

25.3. The Geonim of Babylonia as Biblical Exegetes

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Bibliography: SH. ABRAMSON, *Topics in Geonic Literature* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook 1974; Hebr.); S. ASSAF, *The Geonic Period and its Literature* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook 1955; Hebr.; repr. 1967); W. BACHER, "Le commentaire de Samuel ben Hofni sur le Pentateuque", *REJ* 15 (1887) 277-88, 16 (1888) 106-23; H. BEN-SHAMMAI, "New Findings in a Forgotten Manuscript: Samuel b. Hofni's Commentary on *Ha'azinu* and Sa'adya's 'Commentary on the Ten Songs'" (Hebr.), *Qiryat Sefer* 61 (1986) 313-32; idem, "Saadya's Introduction to Isaiah as an Introduction to the Books of the Prophets" (Hebr.), *Tarbiz* 60 (1991) 371-404; R. BRODY, *The Geonim of Babylonia and the Shaping of Medieval Jewish Culture* (New Haven: Yale 1998); I. DAVIDSON / S. ASSAF / B. I. JOEL, *Siddur R. Saadia Gaon. Kitāb Gami' Aṣ-Ṣalawāt Wat-Tasābīḥ* (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim 1941; repr. 1970; Arab. and Hebr.); J. DERENBOURG / H. DERENBOURG / M. LAMBERT, *Saadia ben Joseph al-Fayyūmī. Œuvres complètes I-V* (Paris: E. Leroux 1893-1899; repr. Hildesheim: G. Olms 1979; Arab., Hebr. and French); R. DRORY, *The Emergence of Jewish-Arabic Literary Contacts at the Beginning of the Tenth Century* (Literature, Meaning, Culture 17; Tel-Aviv: The Porter Institute for Poetics & Semiotics, Tel-Aviv University 1988; Hebr.); R. ECKER, *Die Arabische Job-Übersetzung des Gaon Saadia ben Joseph al-Fajjūmī* (Munich: Kösel-Verlag 1962); L. GINZBERG, *Geonica I-II* (Texts and Studies 1-2; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America 1909; repr. 1968); L. E. GOODMAN, *The Book of Theodicy. Translation and Commentary on the Book of Job by Saadiah ben Joseph al-Fayyūmī* (YJS 25; New Haven: Yale 1988); A. GREENBAUM, *The Biblical Commentary of Rav Samuel ben Hofni Gaon. Accordind [sic] to Geniza Manuscripts* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook 1978; Arab. and Hebr.); idem, "The Commentary of R. Samuel b. Hofni on the Pericope *Ha'azinu*" (Hebr.), *Sinai* 100 (1987) 273-90; T. GRÖNER, "A List of Hai Gaon's Responsa" (Hebr.), *Alei Sefer* 13 (1986) 1-123; A. S. HALKIN, *Josephi b. Judah b. Jacob Ibn 'Aknin, Divulgatio Mysteriorum Luminumque Apparentia. Commentario in Canticum Canticorum* (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim 1964; Arab. and Hebr.); M.-R. HAYOUN, *L'exégèse philosophique dans le judaïsme médiéval* (TSMJ 7; Tübingen: Mohr 1992); H. MALTER, *Saadia Gaon. His Life and Works* (The Morris Loeb Series 1; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society 1921; repr. 1942); J. MANN, "The Responsa of the Babylonian Geonim as a Source of Jewish History", *JQR* NS 7 (1917) 457-90; idem, "A Fihrist of Sa'adya's Works", *JQR* NS 11 (1921) 423-28; J. MUSAFIA, *Geonic Responsa* (Lyck: Mekize Nirdamim 1864; repr. Jerusalem 1967; Hebr.); J. QAFIḤ, *The Commentaries of Rabbi Saadia Gaon on the Torah* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook 1963; Hebr.); idem, *Psalms with the Translation and Commentary of Rabbi Saadia ben Joseph Fayyumi of Blessed Memory* (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research 1966; Arab. and Hebr.); idem, *Job with the Translation and Commentary of Rabbi Saadia ben Joseph Fayyumi of Blessed Memory* (Jerusalem: Committee for the Publication of the Works of R. Saadia Gaon 1973; Arab. and Hebr.); idem, *Proverbs with the Translation and Commentary of Rabbi Saadia ben Joseph Fayyumi of Blessed Memory* (Jerusalem: Committee for the Publication of the Works of R. Saadia Gaon 1976; Arab. and Hebr.); idem, *Daniel with the Translation and Commentary of Rabbi Saadia ben Joseph Fayyumi of Blessed Memory* (Jerusalem: Committee for the Publication of the Works of R. Saadia Gaon 1981; Arab. and Hebr.); Y. RATZABY, "Six New Fragments of the Commentary of R. Saadia on the Torah" (Hebr.), *Sinai* 96 (1984) 1-17; idem, *Saadya's Translation and Commentary on Isaiah* (Kariat Ono: Mkhon Moshe 1993; Arab. and Hebr.); S. ROSENBLATT, *Saadia Gaon: The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* (YJS 1; New Haven: Yale 1948; repr. 1958 [Arabic original: S. LANDAUER, *Kitāb al-Amānāt wa'l-I'tiqādāt von Sa'adja b. Jūsuf al-Fajjūmī* (Leiden: Brill 1880)]); U. SIMON, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms. From Saadiah Gaon to Abraham Ibn Ezra* (Albany: SUNY 1991 [Hebrew original: Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan 1982]); D. SKLARE, *Samuel b. Hofni Gaon and His Cultural World. Texts and Studies*

(EJM 18; Leiden: Brill 1996); M. SOKOLOW, "Did R. Samuel b. Hofni Complete his Torah-Commentary?" (Hebr.), *Alei Sefer* 8 (1980) 137-39; idem, "Saadiah Gaon's Prolegomenon to Psalms", *PAAJR* 51 (1984) 131-74; H. A. WOLFSON, *Repercussions of the Kalam in Jewish Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA / London: Harvard 1979); M. ZUCKER, *Rav Saadya Gaon's Translation of the Torah. Exegesis, Halakha and Polemics in R. Saadya's Translation of the Torah. Texts and Studies* (Michael Higger Memorial Publications 3; New York: Philip Feldheim 1959; Hebr.); idem, *Saadya's Commentary on Genesis* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America 1984; Arab. and Hebr.).

