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Edited by

Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman

University of Kentucky

SARAH STROUMSA

4 Saadya and Jewish *kalam*

In an oft-quoted dictum the twelfth-century Spanish polymath Abraham ibn Ezra describes Saadya as "first and foremost among speakers everywhere." This seemingly simple sentence praises Saadya on more than one level, playing as it does on the multivalence of the word "speakers" (*medabberim*). The context of Ibn Ezra's phrase (in his book on Hebrew grammar) suggests that this word refers here primarily to linguists; yet it can also mean "spokesmen" in a general way, and it is also a literal translation of the Arabic *mutakallimun*, that is, practitioners of dialectic theology. In all likelihood, Ibn Ezra intended all these meanings together. Indeed, Saadya's towering figure dominates the emergence of medieval Jewish scholarship in all fields: linguistics and poetics, philosophy and exegesis, polemics and law, and he is also generally considered to be the most prominent representative of Jewish *kalam*. An inquiry into Saadya's thought, his background, and his influence can thus serve as a convenient introduction to Jewish *kalam*.

Kalam (literally "speech") is a generic name for Islamic dialectical theology. Common to all *kalam* schools is the formulation of a system based on the dual basis of rationality and Scripture, and on the assumption that the two complement, rather than contradict, each other. Also typical of all *kalam* schools is the specific discourse that uses dialectical techniques for the analysis of religious and philosophic problems. Whether it is presented as a strictly theological compendium or in a different kind of literary composition (exegetical, polemical, or a monograph on a specific theological question), a *kalam* work is often recognizable as such even before a thorough acquaintance with its content. Structure and style characterize *kalam* works no less than contents. In terms of the general structure,

comprehensive *kalam* works (theological summae) follow a set pattern of discussion, which starts from universal issues (epistemology, the creation of the world, God's unity and justice), and moves on to issues that are more narrowly tied to the specific religion of the author (prophetology, eschatology, and the afterlife). In terms of style, the polemical nature of *kalam* is reflected in arguments ad hominem (*ilzam*), and its dialectical thought is expressed in conventional formulas of dialogue ("If he says: . . . , he should be told: . . ."; or: "He said: . . . ; I answered: . . ."). These stylistic traits constitute the backbone of *kalam* texts. They are common to all schools of *kalam*, and they distinguish *kalam* from other philosophical, rationalistic trends.

Some concern for theological questions (such as free will and predestination) can already be discerned in early, pre-*kalam* Muslim works, but the development of a systematic Muslim theology came only later. Although the theological drive could be said to have come from within Islam, its systematic formulation and the form it took suggest an external influence. This influence was not anchored in the transmission of a specific body of texts (as in the case of the transmission of Greek philosophy and science). Nevertheless, we may assume that the first Muslim theologians were somehow exposed to Hellenistic philosophy, perhaps through the encounter with the Christian academies in Syria and Persia. The first structured school of *kalam*, the Muʿtazila, was established in the mid-eighth (third Islamic) century. The Muʿtazilites, known as "the proponents of God's unity and justice," developed a comprehensive theology, revolving around five basic principles: God's unity; his justice; the intermediate position of a Muslim sinner, as neither a believer nor an infidel; reward and punishment in the afterlife; and the obligation to enjoin virtue and forbid sin. Alongside their theological writings, the Muʿtazilites also developed an extensive complementary exegetical, scientific, and linguistic literature based on the same principles. During the ninth and tenth centuries the Muʿtazila thrived, and its sub-schools developed in two major centers, in Baghdad and in Basra. Aristotelian philosophers berated the *mutakallimun* as mere religious propagandists, but many Muslims regarded the positions held by the Muʿtazila as unrelenting rationalism that compromises religious doctrines. Other schools of *kalam* attempted to strike a different balance between the two basic sources of knowledge, rationality and Scripture. From the tenth century on these schools, and particularly the Ashʿariyya, gained dominance in Muslim theology.

The development of Jewish systematic theology takes place under Islam and mostly in Arabic. Prior to the Islamic conquests, with the exception of Philo's thought, no systematic rationalistic theology was developed by Jews. Philo had no direct continuation in Jewish thought, and Jews in late antiquity used other literary genres to express their theological concerns. Jewish systematic rationalistic thought developed only later, as part of the wholesale Jewish immersion into Arabic culture. As Arabic came to replace both Hebrew and Aramaic as the main cultural language of the Jews, the intellectual activity of eastern Jews became an integral part of the intellectual Islamic scene.

On the whole, works of Jewish *kalam* are constructed along the same lines as works of Muslim *kalam*. They employ the same dialectical techniques and formulas and explore the same conventional topics. The epistemology of the Jewish *mutakallimun* is built upon a firm belief in human rationality as a tool for obtaining a true picture of the world and a sound interpretation of Scripture. The intellectual endeavor is perceived as both a natural human drive and a religious duty. The basic sources of knowledge for each individual are sense perception and rational thought. The knowledge accumulated over the years by generations of scholars is added to these, in the form of transmitted interpretive information ("the veridical tradition").

