), “have we appointed you (נתנוך) a counselor to the king?” (2 Chr 25:16), and similar cases.

Jephet ben Eli (10th c.) quoted the interpretation of נעשה as a plural of majesty as one of the possible solutions offered by earlier exegetes “in accordance with the accepted usage of the grammarians.” However, he preferred to interpret it as an actual plural form implying a collective action: the whole universe was involved in the creation of man. Jephet ben Eli called the attention on the fact that Scripture uses three verbs referring to the creation of man:עשה ‘to make’ (Gen 1:26 and Gen 2:18), יוצר ‘to create’ (Gen 1:27) and ייצר ‘to form’ (Gen 2:7). He added that the verbעשה ‘to make’ is never used for any other created thing; therefore, it was used to highlight the exceptional character of man and his superiority above the rest.

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of creation. According to Jephet ben Eli, the use of the plural נעשה "let us make" implies the collective action of the whole universe in the creation of man, for he is a microcosm which completes creation.²⁶

Abraham ibn Ezra may be referring to Jephet ben Eli’s explanation in his second commentary:

Others affirmed that the whole verse are the words of the collective and said that, at the beginning of the verse, it is written ויאמר (in singular) and not ויאמרו (in plural). The collective can be expressed as in “the people said (ויאמר) to his brother Simeon” (Josh 24:21) and “Judah said (ויאמר) to his brother Simeon” (Judg 1:3), and also as in “the Elohim caused me to wander (התעו)” (Gen 20:13), “surely there are Elohim who judge (שופטים) on earth” (Ps 58:12), “let Israel be glad in its Maker (בעושיו)” (Ps 149:2).

According to those authors cited by Ibn Ezra, in the Bible there are examples in which a collective is expressed with a singular verbal form, as in Josh 24:21 and Judg 1:3, or with a plural verbal form, as in Gen 20:13, Ps 58:12 and Ps 149:2.

5. Abraham ibn Ezra’s Own Interpretation on the Creation of Man

5.1. The plural form נעשה
After quoting the interpretations of earlier exegetes and grammarians mentioned above, with which Abraham ibn Ezra disagreed, he offered his own. Regarding the verbal form נעשה, in his first commentary he affirmed:

Note that all the works of creation came into being by God’s command for the glorification of man. The earth brought forth plants, and the earth and water brought forth all living creatures. After all plants and living creatures had been created, God said to the angels:

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“Let us make man”, i.e., we will occupy ourselves with his creation, not the water and the earth.27

In this paragraph, Ibn Ezra emphasized man’s unique position within creation, an idea that had been previously stressed by Saadiah Gaon. The creation of man is different from the creation of plants and animals, because whereas plants and animals came into being through the participation of an element of nature—namely, the earth and the water—, man was created exclusively by God and his angels.

Man’s creation as different from the creation of plants and animals had already been pointed out by Jephet ben Eli. He wondered why Scripture does not affirm that he was created by the earth, just as it affirms that the rest of the living creatures were brought forth by the earth in the verse and God said: Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind (Gen 1:24). The reason given by Jephet ben Eli was that, although the body of man comes from the earth, the human soul is a sublime substance of celestial origin. According to Jephet ben Eli, the expression נפש אדם ‘human soul’ defines perfectly the composed character of the human being: a body from the earth (אדמה) and a spiritual soul from heaven.

In his Megillat ha-Megalleh, Abraham Bar Hiyya (12th c.) also distinguished between beings that were created with no participation of other thing in their creation, like the heavenly beings, and beings that were created with the participation of the earth and the water, like plants and animals. Regarding man’s creation, Bar Hiyya affirmed:

But we find that the creation of man is different from and superior to all of them. No other being was allowed to participate in his creation, and in this he resembles the creations of the upper world,

27 On the word נעשה in his second commentary, Ibn Ezra simply said: “God said to the angels: we will make man; נעשה refers to Him and the angels.”
which persist for ever. In this he differs from all other creatures of the lower world.28

As can be deduced from these texts, Ibn Ezra’s stress on the creation of man as something different from the creation of other beings may have been influenced by Jephet ben Eli and Abraham Bar Hiyya.

