

R. SAADIA GAON

Jewish philosophical literature first developed under the influence of Moslem philosophers in Babylonia (Iraq) during the Geonic period, in the first half of the 10th century. We know the names of some Jewish philosophers who lived prior to R. Saadia Gaon and from whom he learned. But Saadia—who may be regarded as the father of medieval rabbinic literature in all its many varied branches—was the first whose philosophical works have come down to us in their entirety. One may consider him the founder of the philosophical tradition that interprets holy writ from a Jewish/rabbinic viewpoint.

His Life

R. Saadia Gaon was born in 882 in Fayyum, Egypt. At about the age of 30 he left under circumstances that are unclear (apparently because of persecution by the Karaites) and came to Palestine. His varied literary activity began in Egypt and continued throughout his life, spurred on by the many controversies in which he was deeply involved, especially those between the Rabbanites and the Karaites, and between the Jewish communal leaders of Babylonia and Israel. He moved to Babylonia in 922 and was appointed Gaon of Sura in 928. He died in 942, after a life full of struggle and controversy.

His Fields of Productivity

Saadia's fields of productivity were varied, but one tendency is clearly recognized in all—to establish the authority of the rabbinic tradition against all its opponents. His philosophical work was devoted to the same goal. He was creative in six principal fields: lexicography and study of the Hebrew language; prayer and liturgical poetry; biblical translation and commentary; polemical literature; halakhic literature, and philosophical literature. As our interest here is in his philosophical thought, I shall content myself with pointing out the new tendencies that came to expression in his contribution to codifying the prayer

book, interpreting the Torah, and polemicizing against the critics of rabbinic Judaism, particularly the Karaites, all of which may serve as an introduction to his philosophical enterprise.

Saadia compiled one of the earliest prayer books, known as “The Sid-dur of R. Saadia Gaon,” and included in it a redaction of the Passover Haggadah. We shall not delve into the complex issue of the history of the prayer book and the evolution of Jewish prayer, but it is worth pointing out one feature. His prayer book was codified as a response to the criticisms of the Karaites against the rabbinic prayer formulas, for the Karaites included only biblical texts in their own prayers.

We also recognize in Saadia’s prayer book his inclination to a method-ical approach that verges on the scientific. This is characteristic of all his undertakings, and in this respect we may see him as inaugurating a new period, and not just in the philosophical arena.

Torah and Commentary

Saadia wrote a translation of the Torah in Arabic with commentary. We also have fragments of his translation of other books of the Bible.

His translation and commentary addressed a specific need of the Jewish community—the emergence of an Arabic-speaking community who were no longer knowledgeable in Hebrew (or the Aramaic of the prior Targum). In addition, it was necessary to deal with the various sects (especially the Karaites) as well as the Moslems, each of whom had their own reading of the sense of Scripture. An authoritative translation from the rabbinic perspective could counter these.

In Saadia’s commentary to the Torah, a rationalistic and conserva-tive tendency is prominent. It is clear that he is attempting to refute the penetrating objections of the rationalistic critics of the Bible who were active at the time. (Hiwi al-Balkhi, for example, raised 200 ques-tions against the Bible, and we can deduce their nature from Saadia’s responses: Why was Adam prevented from accessing the Tree of Life? Why did God not rescue Abel? How is it conceivable that God should repent of having made man? Why is the blood of animals acceptable as an offering to God? If God knows everything, why did He test Abraham? Etcetera.) Rationalistic criticism of the Bible left a strong impression, and its influence made inroads among Jews of the Rabbanite party. Thus there was a felt need for a project of basic interpretation of Scripture that would defend its plain sense and answer the objections.

Saadia's rationalistic, apologetic and polemical predilections led him to philosophy. He did not view philosophy as an intrinsic objective of religious thought, and he did not engage in it for its own sake. He saw it as a useful tool for defending the true faith against its opponents. The problem that troubled him, by his own testimony, was the wide-ranging disagreement among his contemporaries as to the proper doctrines and beliefs. This led to uncertainty, whereas the goal of religion is to bring one to the certainty that is the foundation for a correct way of living:

...My heart grieved for my race, the race of mankind, and my soul was moved on account of our own people Israel, as I saw in my time many of the believers clinging to unsound doctrines and mistaken beliefs while many of those who deny the faith boast of their unbelief and despise the men of truth, although they are themselves in error. I saw men sunk, as it were, in a sea of doubt and covered by the waters of confusion,—and there was no diver to bring them up from the depths and no swimmer to come to their rescue. But as my Lord has granted unto me some knowledge which I can use for their support, and endowed me with some ability which I might employ for their benefit, I felt that to help them was my duty, and guiding them aright an obligation upon me...¹

We note that Saadia speaks as a believer secure in the knowledge of his truth. He himself is not troubled by any doubts, but he grieves for the plight of those who are beset by doubt and perplexity, and sees himself as obligated to help them out. This is the background of his engagement with philosophy.

The Name of the Book

The name of the book *Sefer ha-Emunot v'ha-De'ot* (*Kītab al-'Amanat wal-'Itikadat*) attests to this purpose. Some² think that this title expresses an

opposition between authenticated “beliefs” to “opinions” that are merely conjectural. Others see it as a contrast between “doctrines” that are taken on faith and need to rise to the level of “beliefs” substantiated by reason. In either case, Saadia’s purpose is to define the principles of religion and argue their truth. This purpose informs the method of presentation and the structure of the book. At the start of each chapter he sets forth one religious principle and supports it by a Biblical proof-text. In the body of the discussion he presents philosophical arguments in its favor, outlines opposing positions and refutes the objections in every possible way, thus banishing all doubt and imbuing his readers with secure certainty.

Three Sources of Knowledge: Sense, Reason and Inference

In order to fulfill this mission successfully, Saadia first outlines the sources of human knowledge and the ways of validating it. Doctrines and beliefs come to us, in his view, from three sources:

1. *Knowledge Perceived through the Senses*—This is the main source. Saadia assumes that what we see is not merely the outer form of things, but their very essence. In Saadia’s view, human beings can only grasp what is grasped through the senses, i.e. material entities. Purely spiritual entities cannot be grasped by our faculties of knowledge, but what we grasp through the senses is certain. Indeed, Saadia recognizes that the senses can err and generate doubt, but in his view we discover our errors by means of the senses and correct them. Therefore experiential observation undertaken in an exact and critical manner can remove all doubts.
2. *Knowledge of Reason*—These are elementary truths that reason intuits by itself, for they are integral to it. Saadia has in mind the distinction between good and evil, and the basic axioms of logic. On the one hand, there is self-evident knowledge, and on the other hand, there is sensory knowledge. These two sources are combined in every intellectual apprehension. We explain this by saying that the intellect passes judgment on sensory experience. The content of intellectual apprehension has its source in or through the senses. Thus the intellect, like the senses, can avoid error and doubt through repeated critical examination.
3. *Inferential knowledge*—These are conclusions that follow from the senses and from reason by logical deduction. The third source is

dependent for its action on the first two. Most scientific knowledge is of this sort, but most errors derive from it as well, because complex cognition requires a doubly critical stance, both of its sensory and rational elements. Nevertheless, a sustained critical effort can dispel doubt.

If we are careful not to contradict the senses, reason, and what follows logically from both, and if we are not hasty in our judgments, but proceed patiently and methodically on firm foundations, then we can arrive at well-founded and firm knowledge on which we can rely.

What is Rationalism?

Saadia's rationalism is sincere inasmuch as he believes in the ability to arrive at absolute knowledge of the truth within the realm of our experience. Still, we are speaking of a knowledge with limits. We know by our reason that there are things beyond our knowledge. Our knowledge depends on our senses, and our reason passes judgment on our limited sensory experience. Moreover, we know how to arrive at well-founded conclusions, but even then we cannot be entirely sure that we have not erred. We must recognize that our reason is limited and liable to err. Therefore, even when we arrive at a conclusion that satisfies us, we ought to admit that we may have erred. This is a very important conclusion for understanding Saadia's religious thought, as will become clearer later.

Let us elaborate on this point. Saadia wants to arrive at certainty. He has no interest in speculation for its own sake. The intellectual enterprise for its own sake is not a goal for him. His only goal is to live in accord with the Torah's commandments. Furthermore, he recognizes no supra-sensual reality. The example that he brings is instructive: we see smoke and deduce that there is fire; we see a man moving and deduce that he has a soul. This may seem to go beyond the evidence of the senses, but this is not really the case. We are still in the sensory realm. Saadia considers the soul, too, as a sensory reality that we know from our inner experience; we do not surpass the limit of what is grasped experientially. God, who is the cause of sensory reality, is a spiritual essence, but when we assert this we have arrived at the limit beyond which our reason cannot go. We cannot know God, but only His creative activity.