It is on the basis of these epistemological assumptions that the Jewish *mutakallimun* build their theological system. They argue that contemplation of the world reveals its created nature, and hence the existence of a creator. It also shows that the world must have been created *ex nihilo* (rather than from a preexistent matter). The creator must be of an intrinsically different nature than its creation. And as the world contains plurality, the creator must be a perfect unity. The proof of God's unity is usually combined with the discussion of his attributes. The Jewish *mutakallimun* usually reject the existence of separate divine attributes, and adopt *kalam* formulas that insist on the perfect unity of God with his knowledge, wisdom, life, and so on. The creator must also be benevolent, and Jewish *mutakallimun* insist on the applicability of human moral criteria to God. Although some of God's actions may not be understood

by human beings, the basic assumption must remain that he is good in the same sense that we are good.

From God's goodness follows the principle of divine revelation. God endowed human beings with reason to guide them to salvation. Because of his benevolence, God complemented this gift by sending prophets to spell out the best ways of serving him. The prophet, who is a normal, accomplished human being, can be recognized by the miracles he performs, by his moral and intellectual perfection, and by the concord of his message with the content of the revelation received by previous prophets. In works of Jewish *kalam* the true prophet is primarily Moses. Obedience or disobedience to the precepts brought by him will be requited by God in the hereafter as well as in the Messianic age.

This general scheme is so closely akin to Muslim *kalam* that, at first sight, only the prooftexts appear to be different. But Jewish *kalam* developed also some specific concerns, which are not found in the same way in Muslim works.

In some cases, the differences with Muslim *kalam* have nothing to do with religious differences. Whereas some Jewish *mutakallimun* adopted the atomistic physics of the *kalam*, others did not. Their rejection of atomism may be explained by their exposure to the influence of Christian philosophy, to Aristotelian teachings, or to non-atomistic *kalam*. At any rate, it does not stem from a preconceived religious doctrine, nor does it reflect a basic religious disagreement with Islam.

In other cases, however, the differences with Muslim *kalam* are related to the special religious doctrines of both religions. Certain questions that became central to Muslim theology remained of rather marginal interest in Jewish *kalam*. By way of an example we can mention the question of the created or uncreated speech of God, which became a cause célèbre in the debate between traditionalists and rationalists during the heyday of the Muʿtazila. Although the discussions of Jewish *mutakallimun*, and even the solutions they offer, reflect their awareness of the centrality of the question in Muslim *kalam*, it is evident that they do not participate in the heated debate. Jewish theologians agree that the various prophetic revelations were all temporal, and they attempt to reconcile the temporal revelation with God's eternal, unchanging nature. Another example is the question of the status of the sinner who is formally a believer. In Jewish *kalam*, the discussions of the relative weight of human acts in general and sins in particular are often couched in the Jewish legal tradition, and are not part of the historical disagreement within Muslim theological circles.

The Islamic notion of the abrogation of the law, on the other hand, received much attention, due to its importance in interreligious polemics. In the attempt to rebut their opponents' claims that Mosaic law had been replaced by Christianity or by Islam, Jewish theologians insisted on the immutability of God's revelation, entailed by his own immutability.

As in Muslim *kalam*, Jewish *mutakallimun* devoted much time and energy to polemics. They were engaged in public debates on religious, scientific, and philosophical issues, and polemics is a predominant feature of their writings. They polemicized with other religions, with various philosophical schools (both historical and fictitious), and with each other. Their polemical drive resulted in the development of heresiographical interest: Jewish theologians (e.g. al-Muqammas, Saadya, Qirqisani, Judah Hadassi) attempted to map and classify contemporary opinions and to trace their origin to ancient schools and sects.

A brief outline of the emergence of Jewish *kalam* is given by Moses Maimonides (d. 1204) in his *Guide of the Perplexed* 1:71. According to Maimonides, the meeting of the early Christians with the pagan philosophers had forced the Church Fathers to develop philosophical tools for the defence of their religion. In the same way, centuries later, the encounter of the early Muslims with Christian philosophers had forced the Muslims to develop Islamic theology. Maimonides (whose historical account and evaluation of the *kalam* was influenced by the tenth-century Muslim philosopher al-Farabi) presented the *kalam* as an aberration of truth. In his view, the *mutakallimun* were not true philosophers, but rather people who harnessed philosophical techniques and elements to the defence of their religion. Quoting Themistius, Maimonides hints that, instead of forming their beliefs on the basis of a scientific examination of reality, as philosophers should, the *mutakallimun* tried to bend the facts to fit their convictions. He also implies that the Jewish *mutakallimun* follow the same deplorable practice. According to Maimonides, when the Jews came under the aegis of Islam, they chanced upon the first school of *kalam*, the Muʿtazila, and were deeply influenced by it. As representatives

of Jewish *kalam*, Maimonides mentions the geonim (the heads of the talmudic academies in Iraq) and the Karaites (Jewish sectarians who rejected the authority of rabbinic oral law).