1. Introduction

The term Gaon (pl. Geonim) designates the head of one of the central talmudic academies which flourished in medieval Babylonia during a period stretching approximately from the middle of the sixth to the middle of the eleventh century CE.¹ The two major academies were named after the cities of Sura and Pumbeditha where they had begun, although by the end of the period both had relocated to Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasid empire and one of the most important cultural and intellectual centers of the time.

Throughout the earlier part of the geonic period, the literary activity of the Geonim was restricted to a single genre: the *responsum*.² One of the major responsibilities of the Gaon was to respond (in the name of, and with the cooperation of, the scholars of his academy) to questions addressed to him by correspondents living in a widespread Jewish diaspora.³ The overwhelming majority of these questions (or at least of those which survive) are devoted to the areas of talmudic exegesis and Jewish law (*halakhah*). Questions concerning biblical exegesis are to be found already in the earliest period from which significant numbers of responsa have survived (the middle of the eighth century CE), but these are few and far between.⁴ Although the choice of topics was dictated by the questioners and not by the respondents, it is probably the case that biblical study played a minor role in advanced Jewish education in the geonic milieu; in any event, the material surviving from this early period is hardly sufficient to permit the reconstruction of exegetical themes or approaches.

In this as in so many other matters relating to the geonic period, the crucial turning-point is the tenure of Saadiah ben Joseph as Gaon of Sura (928-942 CE). Saadiah's upbringing was extraordinary for a Babylonian Gaon: born in the village of Dilaz in Upper Egypt, he had spent a number of years in Pales-

¹ There are some differences of opinion concerning these limits, especially with regard to the beginning of the period, but these are irrelevant for our purposes. For surveys of the period and its literature see Ginzberg, *Geonica* (1909/1968); Assaf, *The Geonic Period* (1955/1967); Brody, *Geonim of Babylonia* (1998).

² Several works of a different sort (e.g., *She'iltot* and *Halakhot Gedolot*) were produced in the Babylonian sphere during this period, but their authors were almost certainly not Geonim.

³ For general accounts of the responsa literature see Ginzberg, *Geonica* I (1909/1968) 182-205; Assaf, *The Geonic Period* (1955/1967) 211-20; for a survey of the countries to which responsa were sent see Mann, *Responsa*.

⁴ See Musafia 17a-19a (section 45): of the 42 responsa abstracted here, two deal purely with biblical issues and three others are devoted in large measure to biblical topics, but reflect talmudic concerns as well.

tine before emigrating to Babylonia. His appointment to the office of Gaon, despite his undistinguished family and unconventional background, and despite early suspicions (which were later to prove well-founded) that his assertive personality would lead to conflicts with the exilarch (the political head of the Babylonian Jewish community), was made possible by the conjunction of his unusual abilities and the leadership crisis which had afflicted the academy of Sura prior to his arrival.⁵ Saadiah, profoundly affected by his prolonged exposure to the multi-faceted intellectual life of Palestinian Jewry, introduced far-reaching innovations into the intellectual and literary activities of the Babylonian Jewish elite. In terms of intellectual content, this meant the intensive cultivation of numerous disciplines which had previously received little if any attention in the Babylonian curriculum, traditionally dominated by the study of the Babylonian Talmud and its jurisprudential application; prominent among these were biblical exegesis and related disciplines, such as Hebrew grammar and lexicography. On the literary front, Saadiah's major innovation was the writing of monographic works in Judeo-Arabic on a wide range of subjects – both traditional ones such as topics of *halakhah*, and innovative ones such as philosophy.

Prominent among Saadiah's monographic writings are translations of, and commentaries on, biblical books. In this – as in others of his literary innovations – Saadiah's lead was followed by some later Geonim: in the case of biblical exegesis, these were Aaron Sarjado, Gaon of Pumbeditha in the mid-tenth century, and Samuel ben Hofni, Gaon of Sura at the end of the tenth and beginning of the eleventh centuries. Other Geonim, including such leading figures as Hai ben Sherira Gaon (head of the Pumbeditha academy in the first half of the eleventh century, and son-in-law of Samuel ben Hofni), followed the traditional pattern in this respect, writing on biblical topics only in the context of responsa. Despite evidence of his interest in biblical exegesis (including an account of his consultation with the Nestorian Catholicos [Patriarch] concerning a difficult verse in Psalms), there is very little documentation of Hai's approach.⁶ This article will therefore concentrate on the exegetical writings of the three Geonim mentioned previously, and in particular (since none of Aaron Sarjado's commentaries have yet been published) on the commentaries of Saadiah and Samuel, of which large portions have been published, although much additional material still remains in manuscript.

⁵ Malter, Saadia Gaon (1921/1942) 25–123, although badly outdated with regard to specific details, conveys a good sense of the situation and the historical background.

⁶ For the source of this story, which has been cited by numerous scholars (worth noting is Greenbaum, Biblical Commentary [1978] 316–17, n.34), see Halkin, Divulgatio Mysteriorum (1964) 494 (Hebr. translation: *ibid.* 495), For Hai's responsa on biblical topics see Groner, List (1986) 58.