The most important difference between Abraham ibn Ezra and the exegetes quoted by him is that he interpreted the verbal form נעשה as a plural implying a plural subject: God and the angels occupy themselves in the creation of man.

In Genesis Rabbah 8:3–9 we find interpretations on the plural נעשה in the sense that God took counsel with someone else before creating man: the ministering angels or the souls of the righteous.29 However, no explicit mention is made on the fact that the angels took an active part in the creation of man. On the contrary, Genesis Rabbah 8:9 explicitly affirmed, as a refutation to the heretics, that God alone created him because the verb בהא is used in the singular and not in the plural:

The heretics asked R. Simlai: “How many deities created the world?” “I and you must inquire of the first day,” replied he, as it is written, “For ask now of the first days” (Deut 4:32). Not, “Since the day gods created (ברא) man” is written here, but God created (ברא). Then they asked him a second time: “Why is it written, In the beginning Elohim [plural] created?” “In the beginning ברא Elohim is not written here,” answered he, “but ברא Elohim the heaven and the earth.” R. Simlai said: Wherever you find a point [apparently] supporting the heretics, you find the refutation at its side. They asked him again: “What is meant by, and God said: Let us make man?”

29 See also Sanhedrin 38b.
“Read what follows” replied he, “not, And gods created (וינראו) man is written here, but And God created (ויברא) (Gen 1:27).

Rashi later elaborated on this idea and explicitly mentioned that the angels did not assist God in the creation of man:

Let us make man. Even though they [the angels] did not assist Him in His creation, and there is an opportunity for the heretics to rebel, Scripture did not hesitate to teach proper conduct and the trait of humility, that a great person should consult with and receive permission from a smaller one. Had it been written: “I shall make man,” we would not have learned that He was speaking with His tribunal, but to Himself. And the refutation to the heretics is written in the following verse: “And God created (ויברא),” and it does not say, “and they created (ויבראו).”

The interpretation that the plural form נעשנ means that God was speaking to the angels to consult them on the creation of man became the standard Jewish interpretation of the northern French exegetes. Joseph Bekhor Shor and Rashbam interpreted it in this way.

Benjamin al-Nahawendi (9th c.) was one of the earliest Karaite exegetes who made the strongest efforts to eliminate all traces of anthropomorphism from the biblical text. In his exegesis – known through quotations from Al-Qirqisani, Saadiah Gaon and others – the anthropomorphic expressions referring to God are generally explained as referred to a certain angel who acted as a demiurge. It is this angel or demiurge who created the world, revealed the Torah, made the miracles and communicated with the prophets. According to Benjamin al-Nahawendi, the expression let us make man was pronounced by the primordial angel who addressed the rest of the celestial armies to make him in the image of the angels. Al-Nahawendi’s arguments were fully criticized by Saadiah Gaon and some Karaite exegetes, such as Jacob al-Qirqisani and Jephet ben

30 To base on the plural נעשנ to construct their heresies.
Eli. The principal concern of Al-Nahawendi’s opponents is that he negated that God created the world and man.

Even though Abraham ibn Ezra did not sustain such a radical position as that of Benjamin al-Nahawendi, it may be possible that he was influenced by the later in considering that the angels took part in the process of the creation of man.

5.2. In the image and likeness of the angels
Ibn Ezra’s commentary continued to explain the expression “in our image, after our likeness.” As can be easily inferred from his comments on the plural form נפש, Ibn Ezra considered that man was created in the image and likeness of both God and the angels. To justify this idea, in his first commentary, he focused on explaining the similarities between God and man, and in his second commentary, he focused on the similitudes between the angels and man.