This is the basic difference between Saadia's approach and a philosophy that has arrived at a metaphysical perspective. Saadia's rationalism does not believe in breaching the limits of experience and contemplating metaphysical truth. He only recognizes that experience points to a metaphysical reality of which we can know nothing.

All philosophers agree on the crucial proposition that God is unknown. Nevertheless, they make a concerted effort to apprehend something of God's metaphysical essence, as we shall see later. Saadia vehemently opposes this move. When he arrives at the uttermost limit of knowledge, he does not speculate further.

We can thus characterize Saadia's religious thought as a limited rationalism, which contents itself with verifying natural facts in order to confirm religious thought and action within the limits of human experience, and to overcome doubt. His chief aspiration is religious certainty, and in that respect he achieves his objective.

Tradition—The Fourth Source of Knowledge

The deliberation on the sensory and rational sources of knowledge is a prelude to the fourth source on which religion is based: "reliable report," or tradition.

Saadia sets up tradition as a special source of religious truth. But nevertheless he emphasizes its dependence on the three previous sources of knowledge: we must validate the claim of tradition too, because only then can we rely on it.

Setting the fourth source on the same plane as the first three raises the question of the relation of revelation to reason. Saadia's limited rationalism points this discussion in a particular direction. Clearly, the difference between reason and revelation does not pose the distressing religious problem for him that it did later for Maimonides. He assumes from the outset that there is a simple identity between them. The question is not how to reconcile contradictions between reason and revelation, but rather to what use each of the sources shall be put.

The distinction between good and evil is within the capacity of natural human reason. This follows from a utilitarian conception of the moral ideas: good denotes the useful, and evil the harmful to humankind. In that respect one does not require divine revelation to distinguish good and evil. Nevertheless, Saadia gives revelation a broad scope in the practical realm.

Prophecy and Commandments

Rational and Positive (= Arbitrary)⁴ Imperatives

Among the commandments that define the religious lifestyle, Saadia distinguishes two varieties that parallel the mutual duality of reason and revelation: imperatives of reason and imperatives of obedience.

Rational imperatives—these are the commands that even had they not been revealed in the Torah, we would be obligated to them by reason. These include some imperatives that are religiously significant (belief in God, belief in individual providence, prayer), as well as social imperatives (prohibition of murder, theft, adultery, etc.).

Positive (or arbitrary) imperatives—these are the commands that reason does not require (though it does not exclude them either). Their obligatory nature derives from the Torah. This refers especially to commands that touch on worship of God (Sabbath, dietary laws, etc.).

However, this classification is not hard and fast. Each category contains elements of the other.

On the one hand, there is an arbitrary element in rational imperatives. Reason recognizes general rules of conduct, but the specific norms that embody them rest on governmental authority. For instance, the prohibition of murder is categorical, but the distinction between murder and manslaughter, the gradation of their severity and the punishments meted out to them are a matter of governmental determination that will necessarily be arbitrary to some extent. This is not a purely rational judgment, and it calls for the absolute authority that is to be found in revelation.

On the other hand, there is a rational element in the positive commands. Reason requires man to bend his will to the authority above him and to acknowledge the Good One who has dealt him good, who extends him beneficence without limit. Thus, there is a rational reason to fulfill those commands whose rationale is obedience and subordination to the divine will, even if the person who observes them sees no private benefit from their performance.

We may therefore say that the difference between the rational and positive commands rests with whether the primary content of a given command expresses human utility—whether of an individual or a society—or subordination to the divine will. However, with respect to our motivation to obey and fulfill the imperatives, there is an arbitrary aspect to rational commands and a rational aspect to positive commands.

The Need for Prophecy

The distinction between positive and rational commands, and the need for arbitrary authority even with the rational commands, necessitates a means by which the divine word can come to humanity, in other words, prophecy.

How does Saadia understand the phenomenon of prophecy?