2. The Scope of Geonic Exegesis

In addition to numerous interpretations of biblical verses scattered throughout his other writings – especially his philosophical *magnum opus*, the *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* – Saadia wrote a number of works devoted exclusively to biblical interpretation. These include a translation of the entire Pentateuch, and a commentary on at least half of it (see below), and works combining translation and commentary on a number of additional books, including Isaiah, Proverbs, Psalms, Job and Daniel.⁷ Saadia assigned special titles to (his commentaries on) the various biblical books, in accordance with what he perceived to be their central themes: The commentary on Isaiah is entitled “The Book of Striving for Improvement in Worship”, that on Job “The Book of Theodicy”, that on Proverbs “The Book of the Search for Wisdom”, and that on Psalms “The Book of Praise”.⁸ In this context we may draw attention to Saadia’s surprising characterization of the book of Psalms as a collection of prophecies rather than a group of prayers of human authorship. This position, the defense of which required considerable exegetical gymnastics, is probably rooted in the attempt of early Karaite authorities to de-legitimize the Rabbanite liturgy; they claimed that the inspired book of Psalms represented the only acceptable text for liturgical use, while Saadia argued that it was ludicrous and unacceptable to address God in the same words which He had addressed to humankind.⁹ The commentary on the Pentateuch was called *Kitāb al-Azhar*, probably to be translated “The Book of Splendor (or Radiance)”.¹⁰ These works, like Saadia’s monographs on other subjects – and their Islamic models – have fairly elaborate introductions, which provide an overview of the biblical book in question, and sometimes – as in the introduction to the commentary on the Pentateuch – contain extensive methodological discussions. In this respect, too, Saadia served as a model for Samuel ben Hofni.

Samuel translated – independently of Saadia’s earlier translation! – and commented on at least three books of the Pentateuch (see below).¹¹ The characteristic form of the translation/commentaries of these authors comprises alternating sections: a group of verses is first translated into Arabic, and then discussed at greater or lesser length. These works are known generically by the Arabic term *tafsīr* (‘explication’), which may be applied to either a translation or a commentary.

⁷ See the Bibliography under Derenbourg, Qafih, Ratzaby and Zucker. Commentaries on other books of the Bible have been attributed to Saadia with varying degrees of conviction and plausibility; see e.g. Malter, Saadia Gaon (1921/1942) 316–27.

⁸ See Malter, *ibid.* 317–21; Ben-Shammai, Introduction (1991) 372–76. Ben-Shammai argues convincingly, against Qafih and others, that Saadia meant these titles to refer to the biblical books themselves (*ibid.* 373 and n. 10).

⁹ On the centrality of polemic in Saadia’s œuvre see below, p. 85 and nn. 42–43. Cf. also Simon, Four Approaches (1991) 1–57 [especially 5–11]; Sokolow, Prolegomenon (1984).

¹⁰ Malter, Saadia Gaon (1921/1942) 316 (pace Qafih, Commentaries [1963], Introduction 6, who would translate “Book of Blossoms”).

¹¹ See also: Bacher, Commentaire (1887) 279–83; Greenbaum, Biblical Commentary (1978) 442–43.

Two vexed questions with regard to the work of the various Geonim on the Pentateuch must be mentioned here. The first concerns the relationship between Saadiah's commentary and his translation, which was transmitted as a separate work in Arabic-speaking Jewish communities. Saadiah, in the foreword to his translation, describes the relationship between these two works in the following terms:¹²

I only wrote this book because some petitioners asked me to isolate the simple meaning of the Torah text in a separate work, containing nothing of the discussions of language ... nor of the questions of the heretics, nor of their refutation; nor of the 'branches' of the rational commandments or the mode of performance of the non-rational ones; but extracting the matters of the Torah text alone. And I saw that what I had been requested to do would be advantageous, in order that the audience might hear the matters of the Torah ... briefly, and the labor of someone seeking a particular story would not be protracted because of the admixture of demonstrations of every aspect, which would be burdensome. [And if] he later wants to investigate the legislation of the rational commandments and the mode of performance of the non-rational ones, and the refutation of the claims of those who attack the biblical stories, let him seek it in the other book (i.e., the commentary) ... And when I saw this I wrote this book, the *tafsir* of the simple meaning of the Torah text alone, clarified by knowledge of the intellect and the tradition; and when I was able to add a word or a letter which would make the desired intention clear ... I did so.

The question is: Did Saadiah simply extract the portions of translation from the compound framework in which they had originally been included, or did he produce a revised translation, to be read separately from the commentary? Scholarly opinion is divided on this question: there are certainly differences between the separate translation and that embedded within the commentary as transmitted, but these might be attributable to scribal errors or emendations. On the whole it seems more likely that Saadiah did prepare a revised translation, adhering more closely to the literal meaning of the biblical text than he did in the context of the commentary, where he could explain at length his reasons for deviating from the literal meaning. In fact it might be said that Saadiah's commentary is actually, to a large extent, an annotated translation, with numerous passages beginning: "I translated X because the word Y has Z meanings in Hebrew ..." — one instance among many of Saadiah's and Samuel's penchant for enumeration. One example of this phenomenon concerns the Tree of Life in Genesis 2-3: in his commentary Saadiah translates this as "The Tree of Health (or Well-Being)", supplying philological arguments in support of this rendering, while his separate translation follows the simple sense of the text.¹³

Another outstanding question, which has implications for the previous question as well, and which has occasioned frequent and sometimes acrimonious scholarly discussion, concerns the scope of the pentateuchal commentaries of each of the three Geonim mentioned above. A twelfth-century author, Joseph ben Jacob *Rosh Ha-Seder*, states that he was inspired to write a commentary on the *Haftarot* after studying "the threefold commentary on the Torah: from Bereshit to *Wayese* and from Exodus to Numbers by Rabbi Saadiah Gaon;

¹² Derenbourg et al., *Œuvres* (1893) 4 (with Hebr. translation).