Most modern scholars agree with Maimonides that Saadya Gaon, like other geonim, was a *mutakallim*, and that his main source of influence was the Mu'tazila. The question arises, however, how to reconcile Maimonides' devastating evaluation of the *kalam* with the stature of Saadya and the magnitude of his contribution to Jewish thought. Other difficulties contribute to a certain unease concerning Saadya's classification as a *mutakallim*. There are some significant differences between his thought and standard Muslim *kalam*, and his writings contain some elements that seem Aristotelian or Neoplatonic rather than kalamic. One possible solution to these difficulties was suggested by Michael Schwarz, whose analysis of Maimonides' sources offers some explanation for the differences between Maimonides' *mutakallimun* and those contemporary with Saadya. Another solution endeavors to put some distance between Saadya and the *kalam*. Lenn Goodman thus argues that "if Saadya was a mutakallim, he was of quite a different sort from the old type catalogued by his mutakallim contemporary al-Ash'ari."[1]

Saadya's affinities with the *kalam* must therefore be examined with care, and the nature of his *kalam* defined more precisely. In terms of the discipline, Saadya certainly regarded himself as a philosopher in the sense that he was earnestly seeking truth. His commitment to the search for scientific truth can be fully appreciated when we compare Maimonides' above-mentioned sarcastic quotation from Themistius about the true method of the philosopher with Saadya's description of the correct scientific method. Saadya, just like the philosopher Maimonides, believes that "the praiseworthy wise person is he who makes reality his guiding principle and bases his belief thereon" and that "the reprehensible fool . . . is he who sets up his personal conviction as his guiding principle, assuming that reality is patterned after his beliefs."[2]

In terms of belonging to a school, however, Saadya did not belong to *falsafa*. Occasionally he does refer to the philosophers,[3] but he clearly intends by it the generic name of the discipline, not the school. On the other hand, he never identifies himself as a *mutakallim*, nor does he quote *mutakallimun* by name (but then, Saadya hardly ever quotes anyone by name).

Most modern scholars refer to Saadya as "the first Jewish medieval philosopher," thus overlooking the fact that both Isaac Israeli (d. c. 932) and the ninth-century al-Muqammas had ventured into this field before him. Medieval students of Jewish thought often appreciated this fact correctly: Daniel ibn Mashita, for example, in his *Taqwim al-adyan* (composed in 1223), begins his account of Jewish philosophy with al-Muqammas.[4] The modern mispresentation stems from a combination of the paucity of our knowledge of pre-Saadyanic thought on the one hand and from the wish to insist on Saadya's importance on the other. But in order to evaluate Saadya's role correctly, the fact that he was not the first Jewish philosopher should in no way be overlooked. Indeed, more often than not, to be "first" entails a certain lack of sophistication, whereas Saadya, as a representative of a second generation of Jewish philosophers, presents a relatively mature Jewish *kalam*.

A text that is often mentioned as an example of early Jewish *kalam* is an anonymous epistle attributed by its first publisher, Jacob Mann, to the ninth-century Karaite thinker Daniel al-Qumisi.[5] Although the *Pseudo-Qumisi* is strongly opposed to the use of "foreign wisdom," it reflects the influence of precisely this wisdom. The epistle, written in Hebrew, contains some Arabic *kalam* concepts, such as "indicatory sign" (*dalil*), the *kalam* term for a proof. It attempts a theological formulation of religious doctrines, such as divine unity and justice and the religious obligation to use reason, and it supports these doctrines with biblical prooftexts. Nevertheless, the *Pseudo-Qumisi* is not a *kalam* text in the sense that it does not partake in the *kalam* discourse. It does not attempt to offer a systematic analysis of theological questions, and it does not adopt the typical kalamic analytical discourse. The importance of the *Pseudo-Qumisi* lies perhaps precisely in the fact that it allows us a glimpse into a transitional period, in which Jewish thinkers were not yet engulfed in the Arabic intellectual world, but its growing influence was already encroaching on Jewish thought. Although Jewish thinkers were still resisting the influence of Arabic theology, they were already speaking the language of *kalam*, and under its pressure they were already developing a theology.

In both Jewish and Islamic theology, most of the early texts are not extant. We are, however, fortunate to possess about three quarters of what is probably the first Judeo-Arabic theological summa, which

happens to be also the first extant Arabic summa, earlier than extant Muslim specimens of the same genre. The text, al-Muqammas' *Twenty Chapters*, offers a thorough, systematic exposition of Jewish theology. Al-Muqammas had converted to Christianity and had studied with a teacher named Nana (probably the Jacobite Nonnus of Nisibis). As we can learn from an Arabic *Life of St. Stephen*, al-Muqammas' very name seems to stem from Christian-Arab vocabulary, where the word "Muqammas" designates an Arab, perhaps a person dressed in a tunic (*qamis*) like an Arab. The sobriquet thus reflects al-Muqammas' position as an Arabic-speaking Jew between two cultures, the Syriac Christian and the Arabic Muslim. He knew Syriac and he translated from Syriac two commentaries, on Ecclesiastes and on Genesis.[6] He also wrote some polemical works, and a work on Aristotelian logic. His literary activity thus reflects a conscious intellectual effort to establish a comprehensive rational Jewish theology. But the somewhat rough integration of the various elements in his work reflects the difficulties typical to the trailblazer.

Al-Muqammas' books were written after he returned to Judaism, but in his attempt to present universal truths he usually avoids disclosing specific Jewish doctrines or using Jewish sources. Moreover, his extant written work bears clear marks of his Christian schooling. This is evident not only in the case of his anti-Christian polemics, which plays an important part in the discussion, but in his whole theology. His theological work closely resembles, in both presentation and content, works of Muslim *kalam*. But on several plans the content of his work deviates considerably from the familiar *kalam* pattern. His writings contains some material, mostly in logic, that is derived explicitly from Aristotelian philosophy. Unlike most Muslim *mutakallimun*, al-Muqammas' physics is not atomistic. And although he is aware of debates and positions current among contemporary Muslim *mutakallimun*, his final position sometimes differs from theirs (as in the case of the divine attributes, where the negative theology he adopts seems closer to the position we usually identify with Islamic Neoplatonists). Al-Muqammas' discussion of all these points reflects (and sometimes follows) the common practice in the Christian schools, and some of the deviations from *kalam* in his system are the same deviations from Muslim *kalam* that we find later in Saadya's work.