First of all the question of the likelihood or reasonableness of the prophetic vision does not bother Saadia especially. For Halevi and later for the Aristotelian philosophers, this is a question of the first rank—how can one explain prophecy, either psychologically or theologically? But for Saadia, this is an indubitable experience for which it is not hard to give a scientific explanation. The reason is that he had no general theory of the natural and the supernatural, but he accepted the biblical view of reality at face value and sought rational evidence for all its components. When he was faced with outright denial of the divine source of holy scripture, he sought to show that it was groundless.

In that case, how does God bring his word to mankind? In the *Book of Doctrines and Beliefs* Saadia dealt with this question with extreme brevity, but he treated it more fully in his earlier work, the commentary to the *Book of Formation*. The *Book of Formation* (*Sefer Yetzirah*) is an enigmatic mystical work that deals with the creation of the world and the secret connections between the divine and terrestrial realms. Scholars debate the date of its composition, and we shall not enter into that controversy. Suffice it to say that it was invested with traditional authority by both the philosophers and the kabbalists of the Middle Ages. Saadia used it for his purposes and it contributed to his development of the idea of the “created manifestation” of God by means of which he explained prophecy.

God is a spiritual entity, whereas man is a material creature. It is therefore impossible that God himself should speak to man or appear to him. Nevertheless, Saadia accepts at face value the prophets’ testimony that they saw divine visions and heard the divine voice speaking to them.

He explains this by postulating a mediating entity that was made visible to the prophets' eyes and was heard by their ears by divine fiat.

This "glory" or manifestation must be an ethereal material entity that was created to serve as a medium. It is pictured in forms that have allegorical significance, and in this way it informs the prophets of the divine will. The voice that the prophet hears is also a material voice. This is the explanation for the fact that different prophets see different visions. God depicts the glory to each prophet in a way appropriate to him. The vision is allegorical, but what the prophet sees and hears are real apparitions and voices, not the phantoms of his imagination. Thus Saadia reconciles an incorporeal notion of God with the objective reality of the prophetic vision.

Creation and God's Existence

Creation as a Foundational Theological Principle

We saw that prophecy rests on a demonstrative miracle, and the miracle rests on the assumption that the world was created by the will of an omnipotent God. Indeed, the affirmation in Genesis that the world was created after a prior non-being (which Saadia interprets as creation *ex nihilo*) and in that respect is generated (not eternal) and is regenerated continually, was in his view the foundation for proving the metaphysical truths of religion—knowing that God exists, and knowing the divine attributes. The knowledge that human beings are commanded to fulfill

the divine commandments is a necessary deduction from the fact that God created the world and humankind in it. To this, Saadia added a very important stipulation: God is perfect and lacks nothing, so it is clear that He did not create the world for His own sake, but rather—as the Good and Beneficent One—for the sake of the world and humanity. This therefore provides a double reason for our obligation to fulfill God’s commandments. We are beholden to God for the kindness of creating us, and God’s commandments are given for our benefit.

Maimonides’s Criticism of Saadia’s Doctrine of Creation

We can understand how central the belief in the world’s creation was to the foundation of Saadia’s biblical religious world outlook, from the spirited criticism that Maimonides directed at it. Saadia first proved that the world was created, and on that basis he proved God’s existence. Maimonides argued that one ought not to prove God’s existence on the basis of the world’s creation, because creation is not subject to logical proof. There are considerations on each side of the argument. Therefore one should not make the proof of God’s existence dependent on an unproved proposition. On the contrary, it would be better to prove God’s existence on the basis of the physics of Aristotle, who preferred the view that the world is eternal and the laws of physics are everlasting.

Maimonides’s argument raises a problem of interpretation, one with which we will have to reckon when we come to discuss his philosophy. In connection with his criticism of Saadia, one must emphasize that (according to our view) Maimonides accepted the belief in the world’s creation, for only on that basis can one establish a religious theology true to the outlook of the Bible, one that posits a God who wills, commands, directs the world, provides for reward and punishment, reveals, and works miracles. We learn all this from revelation. But in order to believe in revelation, we first need to believe in the existence of God. To this purpose, we should rely on a physical theory that is systematic and tested, namely that of Aristotle, and not on an assertion of creation that cannot be proved!