¹³ Abramson, *Topics* (1974) 40-43. Cf. Zucker, *Commentary* (1984) 78 (Hebr. transl. 296).

from *Wayeṣe* to Exodus and from Numbers until *Shofetim* by Rabbi Samuel ben Hofni; and from *Shofetim* until the end of the Torah by Rabbi Aaron ben Sarjado".¹⁴ On the face of it, this would seem to imply that it required the combined efforts of all three Geonim to produce a commentary covering the entire Pentateuch: Saadiah commented on the first half of Genesis and on the books of Exodus and Leviticus in their entirety; Aaron on the second half of Deuteronomy; and Samuel on those portions not treated by his predecessors: the second half of Genesis, the first half of Deuteronomy, and the entire book of Numbers. This picture finds support in various early booklists, especially a list (*fihrist*) of works by Saadiah compiled by his sons; the vast majority of citations in later literature also conform to this picture. On the other hand, it is possible that someone in the eleventh or twelfth century had put together a "threefold commentary" comprising selected portions of commentaries by the three Geonim and excluding others; some support for this hypothesis may be found in occasional citations from commentaries of Saadiah or Samuel on portions of the Torah outside the framework suggested above.¹⁵ However, it has been argued that these Geonim may have commented on selected pericopes, either at the request of correspondents or on their own initiative, in addition to their commentaries on entire books or half-books; final resolution of this question must await the publication of additional manuscript material.¹⁶

It may be appropriate at this point to describe briefly some of the difficulties connected with the publication of this material. Many works of geonic exegesis, including all three Pentateuchal commentaries as well as Saadiah's commentary on Isaiah, suffered a fate common to most early Judeo-Arabic literature: as the intellectual centers of world Jewry moved westwards, to Christian lands, in the course of the Middle Ages, works written in Arabic (with the exception of a minority which were translated into Hebrew) became inaccessible to leading scholars. Only a few works of the early period were transmitted by Arabic-speaking Jewish communities (primarily the Yemenites); the remainder are known today — aside from occasional citations in the works of later authors who were able to consult these works in the original — only from fragmentary remains found in the famous Genizah (repository) of Fostat (Old Cairo). This was located in the attic of the eleventh-century Ben Ezra synagogue, and served for the disposal of unwanted writings, especially those considered sacred. Not surprisingly, in view of the high cost of producing manuscripts, literary works were almost never disposed of in this manner until they had reached a state of severe dilapidation. The fragments deposited in the

¹⁴ Mann, *Fihrist* (1921) 426–27 and nn. 9–10 (misunderstood by Malter, *ibid.* 427–28); Greenbaum, *Biblical Commentary* (1978) 424, n. 409.

¹⁵ The evidence of cross-references must be evaluated cautiously, bearing in mind differences between references to completed commentaries and to those planned for the future, and between references to actual commentaries and those to discussions of a given passage, which may have been incorporated in other contexts. Cf. Greenbaum, *Biblical Commentary* (1978), Introduction 31.

¹⁶ See Greenbaum, *ibid.* 24–33; *idem*, *Commentary on Ha'azinu* (1987) 275–76; Sokolow, *Torah-Commentary* (1980); Zucker, *Commentary* (1984), Introduction 11–12 and n. 7; Ben-Shammai, *New Findings* (1986); Sklare, *Samuel b. Hofni* (1996) 12–15.

Genizah, therefore, are mostly isolated pages or bifolia, and often seriously damaged as well; in addition, almost all lack titles or other unambiguous indications of authorship. This means that the reconstruction of literary works known only from the Genizah resembles the solution of a particularly complex series of jigsaw puzzles, and in some cases identifications will remain uncertain despite the best efforts of scholars. Since the style of the various biblical commentaries of the Geonim is relatively uniform, and probably served as a model for later authors as well, definite identification depends to a large extent on external evidence such as that provided by citations in later writings or by cross-references to other works by the same author, and such evidence is not always forthcoming.¹⁷

3. Exegetical Principles

The methodological guidelines which the Geonim laid down in the introductions to their commentaries are of particular importance for an appreciation of their methods and aspirations as biblical exegetes. Perhaps the clearest exposition of the philosophical and hermeneutic underpinnings of this school of exegesis is to be found in Saadiah's introduction to the commentary on the Pentateuch:¹⁸

Now that I have finished explaining these three types of knowledge, which are necessary for the commentator on the Torah, I see fit to preface (a description of) the method by which one should expound the Torah and the other books of the Prophets. I say: Since these three sorts of knowledge are the foundations, and since every speech includes perforce both unambiguous and ambiguous (expressions – *muḥkam* and *mutasābih*) ... the exegete must consider all words which are in accordance with the prior dictates of reason and the later dictates of tradition as unambiguous words, and all those words which are in conflict with one of these two as ambiguous words. To explain further: A reasonable person must always understand the Torah according to the simple meaning of its words, i.e., that which is well-known and widespread among the speakers of the language – since the purpose of every book is to convey its meaning perfectly to the reader's heart – except for those places in which sense perception or intellectual perception contradicts the well-known understanding of an expression, [or] where the well-known understanding of an expression contradicts another, unequivocal, verse, or a tradition. But if the exegete sees that retaining the simple meaning of an expression will require him to believe one of these four things which I have mentioned, let him know that this expression is not to be understood according to its simple meaning, but contains one or more metaphors (*majāz*);¹⁹ and when he knows which type of metaphor is involved, in order to bring the word to its unambiguous (equivalent, *muḥkam*), this Scripture will be brought into accord with the senses and the intellect, with other verses and with tradition.

This programmatic statement is followed by a series of illustrations, one for each of the four types of contradiction to be resolved by the exegete: The expression *אם כל חי* which describes Eve in Gen 3:20 cannot be interpreted lit-

¹⁷ As witness the recent debate concerning the attribution of fragments of a commentary on Numbers: Ratzaby, *New Fragments* (1984); Greenbaum, *Commentary on Ha'azinu* (1987).

¹⁸ Zucker, *Commentary* (1984) 17–18 (Hebr. translation: *ibid.* 191; the reader should be aware of the fact that Zucker's translations frequently deviate considerably from the original).