Saadya's predecessors, al-Muqammas and Isaac Israeli, delineate the spectrum of influences to which an educated Jew would be exposed: Christianity and Islam, Christian *kalam* (which includes some Aristotelian philosophy), Muslim *kalam*, and Neoplatonic thought. The role of pioneer belongs to these predecessors, who legitimize these influences and show the way for their integration into Judaism. It was then Saadya who, creatively and systematically, shaped, smoothed the rough ends, and consolidated the foundations laid by his predecessors, and presented the outcome as "Jewish philosophy," with an authority that his predecessors lacked. Precisely because he was not the first, Saadya was free from the chore of path-breaking, and he could thus use the raw materials in a richer and more mature way.

The twelfth-century Judah ben Barzillai of Barcelona reports a rumor that Saadya had studied with al-Muqammas. We have no proof of that. Saadya, as is his wont, does not identify his sources, and he often thoroughly reworks the material he drew from them. There are nevertheless some paragraphs in Saadya's work that closely resemble al-Muqammas' *Twenty Chapters*, and since al-Muqammas' summa was well known in Saadya's time, our assumption should be that, among the many things Saadya read, he probably read al-Muqammas too.

Saadya, however, goes at least one step further: on the one hand, he seems more familiar with the fruits of Muslim *kalam* than al-Muqammas. On the other hand, his work is thoroughly and overtly Jewish. All of Saadya's literary output is directed toward the establishment of a system that demonstrates the agreement between rationally based knowledge and biblical revelation as interpreted by talmudic tradition.

Saadya was born in 882 in Egypt, which he left in 915. The reasons for his departure are unknown to us, but his subsequent tumultuous career, strewn with heated confrontational episodes involving leading authorities of the Jewish community, suggests that a similar confrontation may have forced him to leave Egypt. He spent the next decade in Palestine, with excursions to Iraq and to Syria. In 928 he moved to Iraq, where he was appointed head of the academy in Sura, a position he held, with interruptions, until his death in 942. The intellectual climate at the end of the ninth century in Egypt, where Saadya passed his formative years, is not very clear to us. While both

the Christian intellectual tradition and the memory of the proud philosophical past of late antiquity must have been present, there is little evidence of that, still less of any significant Muslim theological circles. Saadya's literary activity began already in Egypt: there he wrote his first book against the Karaites, and his correspondence with Isaac Israeli suggests that he was exposed to some kind of Neoplatonic influence. According to the Muslim historian al-Mas'udi (d. 957), during Saadya's Palestinian period he studied with a certain Abu Kathir Yahya al-Tabarani, who may or may not have been a Karaite. We have no information concerning Saadya's intellectual contacts with non-Jews, but the common language (Arabic) would have facilitated such contacts. In Syria the Christians had a strong intellectual presence, and the affinity of Jewish Aramaic to Syriac suggests the possibility that Christian writings could have been accessible to Saadya. In Syria Saadya could also have encountered representatives of the various schools of Islamic thought: Sufism, *kalam*, and *falsafa*. Saadya's immersion in this Islamic culture must have become a still more dominant factor after his move to Baghdad. Thus, although we have no definite landmarks of Saadya's education, we can be quite certain that, by the time he wrote his theological summa, he must have had access to practically everything on the intellectual market.

There is no question that Muslim thought in general and Muslim *kalam* in particular grew during Saadya's lifetime to become a major intellectual force. But as a non-Muslim, Saadya was not obliged to choose a school with which to align himself, nor was he committed to follow Muslim rather than Christian patterns of theological activity. Like al-Muqammas before him, Saadya was not committed to any particular philosophical school. Existing philosophical schools were the heritage of a non-Jewish culture, the rich influence of which Saadya did not try to reject. But being a Jew, he felt free to collect material gleaned from various sources: from Mu'tazilite *kalam*, from Christian *kalam*, from *falsafa*, or Neoplatonism, and to combine it as suited his purpose. Henry Malter, who noted the eclectic nature of Saadya's thought, attributed it to his polemical goals. According to Malter, since Saadya needed to offer a Jewish response to Aristotelian and Neoplatonic thoughts, he refuted these thoughts using various elements from them.[7] This explanation, however, does not account for the fact that the eclectic method is not used on a similar scale by Muslim polemicists, for instance. Saadya's flexibility and originality

must be attributed primarily to his daring personality. But beyond that, it seems that his position as a Jewish thinker also allowed him a certain freedom of choice. This freedom results from his being an outsider to Muslim *kalam*.

As in the case of the Muslim Mu'tazila, the literary output of the first generations of Jewish medieval thinkers extended beyond philosophical activity. Already al-Muqammas had applied himself to biblical exegesis, logic, and polemics. With Saadya, the expansion of Jewish interests became a full-fledged intellectual project, imprinted by the versatility of Saadya's personality. Through his vision he rewrote the map of Jewish interests: poetics and liturgy, exegesis and grammar, history and law, polemics and applied science. He applied his systematizing drive to all these new fields. And all his literary activity was informed by the *kalam* principle of the conformity of religious revelation with the decrees of the intellect. In its details, this new map often follows the map of Muslim literary activity. Thus from the fact that the Bible is written in Hebrew followed the demand to establish a rationally based theory of language, and this linguistic theory closely resembles the one developed by Muslim grammarians. But the approach as a whole, with its "Scripture-centeredness," also closely follows the Christian apologetic tradition.