This criticism sheds light on Saadia’s method. It reveals Saadia’s innocence and naivete in relying on the authority of the biblical text. The Torah begins with the description of creation and presentation of God as creator. Saadia follows the same procedure in his philosophical argument. Maybe that is why he was unaware that his proofs of

the creation of the world would not withstand the test of systematic philosophical method.

Kalam and Aristotelianism in Muslim Philosophy

This is the place to clarify Saadia's relation to the two principal currents in Muslim philosophy, and to identify the main difference between them. The Mutakallimim were theologians who engaged in philosophy exclusively from a religious viewpoint and purpose. They were not interested in scientific and philosophical subjects for their own sake. Aristotelian philosophers, on the other hand, were interested in philosophy for its own sake. For them religion was only one portion, though an important and central one, of the general truth that interested them. For that purpose, they relied not simply on revealed scripture, but on scientific research, both empirical and theoretical. It is clear that Saadia followed the path of the Kalam. He did not engage in natural science for its own sake. Nevertheless, there are grounds for establishing that Saadia was familiar with Aristotle's physics and considered it superior. The result was a kind of amalgam between theological and scientific arguments. Saadia showed originality and creativity in this endeavor, but he did not see that he was subordinating what he learned of Aristotle's physics to what he learned from the Kalamic thinkers, and that from a systematic Aristotelian standpoint his arguments for the creation of the world and his proofs for God's existence were not convincing.⁵

Saadia's Fundamental Assumption: Cause Precedes Effect

To understand Saadia's proofs, we must uncover a prior assumption that differs from Aristotle, one that he regarded as so obvious that he did not bother to state it. In Saadia's view, a physical cause for generating

objects and the processes that they undergo must be prior in time to its effects. In other words, it cannot be the case that the cause and effect occur at the same time. Thus the cause must be external (transcendental) to the effect. It thus follows that if we encounter objects or processes that cannot be explained of themselves, we must assume that there is an external cause prior to them in time, which caused them. It is easy to see that this assumption contains in itself Saadia's primary argument. If we prove that the world that we see cannot develop from itself—if we prove that the world only has “possible existence” and not “necessary existence”—we can then of course prove that there is a cause that caused the “possibly existing” thing to become actual, and that cause is God, of whom we know whatever of Him is revealed through His creations.

Aristotle (and Maimonides following him) disagreed with this assumption. In his view, the causes and effects of every process of becoming and transformation must coexist in time. This necessarily follows from the relation of cause and effect. The cause precedes the effect, of course, in respect of importance and role. But if we assume that God is eternal, it necessarily follows that the world is coeternal with God. Saadia did not see the fallacy in his own argument, and therefore Maimonides criticized him. But it is clear from this example how much Saadia was influenced by the biblical way of thought.

Proofs for Creation of the World

Saadia offers four proofs for the creation of the world:

1. *The world is finite*—The world's finite character can be demonstrated in various ways, for instance from the fact that the earth is encircled by the sun's orbit. This is an Aristotelian assumption, and likewise the following: A finite body cannot contain an infinite force. Therefore it is necessary that the world must have a beginning and end in time.⁶ We note that Saadia uses Aristotelian premises to arrive at conclusions opposite to Aristotle's. It is clear, too, that the source of the difference is what we specified

earlier: Saadia believes that the cause must precede its effect in time, and therefore the effect must begin at a certain moment, after the action of the cause.

2. *The world is composed of many parts*—This can be demonstrated by simple sensory observation of the world. It is composed of many parts, and all the parts are composed of parts that can further be subdivided, *ad infinitum*.⁷ In that case, the composition of the parts that preceded the whole must be a kind of creation. Here too Saadia used an Aristotelian theory that has been uprooted from its systematic context. In its Kalamitic source, this argument is based on the theory of atoms. Every object is composed of atoms, and the composition is brought about by creation. Saadia rejected the atomic theory on Aristotle's authority, and therefore he deals with the composition of the organic constituents of the world: earth, water, air and fire; mineral, vegetable, animal and rational (human); etc. Indeed, in Aristotle's view one may prove from this composition that God is their cause, but it does not follow from this what Saadia argues, namely that the process of composition must have had a beginning in time.
3. *All objects change their accidental qualities*—All things in the world come into being and perish. There is continual renewal in existence, and whatever is regenerated is originally generated. The source of this argument is again Kalamitic: everything is composed of atoms, and they are only distinguished from each other in the arrangement of their atoms. A qualitative change in a body is caused by rearrangement of atoms. Thus far, the Kalamitic proof. But Saadia rejected atomic theory, and reverted to the Aristotelian outlook, according to which objects are generated and change through transformation of form in hylic matter. This change of form is a perpetual regenerative process, i.e. the appearance of new objects each of which has a beginning and ending point of its existence.