¹⁹ I adopt this 'literal' translation (see Zucker, *Commentary* [1984], Introduction: 43) for the sake of convenience, although the semantic range of *majāz* is much wider (*ibid.* 43–46; Ben-Shammai, *Introduction* [1991] 380–82).

erally as "the mother of all living things", for to do so would be to contradict the evidence of our senses, which inform us that lions, oxen etc. are not born of human mothers; we must assume that the verse contains another word which is suppressed in its surface structure, and translate: "the mother of all speaking living things", i.e., of all humans. The statement (Deut 4:24) that God is "a consuming fire" must be interpreted metaphorically, since (philosophical) reason establishes that fire is contingent and mutable, while God is not. Mal 3:10 must be interpreted so as not to contradict Deut 6:16, which is considered to be unambiguous. The prohibition (Exod 23:19; 34:26; Deut 14:21) to "seethe a kid in its mother's milk" must be interpreted more broadly, in keeping with rabbinic tradition, to prohibit consumption of any mixture of meat and milk, "since the tradition was transmitted by eyewitnesses (of Moses' behavior)".²⁰

Parallels for these categories of circumstances which call for non-literal interpretation may be found without difficulty in the commentaries of Samuel ben Hofni. As an instance of non-literal interpretation required by what might be described as the evidence of the senses, we may cite Samuel's comments on Gen 41:54, in which he points out that it is implausible to understand the reference to a famine in "all the lands" literally, or to imagine that the denizens of the entire world came to Egypt to seek food (Gen 41:57), "for the distant lands of the East and those at the ends of the West are not dependent on the produce of Egypt..."; all the references in this passage are to be understood as referring exclusively to "the lands of the people of Egypt and the cities of Syria and their environs".²¹ As an example of philosophically motivated interpretation we may mention his commentary on Num 11:19-20: "Not one day shall you eat, nor two ... but a month ...". Arguing that it is inconceivable that God should brag of His generosity in the manner of misers (despite the continuation of verse 20!), he proposes a novel interpretation of these verses as an explicit threat: those most deserving of punishment will die after a single day of eating meat, those slightly less deserving of punishment will enjoy two days of meat-eating before suffering their fate, etc.²² In Gen 48:8, "Israel saw" is to be interpreted as "became aware — by their voices or some other trait", in order to avoid contradiction with verse 10 of the same chapter, which states that Israel was unable to see, "and because of this I translated it 'knowledge' rather than 'sight', so that there should be no contradiction between the two statements".²³ Finally, the reference in 1 Sam 31:12 to the cremation of the bodies

²⁰ Zucker, *ibid.* 17-18 (Hebr. translation: *ibid.* 191; cf. *ibid.* 78, with Hebr. translation *ibid.* 296), with parallels in Rosenblatt, *Beliefs and Opinions* (1948/1958) 265-67, and elsewhere (cf. Ben-Shamunai, *Introduction* [1991] 379, with bibliography in n.38). Only in the last case cited does the *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* offer a different example: the "forty stripes" of Deut 25:3 are actually 39, in accordance with rabbinic tradition, while 40 is a round number; Saadiah supports this assertion by noting that the "forty years" of Num 14:34 should be understood as referring in fact to thirty-nine years, "since the first year of Israel's sojourn in the wilderness did not enter into this punishment".

²¹ Greenbaum, *ibid.* 156-59 (including Hebr. translation).

²² Greenbaum, *ibid.* 445 (Hebr. translation: *ibid.* 444).

²³ Greenbaum, *ibid.* 325 (Hebr. translation: *ibid.* 324). Note that Saadiah translated literally in this instance, presumably accepting the interpretation offered by most commentators, that Israel's vision was impaired but he was not completely blind.

of Saul and his sons is not to be understood literally, since such behavior would not have been in keeping with Jewish law; rather, this must refer to the custom of burning goods in honor of deceased kings.²⁴

In Saadiah's introduction, the categorization of cases in which the text is to be interpreted non-literally is followed by a list of linguistic and stylistic phenomena to be borne in mind by the commentator; similar lists are contained in Samuel's introductions to the various portions of his commentary. In the fragments of Saadiah's list which have survived, we find such phenomena as a single verb governing two clauses, asyndetic constructions and others in which 'missing' words are to be supplied by the reader, and the substitution of one consonant for another.²⁵ In a similar list, which has survived almost intact, Samuel requires of the commentator extensive linguistic expertise, which he describes under 22 headings, e.g., "the fourth sort, that he should know all the nouns, whether common or rare, found in Scripture, such as the stones of the breastplate ... the eighth sort, that he should know the past which is expressed as the future, such as 'they will make a calf in Horeb' (Ps 106:19) ... the tenth sort, that he should know the plural which is expressed as singular, such as 'and Israel encamped' (Exod 19:2) ...".²⁶

Most of Saadiah's literary innovations are deeply rooted in contemporary Islamic culture, and his work in the field of biblical exegesis is no exception: as demonstrated especially by ZUCKER, both the broad outlines of the philological program pursued by the Geonim (including such linchpins of their system as the *muḥkam/mutašābih* dichotomy adumbrated in the Koran itself), and many of its specific techniques for analyzing linguistic and stylistic phenomena, have close parallels in the literature of koranic exegesis.²⁷ The philosophical positions of Saadiah and Samuel ben Hofni, which play a leading role in shaping their biblical exegesis, also place these authors well within the framework of contemporary Islamic philosophical thought.²⁸

4. Theological and Polemical Dimensions

The philosophical training and sensitivities of the geonic authors find expression in numerous contexts. For instance, Samuel paraphrases accepted philosophical opinions in his discussions of topics such as the nature of beauty or the interpretation of dreams.²⁹ The theory of the "four elements" was so well es-

²⁴ Greenbaum, *ibid.* 315 (Hebr. translation: *ibid.* 314). This example is actually more extreme, in that the Gaon avoids attributing non-halakhic behavior to biblical characters; see *inf.* 83-84.

²⁵ Zucker, *Commentary* (1984) 19-20 (Hebr. translation: *ibid.* 192-95).

²⁶ *Ibid.* 448.

²⁷ See Zucker, *Translation* (1959) 229-36; *idem*, *Commentary* (1984), Introduction 35-69; and in general Drory, *Contacts* (1988).

²⁸ With regard to Saadiah this is a commonplace; see e.g. the works listed by Malter, *Saadia Gaon* (1921/1942) 376-80, and for two recent treatments: Wolfson, *Repercussions* (1979); Goodman, *Saadia on Job* (1988) 31-56; with regard to Samuel see Sklare, *Samuel b. Hofni* (1996).