In his first commentary, Ibn Ezra first quoted the traditional principle that “the Torah speaks in the language of human beings” (Berakot 31b) to justify that “a human can only speak of things above or below him by using human imagery.” Ibn Ezra then quoted some biblical verses in which anthropomorphisms are used: Num 16:30, Num 13:29 and Prov 8:26. These examples cannot be explained literally but figuratively. Also in the case of Gen 1:26, image and likeness have to be interpreted figuratively, because God does not possess an image (דמות). Scripture clearly refutes such a notion by stating, To whom then will you compare me? (תדמיוני) (Isa 40:25). Ibn Ezra continued by explaining the reasons that the Bible affirms that man was created in the image and likeness of God:

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It is because man’s upper soul is eternal and is compared in its existence to God, and because man’s soul is incorporeal and fills the body, which is a microcosm, in the same way that God fills the universe. May God’s name be blessed, for He commenced with the macrocosm and concluded with the microcosm. The prophet also said that he saw God’s glory appear “in human form” (Ezek 1:26). God is one. He is the creator of all. He is all. I cannot explain further.

In his second commentary, Ibn Ezra first stated that the earth and the water mentioned in the story of creation are in fact the eternal elements of nature. They cannot perish. However, the creatures that proceed from them, such as plants and animals, will perish. He then explained:

Nothing is eternal on earth except man, because he was created in the image of the Elohim, who are the eternal angels. If man was created in their image, man is eternal. [...] The expression in our image refers to the angels, who are a multitude, as is written in the book of Daniel, “a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood” (Dan 7:10). The meaning of image is like a pattern, as it is written, “he became a father of a son in his likeness, according to his image” (Gen 5:3). The בֵּית (בֵּית) indicates something like the instrument (כלי) to make him.

According to Ibn Ezra’s two commentaries, three main ideas can be deduced from the expression in our image, after our likeness: first, man can be compared to God because he possesses an eternal soul; second, man can be compared to God because man is a microcosm; and third, man can be compared to the angels because both are eternal. In this last case, Ibn Ezra did not specify in what sense man is eternal or if only a part of him is eternal.

In his explanation on the creation of man, Abraham bar Hiyya argued that the word image refers to his physical aspects and likeness to his spiritual aspects. As H. Töyrylä pointed out, according to Bar Hiyya, “Gen 1:26 refers to man being made with the image that God had prepared for him and resembling the likeness, i.e. man
bears a certain similarity to God through the rational and spiritual part of his soul.”

In Bar Hiyya’s words:

It then says resembling the likeness to attest on the living soul and the spirit blown into him, which bears resemblance to the Creator, because man understands the workings of the heaven and the earth, and has some part in the wisdom and he rules over the creatures of the earth, and in this way has a part in the rulership. These two aspects, wisdom and rulership, are attributes of the creator.

Although Ibn Ezra coincided with Bar Hiyya in explaining that the expression in our image, after our likeness implies a resemblance between man’s soul and God, there is a difference between them: whereas Bar Hiyya interpreted such resemblance in the sense of man’s ability to possess knowledge and wisdom, Ibn Ezra interpreted it in the sense of the human soul’s eternity.

The idea of man as a microcosm is present in many medieval philosophical and exegetical writings. Neoplatonic philosophers such as Isaac Israeli, Solomon Ibn Gabirol, Joseph Ibn Zaddik, and others elaborated extensively on this conception. According to such notion, since man is a microcosm, through knowledge of himself or of his body and soul, he is capable to know the whole world.

Abraham ibn Ezra, however, did not use the idea of man as a microcosm in terms of knowledge, but as a proof of the resemblance between him and God in terms of physical fulfillment: the human soul fills the body in the same way that God fills the Universe. Although it seems that this is an original interpretation by Ibn Ezra, some similarity can be found between Ibn Ezra’s interpretation and the use of this notion by Jacob al-Qirqisani in his exegesis on the creation of the world. In Al-Qirqisani’s view, man was created last because he has some correspondences with the things in the Uni-