4. *Time cannot be infinite*—Of all the proofs that Saadia offers for the creation of the world, this is the only one that has philosophical merit. It had important antecedents, and it contains in kernel the essential difference between the Aristotelian outlook and Saadia's biblical outlook. If the world is eternal—so argues Saadia—it must follow that an infinite time preceded the present moment, and similarly every present moment has an infinite time preceding it. This is absurd; an infinite time cannot pass in actuality. It follows that time must have an absolute beginning. This argument points to a difficulty inherent in the Aristotelian system. This disagreement would eventually be codified as one of Kant's philosophical antinomies. Aristotle overcame this difficulty by the argument that time is cyclical and continually fluctuating between potentiality and actuality. It follows that past and future alternate continually through eternal repetition. On the other side, Saadia's (and Kant's) conception of time is biblical: there is an absolute difference between past and future, and time goes not in a circle but in a straight line in the direction of the purpose and perfection that God intended for creation. Here, then, is a substantive difference between the biblical, monotheistic conception of time and Aristotle's pagan conception.

Creation ex nihilo and God's Existence

Saadia deduced three principal consequences from the creation of the world:

1. *Creation must be from nothing*—This follows simply and necessarily from Saadia's conception of creation. If the world was created from pre-existing matter, then it itself is pre-existing and eternal.
2. *The created cannot create itself*—If we suppose that it created itself, we imply that it preceded itself. From this, he proves that there must be a God who is the cause of creation.
3. *From the creation of the world, we can deduce God's attributes*—He is revealed as Creator, and this is the foundation of further theological discourse.

God's Positive Attributes and Conception of a Personal God

In addition to the corporeal imagery of God we find in the Bible positive attributes of another kind, attributes that conceive God as a personality acting from intentionality and will, namely the attributes Living, Powerful, Wise, and Willing.

In Maimonides's discussion of the divine attributes, he draws no distinction between these attributes and those which are grossly corporeal and anthropomorphic. In his view, only someone who does not understand the matter properly will treat the two differently. One can only predicate these attributes in a positive sense of a material entity. That

is not Saadia's view. Indeed, he understands the difficulty in ascribing these attributes to God, inasmuch as they would introduce plurality in Him, whereas God must be one in simple unity, without composition. Nevertheless, Saadia does ascribe these attributes to God in a positive sense. How so? In his view, these attributes follow necessarily from conceiving God as Creator. The Creator must necessarily be living, powerful, wise and willing. These attributes are implicit in the concept of "creating" when we analyze its meaning.

In this way Saadia seeks to overcome the danger of plurality in affirming these attributes. We conceive them instantaneously in thought as a single notion; only the limitations of language require us to formulate this notion in four separate words.

Saadia nevertheless affirms the personal notion of God that arises from creation. His extreme caution on the question of plurality in connection with the attributes, rather than reflecting reverence for the conclusions of intellectual inquiry (as is actually the case with Maimonides), more likely reflects sensitivity to the difference between the Jewish concept of God's absolute unity and the Christian doctrine of the Trinity (to which he dedicates a great deal of polemical attention). Saadia wants to banish compositeness from theological discourse. The Torah's doctrine of divine unity does not tolerate plurality.

The Good God

So far, the biblical concept of God has been preserved throughout the discussion of the conception of God. The impress of that concept is still more visible in those contexts where God appears as the object of human worship. From the fact of being creator of the world and humanity, God is already conceived as the source of absolute lovingkindness. Creation is the revelation of a will whose sole motive is beneficence, to do good in the most perfect way possible. It is inconceivable that God should harbor maleficent motives or evil intentions toward His creatures. He creates them for their good, not for His sake. It necessarily follows from God's goodness that He should govern the world and exercise providence over it by means of commandments and prohibitions, by bestowing free will on human beings, and by educating them through reward and punishment. And from all this, it follows further that God will exercise His providence justly in all matters of reward and punishment for human actions, both in this world and in the world to come.