²⁹ Greenbaum, *Biblical Commentary* (1978) 88-89 and n. 50*, 104-07 and n. 35, and see *ibid.*, Introduction 87-90.

established in Saadiah's mind that he found it necessary to explain why the biblical account of creation makes no explicit mention of the creation of fire.³⁰ Ingenious interpretations of biblical verses, designed to avoid such philosophically objectionable elements as anthropomorphism or mythic motifs, are to be found fairly frequently. We shall mention a few examples of verses from elsewhere in the Bible which Saadiah cites and interprets in the course of his commentary on a single chapter, Genesis 1. Ps 104:26 is interpreted to mean that Leviathan was created to play in the ocean (taking *בַּיָּם* to refer to the ocean).³¹ When God is said in Gen 2:15 to have taken Adam and placed him in the Garden of Eden, this was "not (done by) coercion, because He has no (direct) entry to the actions of speaking creature (i.e., human beings), but by command".³² And the 'speaking' attributed to Balaam's ass in Numbers 22 is taken to refer to "a voice which was created in proximity to the ass, and which Balaam heard as if it had passed her tongue".³³

The Geonim find it necessary to explain the indispensability of the Bible in philosophical terms, both globally and locally. Saadiah explains that the Torah comprises three major components, which complement each other in achieving the central aim of motivating the reader to obey the Divine commands:³⁴

... For it is a book which teaches the service of God, and the essence of the service of God is performance of the commandments. And we have found that the best preparation [for] human acceptance of the commandments is threefold: commandment, (notification of) reward, and (examples for) consideration. Commandment: "Do" and "Do not". (Notification of) reward: exposition of the consequences of actions which we have been commanded or prohibited to do. (Examples for) consideration: accounts of people who kept the commandments and flourished, and those who ignored them and perished ... And because the All-Wise knew that we should derive the greatest benefit from the conjunction of these three types, He made them the pillars of His Torah.

In keeping with this approach, Saadiah proceeds to discuss the benefits to be obtained from other sorts of material contained in the Torah, including genealogies and accounts of journeys, "for it is inconceivable that the Torah contains worthless things".³⁵ In his commentary on the account of creation, he reiterates several times (even commenting himself on the repetition) a fourfold explanation of the significance of this account. Its purposes are: (1) To move us to worship the Creator, (2) To prevent us from worshipping His creatures, (3) To engender belief in the biblical accounts of miracles involving His creatures, (4) To foster obedience to those commandments connected with these creatures.³⁶

³⁰ Zucker, *Commentary* (1984) 29 (Hebr. translation: *ibid.* 215).

³¹ Zucker, *ibid.* 242 (in Hebr. translation; the transcription of the corresponding manuscript page is mistakenly omitted on p. 43), and see n. 178 ad loc.

³² Zucker, *ibid.* 50 (Hebr. translation: *ibid.* 251).

³³ Zucker, *ibid.* Saadiah was attacked for this interpretation; cf. *ibid.* 251, n. 257.

³⁴ Zucker, *ibid.* 7-8 (Hebr. translation: *ibid.* 171-72).

³⁵ Zucker, *ibid.* 9 (Hebr. translation: *ibid.* 175).

³⁶ Zucker, *ibid.* 32, 35, 40-41, 46, 50 (the corresponding Hebr. translations: *ibid.* 221, 225-26, 236-37, 246, 251).

A related concern is the desire to justify the actions of the forefathers, so that they may serve as fitting models of behavior. The Geonim seem much less willing than the talmudic Rabbis to criticize the actions of biblical figures, and more determined to attempt to justify their behavior.³⁷ For instance, Samuel refuses to interpret Num 11:22 as indicating that Moses questioned God's omnipotence; in lieu of this he offers two interpretations: Either Moses means to say that the rebels will never be satisfied, even if they are offered all the meat in the world; or else he means that since God had said (in v. 20) that "it will be loathsome to you", all the meat in the world would not suffice to benefit them.³⁸

Linguistic arguments of one sort or another frequently serve to resolve theological difficulties, as indicated in the passage from Saadiah's introduction cited earlier: "... If the exegete sees that retaining the simple meaning of an expression will require him to believe one of these four things, let him know that this expression is not to be understood according to its simple meaning, but contains one or more metaphors;³⁹ and when he knows which type of metaphor is involved, in order to bring the word to its meaning, Scripture will be in accord with the senses and the intellect ...". A clear example of theologically motivated lexicographical (and syntactical) discussion may be found in Saadiah's commentary on Gen 6:6 (וינחם ה' כִּי-עָשָׂה אֶת-הָאָדָם בָּאָרֶץ וַיַּחֲצֹב אֱלֹהִים-לֵבָר). Saadiah justifies his translation of the verb וַיַּחֲצֹב as 'warned' by distinguishing seven different meanings which he attributes to this root,⁴⁰ and adds that in keeping with this interpretation, "he was saddened to his heart" should be taken as referring to (Every)man. However, this explanation is followed by an alternative one, in which the words are interpreted according to their obvious sense, and the theological difficulties presented by the verse are resolved by philosophical arguments.

But linguistic observations, almost invariably documented by reference to other biblical verses, comprise a major component of the geonic commentaries, and are not employed exclusively — and perhaps not even primarily — in the pursuit of theological or philosophical objectives. We may mention, as one instance among many, Samuel's comment on Gen 41:56, in which he argues that פְּנֵי הָאָרֶץ means "the wealthy and notables of the land", buttressing this interpretation by reference to Job 22:8.⁴¹ The reader will recall that the linguistic aspect is one of three which Saadiah singled out in characterizing his commentary — or more precisely, in noting what has been omitted from this commen-

³⁷ The motivation for this is probably partly polemical (cf. inf. 85 f. and n. 47) and partly philosophical, reflecting a reluctance to attribute human frailties to heroic figures.

³⁸ Greenbaum, *Biblical Commentary* (1978) 447 (Hebr. translation: *ibid.* 446).

³⁹ See n. 19 above.

⁴⁰ Saadiah's analysis in this instance is fraught with grammatical difficulties, some of which derive from confusion of distinct roots (the discoveries of Hayyuj being still a thing of the future), and others from the joint treatment of various forms of a single root. Cf. Zucker, *Commentary* (1984) 100-01; Hebr. translation: *ibid.* 333-35.