SAADYA'S PHILOSOPHY AND ITS PHILOSOPHICAL CONTEXT

Although all of Saadya's oeuvre is inspired by his philosophical convictions, two of his books are properly philosophical: the commentary on the *Book of Creation* (*Sefer Yetzira*), written in 931, and his theological summa, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, composed in 933. While there are some crucial differences between his approach in these two works, the evaluation of Saadya's philosophy must include them both, as well as his other works.

In terms of structure and of style, there is no difficulty in identifying Saadya as a *mutakallim*. The ten chapters of his theological summa are arranged according to the classical *kalam* order of discussion: an introductory chapter on epistemology; the created nature of the world, which proves the existence of a creator (chapter one); the unity and incorporeality of God and the correct understanding of his attributes (chapter two); prophecy and revelation (chapter three);

command and prohibition and the question of free will (chapter four). The remaining six chapters deal with various aspects of reward and punishment, the afterlife, and eschatology. This clearly tilts the balance of this compendium in favor of the more specifically Jewish subjects, the chapters discussing universal issues serving more as an introduction.

Characteristic components of *kalam* that concern the smaller literary units, such as the dialogue formulas, are ubiquitous in all Saadya's works. The *kalam* polemical tendency and logical (argumentative) methodology are developed by Saadya to an art that is unparalleled even in Muslim *kalam* works. A classical *kalam* proof is based on an analytical mapping of the various possible arguments, preparing the ground for a systematic examination and elimination of the wrong ones. Saadya perfected the technique so as to make the logical structure patently clear, by presenting numbered lists of the possibilities and sub-possibilities. Indeed, his obsessive fondness for numbered lists has become his trademark. He develops and refines it in two directions: modular construction and linear accumulation. Saadya's method begins with an analysis that resolves every question into its smallest components. He compares the ideal process of learning to the extraction of cream from milk, or to purifying silver from dross. After reducing each problem systematically to its smallest components, the next stage is to outline all their possible combinations. As Saadya himself tells us, one must gradually and patiently eliminate the wrong solutions, sifting and reducing the possibilities from ten to nine, from nine to eight, and then to seven. He also compares the establishment of knowledge to the construction of meaningful statements first from sounds, then from syllables and words.[8] In his analysis of the process of learning, Saadya assigns the delineation of the various possible arguments to a specific mental faculty. A complete and correct analysis of all the possibilities is an essential precondition for the process of elimination. A faulty analysis is at the origin of most incorrect opinions.[9]

The possibilities are then built into his lists. When refuting the first opinion on the list, he counts several arguments against it. The refutation of the next false opinion will include these arguments and add others, and so on, to the end of the list. Every system in the list contains the characteristics of the previous system and adds to it a new distinctive trait. From the smallest, modular units Saadya gradually constructs various systems, accumulating arguments against them. Thus, for example, his refutation of dualism includes twenty-eight arguments, thirteen of which are accumulated from previous discussions, and the fifteen others are gradually added on, following discussions of epistemology and ontology.

Another example of Saadya's "modular" construction of his lists can be seen in the sixth chapter of *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, where Saadya mentions seven theories concerning the soul.[10] A shorter list appears already in Aristotle, but the ultimate origin of Saadya's list is in the Arabic translation of the doxography known as *Pseudo-Plutarch*.[11] These seven theories, however, are preceded by four others, which, although concerned mostly with the question of the creation of the world, also have implications concerning the soul. In the second chapter these four theories were discussed and refuted in the context of creation, where Saadya constructed them as part of a gradual, accumulative refutation of wrong creational systems.[12] The arguments against these four theories, which Saadya had accumulated in the second chapter, are harnessed in the sixth chapter to the discussion of the soul. The "modular" unit is here integrated in a different context, where it serves as the basis for the construction of a new discussion.

A similar analytical deconstruction and recomposition was used by Saadya in his legal work. In the *Book of Testimony and Legal Documents* he presents first the standard clauses that are common to all types of legal document. He then proceeds to construct the individual types of documents, recalling briefly the necessary standard formulas and adding to them the required additional formulas.[13] The theological opinions are constructed by Saadya in the same modular way, *mutatis mutandis*, as the legal documents are constructed from standard and specific clauses.

A correct understanding of the role of this method for Saadya allows us a fuller appreciation of the nature of his polemical activity. Quite often, scholars have found it difficult to identify the various systems he chose to refute. Saadya's descriptions of these systems differ slightly from the ones given by Muslim heresiographers, and as he describes them, they do not seem to agree completely with any known system of thought. This is the case with some of the systems in his list of opinions regarding the creation of the world, the opinions regarding the essence of the soul, and even his taxonomy of

Christianity. But Saadya's intention is not to document and refute existing opinions he may have encountered, nor to preserve the refutation of false opinions he found recorded in books. Saadya's lists do not reflect only his heresiographical interest. After dissecting a problem to its basic components, he reconstructs the possible answers by adding up the components, the modular units, eliminating false answers as he goes. The opinions he attacks may sometimes correspond to existing beliefs, but essentially they are mappings of the logical terrain.

