

Of animals and animates. A linguistic approach to praise and subjection in Qur'ānic Arabic “higher nonhumans”

When Q 24:41 states that “whatsoever is in the heavens and in the earth extols God” adding that “Each — He knows its prayer and its extolling; and God knows the things they do”, reference is obviously made to animate beings. The precise identity of these beings, however, remains obscure, insofar as — out of the (obviously diverse, insofar as heaven- as well as earth-dwelling) community of praise-giving animates, only birds are, in this specific verse, made explicit. In our contribution, we will set out to explore, at the textual level of the Qur'ān and in a purely linguistic perspective, who or what constitutes this group of animates. It will be shown that in Qur'ānic Arabic the well-known Old Arabic alternation of f.sg. vs. f.pl agreement with nonhuman plurals, has specialized into a means of differentiating between “ordinary nonhumans” (common things and animals) and “other-than-human persons” (Hallowell 1960). Focusing on the latter group we will show that “being able of praising God” and “being subjected by God” are properties that, in the Qur'ān, link animals to “animately conceived of” natural phenomena/cosmic entities, especially mountains (e.g., 21:79) and stars (e.g., 16:12. Mesopotamian parallels are briefly touched upon.

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