⁴¹ In this instance (as noted by Greenbaum, *Biblical Commentary* [1978] 167, n. 230), the basic interpretation, without the supporting verse, is to be found in *Gen. Rab.* 91:5 (ed. Theodor / Albeck, pp. 1120-21). For the linguistic techniques of the Geonim see especially Bacher, *Commentaire* (1888) 106-10; Zucker, *Translation* (1959) 237-66.

tary in his translation: "... a separate work containing nothing of the discussions of language ... nor of the questions of the heretics, nor of their refutation; nor of the 'branches' of the rational commandments or the mode of performance of the non-rational ones". Let us now turn to the remaining two elements emphasized by the Gaon: the polemical aspect and what might be termed "the rabbinic connection".

Polemics occupy a central place in the oeuvre of Saadiah. He saw himself as the spokesman of Rabbanite Judaism, more especially in its Babylonian variety, and devoted a number of works specifically to polemics – whether directed against heretics who rejected the authority of the Bible, against Karaites who accepted the Bible but rejected the authority of rabbinic tradition, or against opponents within the Rabbanite camp, including the Palestinian Gaon Aaron [?] ben Meir, and the exilarch David ben Zakkai.⁴² But polemical comments, whether implicit or explicit, are also scattered in great profusion throughout Saadiah's writings on other subjects, and are particularly prominent in his biblical commentaries, and especially – for obvious reasons – those on the Pentateuch.⁴³ One striking passage, in the commentary on Gen 1:14–19, deals at some length with nine or ten different calendrical systems which Saadiah rejects in favor of the traditional Rabbanite calendar; several proponents of these competing systems are named, while others remain anonymous.⁴⁴ In the context of his commentary on Gen 1:26, Saadiah notes that the verse is used by Christians as an argument for the Trinitarian doctrine, because of the plural form of the verb *נַעֲשֶׂה* ("Let us make"); he interprets this as an instance of the 'royal we', and goes on to argue at some length that since the Christians agree that various expressions in this passage are not to be taken literally, they cannot legitimately insist on a literal interpretation of this particular verb.⁴⁵ A possible case of veiled polemic, this time against Islam, is to be found in Saadiah's discussion of the 'Aqedah (the Binding of Isaac, Gen 22): One of the reasons for this trial, according to Saadiah, is "lest anyone think that Ishmael showed greater submission to God than did Isaac, since he was circumcised at the age of 13, when he understood pain and could have refused, whereas Isaac was circumcised at the age of eight days, when he did not understand pain and was unable to refuse".⁴⁶

The polemical dimension is less pronounced, but not altogether lacking, in Samuel's commentary. We find a number of brief passages devoted to refuting attacks of unnamed opponents on the veracity or plausibility of the biblical account or on the behavior of biblical heroes, as well as a refutation of an argu-

⁴² See e.g. Malter, *Saadia Gaon* (1921/1942) 260–71, 380–91; a good deal of additional material has been published since Malter wrote.

⁴³ See Malter, *ibid.* 262; Zucker, *Commentary* (1984), Introduction 17; for some examples in other works: Qafih, *Proverbs* (1976) 38 and n. 8; Davidson et al., *Siddur* (1941/1970) 10.

⁴⁴ The groups discussed include 'Zadokites', 'Boethusians', 'Badarites', and the disciples of Benjamin (al-Nihawandi) and Tiflisi; cf. Zucker, *Commentary* (1984) 41–42 (Hebr. translation: *ibid.* 236–37; and see *ibid.* 436–47). For other discussions of this subject by Saadiah see Malter, *Saadia Gaon* (1921/1942) 168–71, 351–53.

⁴⁵ Zucker, *Commentary* (1984) 50–51 (Hebr. translation: *ibid.* 252); cf. Rosenblatt, *Beliefs and Opinions* (1948/1958) 107–08.

⁴⁶ Zucker, *ibid.* 140 (Hebr. translation: *ibid.* 400); cf. EJ, s. v. Ishmael.

* ment adduced in favor of a non-Rabbanite calendar.⁴⁷ It is interesting to note in this context that Samuel criticizes "the Christian translator" (Septuagint = Peshitta) of Gen 47:31, for reading מַטֶּה as *maṭṭēh* ('staff') rather than the masoretic *mittā* ('bed').⁴⁸

5. The Relationship between Talmudic and Geonic Exegesis

The attitude of the Geonim to rabbinic tradition is a complex one. It unquestionably retained their complete allegiance with regard to matters of law in the broadest possible sense (*halakhah*); and one notable component of their commentaries, as emphasized by Saadia, is the incorporation of legal material, including quotations from talmudic sources and occasional references to post-talmudic developments.⁴⁹ This is particularly noteworthy in view of the fact that practically all of the geonic commentaries published to date are devoted to non-legal portions of the Bible, so that the legal discussions in question have been introduced into a narrative context. One reason for this is undoubtedly the desire on the part of the Geonim to emphasize the connection between rabbinic tradition and the Bible, as part of their struggle against Karaism. But there are other reasons as well; we may cite in this connection Samuel's commentary on Gen 41:49, where he remarks: "We saw fit to dwell at length here on hoarding, because it is relevant to the story and most of the grain merchants in our time do hoard".⁵⁰

The status of rabbinic statements on non-legal matters is much more complicated. The Geonim accepted numerous rabbinic traditions of an *aggadic* nature as authoritative and based their commentaries on them, whether explicitly or implicitly. For instance, Samuel's account of biblical chronology depends explicitly on that of *Seder 'Olam Rabba*.⁵¹ On the other hand, both Saadia and Samuel feel free to reject rabbinic statements of a non-legal nature, and sometimes use surprisingly harsh language to describe these rejected opinions.⁵² It seems clear that they considered many (perhaps most) aggadic comments to represent individual interpretations rather than authoritative traditions,⁵³ although it is difficult to define the criteria which guided them in differentiating between these two categories, aside from a subjective assessment of the extent to which they represent serious attempts at exegesis rather than fanciful

⁴⁷ Greenbaum, *Biblical Commentary* (1978) 47, 153, 445 (corresponding Hebr. translations: *ibid.* 46, 152, 444); see *ibid.*, Introduction 91-92; Bacher, *Commentaire* (1887) 287-88.