Saadya thus builds his philosophy on a *kalam* technique of analysis of (possible) arguments. He combines it with the *kalam* fascination with heresiography, and incorporates it within a conventional *kalam* structure of theological discussion. His innovation is in the calculated upgrading of the technique into a comprehensive methodology, which dictates the framework of the discussion and informs it with an almost obsessively controlled search for the one, perfectly constructed truth.

Occasionally, Saadya demonstrates familiarity with basic concepts of Aristotelian logic and Aristotelian psychology.[14] His theory of language reflects the Aristotelian view that human language is conventional. Following Aristotle, Saadya distinguishes between the abstract universal notions and their specific expressions in various languages.[15] Saadya could have found this idea in al-Muqammas, who introduces a similar analysis into Jewish thought. Saadya, however, integrates the analysis into a complete linguistic project, the first attempt to build a linguistic theory of the Hebrew language.

Neoplatonic influence is apparent in Saadya's *Commentary on the Book of Creation*. Basic concepts of Arabic Neoplatonism, such as the divine will, appear in this commentary in a way that is usually identified with the longer version of the *Theology of Aristotle*. In fact, Shlomo Pines has suggested that this concept, which is so typical of the system of Gabirol (d. 1054/8), may have reached him through Saadya's commentary on the *Book of Creation*.[16] When reading the chapters on creation in the *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* and comparing it to the commentary on the *Book of Creation*, one gets the impression that these two books reflect different philosophical schools. It may be that the two books were written with a different public in mind, and for different pedagogical purposes. Nevertheless, together they faithfully reflect the wide spectrum of Saadya's

philosophical activity. Saadya's philosophy thus includes elements drawn from various sources and various philosophical systems. His handling of these elements is exemplified in two key topics: physics and psychology.

Saadya rejects the *Timaeus* account of prime matter as well as the Aristotelian theory of the world's preexistence. For him, the world is created in time by the creator and according to his will. Saadya's proofs that the world is created are the typical *kalam* proofs, including a classical one, that infers the created nature of the world from the fact that it is never free of constantly changing phenomena. As Herbert Davidson has shown, the origin of this proof (and of the whole body of Saadya's proofs) is the work of John Philoponus, and it is in Saadya's writing that the Philoponan origin of these proofs is best exemplified. But in Saadya's formulation the Aristotelian concepts of matter and form are replaced by the terms "substance" and "accident." These latter terms were used by the *mutakallimun* within an atomistic system. In their system the accidents reside in the substance, but neither one has an independent continuous existence. Substances and accidents exist for a fraction of time and are created each moment anew. Saadya, however, is not an atomist. For him, substance is self-subsistent, and has a durable, continuous existence. The accidents, on the other hand, have only a contingent existence, and they continuously change. The very same use of these terms is found in al-Muqammas, and it is this use that Muslim heresiographers identify as characteristic of Christian theology.

Saadya rejects the Platonic theory of the preexistent soul. According to him, the soul, like everything else in the world, is created in time. But whereas all other things are destined to perdition, the soul, once created, is eternal. The soul is a "pure substance," and its matter is brighter than the spheres, since it is endowed with intellect. For Saadya, intellect is an essential attribute of the soul. He sometimes uses the word "intellect" to denote common sense. He thus employs the word in a way that Maimonides and al-Farabi condemned as a typical *kalam* usage. Saadya does not regard the celestial spheres as endowed with intellect, nor does he see the intellect as having an existence separate from the soul.

In his discussion of the afterlife, Saadya asserts that reward and punishment are given to both soul and body. All human souls suffer from the destruction of the body, but the sinner's soul, which

wanders eternally, suffers more than the soul of the righteous, which reaches heaven. Malter has pointed out that Saadya's discussion of death is not philosophical, and that he repeats opinions current among Jews and Muslims.[17] Saadya's attitude to death, however, is an integral part of his understanding of the soul, and this understanding is not just "not philosophical," but in fact strikingly distinguishable from that of the *falasifa*. In the *falasifa*'s system the intellect is of prime importance. Separate intellects control the movement of the spheres, and the notions of redemption, reward, and punishment are centered on the role of the human intellect. The Intellect is of paramount importance also in Neoplatonic theories, where it is identified as the first hypostasis after the One, and redemption is described as the return to it. None of these notions is apparent in Saadya's psychology or eschatology. It is not likely that his ignoring them stems from either ignorance or simple oversight. The negligibility of the Intellect in Saadya's thought demonstrates that he is neither Neoplatonist nor Aristotelian. One may say that Saadya's theory of the soul and the intellect identifies him as a *mutakallim*.

Saadya's bitter opponents were the Karaites. The Karaite movement crystallized in Palestine during the ninth and the tenth centuries, and it soon gained prominence in Jewish communities. As Scripturalists, for whom the Bible is the sole religious authority, the Karaites put the Bible at the center of their whole intellectual activity. The goal of following solely the dicta of the Bible confronts the daily experience of having to decide on matters not specified in Scripture. As the Karaites tried to minimize the place of tradition in the interpretation of the Bible, independent rational reasoning (*qiyas*, *ijtihad*) became of paramount importance in their thought.