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33 H. Töyrylä, Abraham Bar Hiyya, 209.
verse: his body corresponds to the celestial sphere, the seven orifices of his body correspond to the seven planets, his bones correspond to the earth and minerals, his hair corresponds to the plants, his four bodily humors correspond to the water, etc. Al-Qirqisani then affirmed that the human soul corresponds to the Creator because the human soul guides and moves the body as well as the Creator moves the celestial sphere.\textsuperscript{36} Al-Qirqisani, however, did not use the notion of man as a microcosm as an explanation of the expression \textit{in our image, after our likeness}. According to him, Scripture affirms that man was created in the image of God as a form of singling out and raising to distinction or in the sense of dominion and rulership.\textsuperscript{37} Both interpretations are very similar to those of Sādiah Gaon.\textsuperscript{38}

The explanation that \textit{in our image, after our likeness} refers to the angels is the most common interpretation in medieval Jewish exegesis. As in the case of Ibn Ezra, some commentators simply remarked such similarity without providing any more information on the sense in which man is similar to the angels. This is the case of Ali ben Suleiman, who explained it as “in the image of our angels, in the likeness of our angels”. He quoted the case of והייתם سواء (Gen 3:5) as a proof that Elohim in Gen 1:26 means ‘angels’, not ‘God’. He interpreted Gen 3:5 as “you will become like angels” instead of “you will become like God.”

After explaining that God consulted with the angels the creation of man, Rashi simply said, “\textit{in our image, in our form; after our likeness, to understand and to discern}.” Regarding the expression \textit{God created man in His image} (Gen 1:27), Rashi said, “in the form that was made for him.” From Rashi’s laconic expressions, it is impossible to deduce whose form and likeness the biblical text is referring to. It seems however clear that such similitude is interpreted in terms of man’s ability to understand and discern. Regarding the expression \textit{in the image of Elohim He created him} (Gen 1:27), Rashi

\textsuperscript{36} Chiesa, \textit{Creazione e caduta}, 54–55.
\textsuperscript{37} Chiesa, \textit{Creazione e caduta}, 56–58.
\textsuperscript{38} Sādiah Gaon, \textit{Commentary on the Book of Creation}, 112–113.
was more specific and affirmed, “it explains to you that the image that was prepared for him was the image of the likeness of his Creator.”

Unlike Rashi, Rashbam explicitly stated that in our image means “in the image of the angels.” Regarding after our likeness, Rashbam stated, “according to our wisdom, for when man misbehaves he is, in fact, compared to the likeness (נדמה) of animals (Ps. 49:13).” Rashbam compared man with the angels in the ability to have wisdom and to behave according to their wisdom.

The Spanish philosopher and historian Abraham ibn Daud (c. 1110–1180) explained that in the expression in our image, after our likeness, man is compared to the angels in the following sense:

Let us make man in our image after to our likeness (Gen 1:26) means that He will shine upon [man], from among everything that is under the heavens, an intellectual, rational, angelic form through which he will become like the angels. It is not affirmed that what is like something necessarily is like it in every respect. Rather, the one can have from the other a likeness that is either strong or weak, and between man and angels there is a weak likeness.  

Abraham ibn Daud later affirmed that “the angels are imitated by man by being rational.” N. Samuelson explained that, according to Ibn Daud, likeness in Gen 1:26 means that God will overflow upon human beings appropriate incorporeal forms through which they may become like angels, in having actual intellects. However, there is no corporeal resemblance between human beings and angels. Samuelson also pointed out that, in response to those who interpreted that the term image refers specifically to physical figure, Ibn Daud interpreted it in the sense of ‘imitation’. The specific way that human beings imitate angels is in being rational, not in being corporeal.  