It is thus not surprising that from the tenth century on the Karaites wholeheartedly adopted the rational theology of the *kalam* in its Mu'tazilite version. This development involved a construction of a systematic Mu'tazilite Karaite theology, exemplified in the summa of the tenth-century Yusuf al-Basir, *The Book of Rational Discernment* (*Kitab al-Tamyiz*). Al-Basir adopted the Mu'tazilite theology openly, and he quite often quotes masters of the Basrian school of Muslim *kalam*. The Karaite adoption of the *kalam* involved a major exegetical effort, in which the Bible was interpreted according to the principles of the Mu'tazila. Foremost among the Karaite commentators was Saadya's contemporary Ya'qub al-Qirqisani, whose Bible

commentary includes lengthy discussions of *kalam* problems, and who shares the *kalam* fondness for heresiography. The voluminous commentaries of the tenth-century Yefet ben Eli and of the eleventh-century Yeshu'a ben Yehuda ostensibly restrict their discussions to the text of the Bible, but their approach is decidedly that of the *kalam*, and their analysis of the biblical text is thoroughly imbued with the theology of the *kalam*.

The internal conflict within the Jewish community between Rabbanites and Karaites contributed to a heightening of the importance of certain theological issues. Rabbanite and Karaite authors used the same dialectical arguments to prove their respective positions. Both parties agreed on the epistemological value of the true tradition. But the Karaites rejected the validity of the talmudic tradition, which the Rabbanites regarded as "the oral Law," the only authoritative interpretation of Scripture. Consequently, the discussion of tradition in Jewish *kalam* has a special edge. It no longer seeks simply to prove the authenticity of the prophet or to vindicate the Scripture he brought, but also seeks to establish the authority of the correct, unadulterated interpretation of these writings.

It has been suggested that the Karaites were the link that allowed Saadya to introduce new genres into the Jewish literary vocabulary. According to Rina Drory, the Karaites, as sectarians who broke away from rabbinic tradition, were not constrained by loyalty to previous traditional genres. The literary vacuum from which they suffered allowed them the necessary flexibility to be receptive to new genres, such as systematic exegetical literature and theology. According to this suggestion, it was the confrontation with the Karaites that forced the Rabbanites to venture into new fields. Saadya, himself an outsider to the world of the geonate, was flexible enough to shoulder this task.[18]

There is, however, no evidence for the existence of this comprehensive Karaite literary activity prior to the end of the ninth century. There is thus no reason to assume that the Karaites were the bridge between Islamic *kalam* and Saadya. It is more likely that the exposure of Jews to "external wisdom" happened gradually through the spread of the Arabic language and culture, which facilitated contacts between Jews and their gentile neighbors. It seems that both Karaite and Rabbanite intellectuals were exposed to Christian and Muslim influences more or less at the same time. The predominance

of Mu'tazilite *kalam* in this formative period, as well as the still central role played by Christian intellectuals, dictated the tenor of Jewish thought.

In the debate between Muslim orthodoxy and Muslim rationalist theologians, the latter were on the defensive. Apart from relatively short periods when it gained the upper hand (as during the reign of al-Ma'mun), rational theology was strongly curbed by the prevalent traditionalist orthodox tendencies. In terms of Islamic religious thought, the Mu'tazila is perceived as extremist and therefore liminal.

The setting of medieval Jewish thought is quite different. Both Saadya and Qirqisani hint at some argument with people who reject rationalistic readings of Scripture. But the accounts of this argument are quite cursory, and no writing of the supposed traditionalists is extant. Their very existence as a significant phenomenon is questionable. Their mention may be only a relic from Islamic literature. Even if we assume that such people did exist, by the tenth century the rationalists had the upper hand. Among Rabbanites, the adoption of *kalam* by Saadya was probably of decisive importance in this respect. Unlike al-Muqammas, who was a marginal figure in the Jewish community, Saadya was, from an early age, a dominant one. His charismatic personality contributed to his reputation as a religious and intellectual authority, and although he did not belong to one of the aristocratic Babylonian families, he soon penetrated their stronghold in the academies. Saadya introduced *kalam* into the world of talmudic scholarship, and endowed it with his authority. After Saadya, hardly anyone questioned the legitimacy of the rationalistic approach, and for a while *kalam* is identified with the theology of mainstream Judaism.

This is patently clear when we examine the literary output of the geonim after Saadya, and in particular Samuel ben Hofni (d. 1013), who followed closely the Basra school of Mu'tazilite *kalam*, and adhered to Saadya's approach to the biblical text. Moreover, some *kalam* doctrines left their mark on Jewish theology even beyond the circles of the *mutakallimun*. In the Iberian Peninsula *kalam* in general and Mu'tazilite *kalam* in particular, were not able to gain a firm foothold. Nevertheless, Spanish Jewish authors, like Judah Halevi (d. 1141) and Joseph ibn Zaddiq (d. 1149) incorporate much kalamic material in their discussions. Another case in point is Maimonides, who, notwithstanding his scathing criticism of the *kalam*, read Saadya's work and was influenced by it. Like the *mutakallimun*, Maimonides navigated between what he perceived to be the content of the revealed text and his independent philosophical outlook. In this respect one can justify Leo Strauss' scathing remark that, despite Maimonides' aversion to the *kalam*, he in fact practiced "an intelligent, or enlightened kalam."[19] With the shift of the center of the Jewish world to the West (and, to some extent, perhaps also as a result of Maimonides' influence), the interest of Rabbanite Jews in *kalam* waned. This decline of interest is reflected in the choice of texts for translation: Saadya's theological summa was translated into Hebrew, but his Bible commentaries, as well as the commentaries of Samuel ben Hofni and of other *mutakallimun*, were not. They thus remained outside the reach of European Jews.