40 Abraham Ibn Daud, The Exalted Faith, 221.
Mariano Gomez Aranda

In his *Kuzari*, Judah Halevi introduced his interpretations on Gen 1:26 in a section dedicated to the divine attributes in which he discussed the sense in which man can be compared to God. He explains *Let us make man in our image after our likeness* as follows:

The meaning is: I have displayed wisdom in arranging the creation in the following order: elements, metals, animals which live in the water as well as in the air, and those with fully developed senses and wonderful instincts. Next to this class there is only one which approaches the divine and celestial. God created man in the form of His angels and servants which are near Him, not in place but in rank, as we cannot speak of place in connection with God.\

As is clear in this paragraph, in Judah Halevi’s view, man is compared to the angels only in rank, not in place: man possesses the highest rank on earth and angels possess the highest rank in heaven.

6. Conclusions

In his two commentaries on Gen 1:26–27, Abraham ibn Ezra collected some of the most relevant interpretations on the creation of man in this verse by earlier medieval Jewish exegetes and philosophers.

The plural form נעשה puzzled medieval Jewish exegetes because it may suggest the existence of a plurality of creators. The solutions quoted by Ibn Ezra to avoid interpreting נעשה as a plural are the following: a nifal participle, a plural of majesty and a collective form. The interpretation of נעשה as a nifal participle was the option preferred by Jeshua ben Jehuda. The interpretation of a plural of majesty is the interpretation chosen by most medieval Jewish exegetes, such as Saadiah Gaon, Jacob al-Qirqisani, and Ali ben Suleiman. Some of these exegetes argued against the Christians who found in the plural form נעשה a support of their belief in the Trinity.

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Ibn Ezra rejected these two interpretations by using grammatical arguments, and specially by proving that the biblical examples adduced by Saadiah Gaon to sustain his position cannot be interpreted as plurals of majesty but as actual plurals. The interpretation of נעשה as a collective may be a reference to Jephet ben Eli, who interpreted it as the collective action of the whole universe.

The expression *in our form, after our likeness* also troubled medieval Jewish exegetes not only for the plural form of the possessive forms but also for the anthropomorphism of the terms *image* and *likeness*. As quoted by Ibn Ezra, some exegetes eliminated all possibilities of attributing an image to God by simply affirming that these are not God’s words, but Moses’ words as part of his redaction of the text. The first exegete who quoted such interpretation was Jephet ben Eli.

The anthropomorphism of the expression *God created man in his image* (Gen 1:27) was solved by some exegetes of the northern French school, such as Rashi, Rashbam and Joseph Bekhor Shor, by simply stating that the possessive pronoun *his* refers to the human image, not to God’s image. Ibn Ezra used rational arguments, the rules of the Hebrew accents and other biblical parallels to prove the absurd of such interpretation.

Abraham ibn Ezra also cited that Saadiah Gaon interpreted the expression *in our form, after our likeness* in two senses: first, man has a special status distinction over the rest of created beings just as God has a special status in the whole universe; second, man exerts dominion and rulership over the animals on earth, just as God exerts dominion and rulership over everything. No objection was offered by Ibn Ezra against these interpretations.

Abraham ibn Ezra’s own proposals of interpreting Gen 1:26 are a combination of original arguments and explanations given by earlier Jewish exegetes. He interpreted נעשה as a plural verbal form implying a plural subject: God and the angels occupied in the creation of man. In Rabbinic literature, it was assumed that this plural form implied that God took counsel with the angels before creating him, but no explicit mention was made on the fact that they did
participate in his creation. The notion that an angel, and not God, created man was defended by the Karaite Benjamin al-Nahawendi, who may have influenced Ibn Ezra to a certain degree.

From the expression *in our image, after our likeness*, Ibn Ezra deduced that man can be compared to God because he has an eternal soul and because man is a microcosm, and can be compared to the angels because he is eternal. The influence of earlier philosophers and exegetes, such as Abraham bar Hiyya, the Neoplatonic philosophers, Abraham ibn Daud and Judah Halevi can be detected in Ibn Ezra’s explanations.

Abraham Ibn Ezra’s two commentaries on Gen 1:26–27 prove that in the history of medieval Jewish exegesis, there was not a unanimous interpretation on the creation of man; on the contrary, a great diversity of interpretations were given by Jewish philosophers and exegetes, some of which even came into conflict and led to controversies.