The one exception to this rule among Rabbanite Jews was the Jewish community of Yemen, where Maimonides' authority did not eclipse Saadya, and the works of these two great rationalists continued to be widely studied down to modern times. In the Jewish Karaite community, on the other hand, *kalam* never lost its authority. Its theses were heralded as the true doctrine of the prophets, and even when Arabic was no longer the vernacular, *kalam* continued to exert its influence through translations and original works in Hebrew, composed in Byzantium as well as in Europe.

NOTES

1. L. E. Goodman, "Maimonides' Responses to Saadya Gaon's Theodicy and their Islamic Backgrounds," in *Studies in Islamic and Judaic Traditions II*, ed. W. M. Brinner and S. D. Ricks (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 4–7.
2. Saadya, *Kitab al-Amanat wa'l-I'tiqadat*, ed. J. Qafih (Jerusalem: Sura, 1960), 12; Saadya Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, trans. S. Rosenblatt (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1948), 15.
3. As in the introduction to his *Commentary on the Book of Creation; Sefer Yetzira (Kitab al-mabadi)*, ed. J. Qafih (Jerusalem: n.p., 1972), 17–18.
4. P. B. Fenton, "Daniel Ibn al-Mashita's Taqwim al-Adyan: New Light on the Oriental Phase of the Maimonidean Controversy," in *Genizah Research after Ninety Years: The Case of Judaeo-Arabic*, ed. J. Blau and S. C. Reif (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 74–81.

5. L. Nemoy (trans.), "The Pseudo-Qumisian Sermon to the Karaites," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 43 (1976), 49–105.
6. Cf. S. Stroumsa, "From the Earliest Known Judaeo-Arabic Commentary on Genesis," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 27 (2002), 375–95.
7. H. Malter, *Saadia Gaon, his Life and Works* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1921), 119, 198.
8. Saadya, *Amanat*, 4–10; Saadya, *Beliefs and Opinions*, 5–12.
9. Saadya, *Amanat*, 10; Saadya, *Beliefs and Opinions*, 13; Saadya, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, ed. J. Qafih (Jerusalem: Sura, 1976), 17–18.
10. Saadya, *Amanat*, 193–4; Saadya, *Beliefs and Opinions*, 236–9.
11. H. Davidson, "Saadia's List of Theories of the Soul," in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. A. Altmann (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), 75–94.
12. Saadya, *Amanat*, 44–58; Saadya, *Beliefs and Opinions*, 50–66.
13. R. Brody, *The Geonim of Babylonia and the Shaping of Medieval Jewish Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 257–8
14. For instance, Saadya, *Amanat*, 97–110; Saadya, *Beliefs and Opinions*, 112–16.
15. A. Dotan, *The Dawn of Hebrew Linguistics: The Book of Elegance of the Language of the Hebrews by Saadia Gaon* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1997), I: 96–104.
16. S. Pines, "Points of Similarity between the Exposition of the Doctrine of the Sefirot in the *Sefer Yetzira* and a Text of the Pseudo-Clementine Homilies: The Implications of this Resemblance; Appendix II: Quotations from Saadya's Commentary on the *Sefer Yetzira* in a Poem by Ibn Gabirol and in the *Fons Vitae*," *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities* 7.3 (1989), 122–6; reprinted in W. Z. Harvey and M. Idel (eds.), *The Collected Works of Shlomo Pines*. v. *Studies in the History of Jewish Thought* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1997), 153–7.
17. Malter, *Saadia*, 228.
18. R. Drory, *The Emergence of Jewish–Arabic Literary Contacts at the Beginning of the Tenth Century* [Hebrew], *Literature, Meaning, Culture* 17 (Tel Aviv, 1988); Drory, *Models and Contacts – Arabic Literature and its Impact on Medieval Jewish Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), ch. 5.
19. L. Strauss, "The Literary Character of the *Guide of the Perplexed*," in his *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1952; reprinted, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 41. But see W. Z. Harvey, "Why Maimonides was not a Mutakallim," in *Perspectives on Maimonides*, ed. J. L. Kraemer (Oxford: Littman Library, 1991), 105–14.

SARAH PESSIN

5 Jewish Neoplatonism: Being above Being and divine emanation in Solomon ibn Gabirol and Isaac Israeli*

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

Defining Jewish Neoplatonism is no easy task, due in no small part to the difficulty of defining "Neoplatonism." In an effort to best understand these categories, I will isolate two conceptual issues – the nature of the Godhead, and its relation to the cosmos – in Plotinus (the pagan third-century founder of Neoplatonism), and then, with recourse to Solomon ibn Gabirol in the first case and Isaac Israeli in the second, I will examine the extent to which these issues can be seen to exist – unmodified – within the corpus of Jewish Neoplatonism. By suggesting, first, ways in which each of these Plotinian issues seems, prima facie, at odds with the parallel Jewish Neoplatonic views, but then by emphasizing how in fact they are reconcilable with the Jewish versions, I will challenge oversimplified estimations not only of the nature of Plotinus' own philosophy, but of what real differences exist between it and Jewish Neoplatonism. In this way I will have indirectly been examining what exactly counts as "Neoplatonism," Jewish or otherwise. By proceeding in this way,

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