⁴⁸ See Greenbaum, *ibid.* 316-17 and n. 34.

⁴⁹ See Greenbaum, *ibid.* 65-75; Zucker, *ibid.* 13-18; and cf. Bacher, *Commentaire* (1888) 112, 119-20. For an example of post-talmudic legal development see Zucker, *ibid.* 149 (Hebr. translation: *ibid.* 412).

⁵⁰ Greenbaum, *ibid.* 153 (Hebr. translation: *ibid.* 152).

⁵¹ See Greenbaum, *ibid.* 42-43, 46-47, 70-71, 88-89, 98-101, 188-91 and n. 306; and cf. *ibid.* 172-73, 198-99 and nn. 336-37.

⁵² With regard to Samuel see n. 54 below; with respect to Saadia see Zucker, *ibid.* 267 n. 323, 276 n. 380, 286 n. 422, 300 n. 505, and especially 349-50 n. 77.

⁵³ This is in keeping with geonic attitudes to Aggadah generally; see Assaf, *The Geonic Period* (1955/1967) 244 (no. 66); Sklare, *Samuel b. Hofni* (1996) 41-48.

homiletics. The most explicit methodological statement on this point which I have found is contained in a fragment of Samuel's introduction to his commentary on the second half of Genesis, published by ZUCKER:⁵⁴

The eighth matter: that whatever belongs to the eight categories of the commandments — valid, invalid, forbidden, permitted, unclean, clean, guilty or innocent — he should explain with precision and clarity, without deviation, according to Scripture and the tradition alone. The ninth matter: that whatever is established by an explicit verse or clarified by Scripture or established by rational demonstration, he should state unreservedly and decisively; but of those interpretations (*tafsir*, pl. of *tafsir*) which the Sages call *midrashot* and *aggadot* ... in matters other than the commandments, with which he embellishes his discourse, he should say "It may be" or "It is proper".

Geonic exegesis in general may be characterized as more disciplined and less fanciful than earlier rabbinic exegesis, and more concerned with a close, systematic reading of the biblical text, in which attention is devoted both to the smallest textual units and to the integrity of larger narratives. Some differences in this area between the Geonim are, however, worth noting. Saadiah seems to have retained something of the homiletical mentality of the talmudic Rabbis; this finds expression both in interpretations which attribute significance to minor variations in spelling, and in the willingness to offer a number of interpretations for a single verse, of which one is said to be the simple or literal meaning of the text, while the others are obviously and admittedly homiletical in nature.⁵⁵ Samuel appears to focus more closely on straightforward interpretations; when he offers multiple interpretations, these are presented as alternatives, only one of which is presumed to be true.⁵⁶ Although Samuel's commentary contains numerous passages of a homiletical or hortatory nature, these do not purport to derive their message from textual clues such as variant spellings or 'superfluous' words, but rather from the thrust of the biblical account as a whole, and especially from the actions of exemplary figures such as the Patriarchs and Jacob's sons.⁵⁷ On the other hand, Samuel is fond of introducing lengthy digressions having only a tenuous connection with the biblical text on which he is commenting, a practice for which he was roundly criticized by Abraham ibn Ezra.⁵⁸ For instance, the account of Jacob's departure from Beersheba in Gen 28:10 occasions a disquisition on journeys and their purposes, including a survey of those mentioned throughout the Bible; while the account of Joseph's storing up grain in preparation for the famine in Egypt provides the opportunity for a lengthy discussion of factors to be considered in grain storage, ending: "And the masters of agriculture have mentioned many things

⁵⁴ Zucker, *ibid.* 448; and cf. Greenbaum, *Biblical Commentary* (1978) 521 (discussed by Sklare, *ibid.*).

⁵⁵ See, with regard to homiletic interpretations, Zucker, *Commentary* (1984), Introduction 15–16; for some examples see *ibid.* 53, 127, 134–35 (corresponding Hebr. translations: 258, 381–82, 393); for examples of multiple interpretations see *ibid.* 107, 118, 144 (Hebr. translations: 345–46, 366, 403–04).

⁵⁶ See Greenbaum, *ibid.* 136–37, 140–43, 324–25, 332–33, 336–39. But the difference is perhaps one of degree, cf. *ibid.* 80–81 and Zucker, *Commentary* (1984), Introduction 51.

⁵⁷ See Greenbaum, *ibid.* 44–45, 64–65, 90–93, 156–57, 182–83, 242–45, 284–85, and cf. *ibid.* 310–13.

⁵⁸ Greenbaum, *ibid.* 2–6 (Ibn Ezra's criticism: *ibid.* 3, n. 5).

of this sort which I do not see fit to mention, but I have no doubt that Joseph took care for the grain of Egypt and guarded it in such fashion or in even more effective ways".⁵⁹

The pioneering work of the Geonim exercised considerable influence on succeeding generations of Jewish biblical exegetes, both Rabbanites and Karaites. This influence is especially prominent in the works of authors who wrote in Arabic, including Judah ibn Balaam and Abraham Maimonides, and in the linguistic and lexicographical writings of Jonah ibn Janah. European authors writing in Hebrew, however, also made extensive use of geonic exegesis; this influence is probably most noticeable in the works of Abraham ibn Ezra. A number of geonic interpretations were incorporated in late *midrashic* works, especially those written in Arabic. The *Midrash Ha-Gadol*, a Yemenite compilation written in Hebrew, also contains a very rich vein of geonic exegesis.⁶⁰ In a broader sense, the work of the Geonim provided a precedent for the writing of systematic biblical commentaries in a form essentially different from that of classical rabbinic midrash, and doubtless provided inspiration and a sense of legitimacy to numerous commentators who had no direct access to their works.

⁵⁹ Greenbaum, *ibid.* 153 (Hebr. translation: *ibid.* 152); cf. Bacher, *Commentaire* (1887) 283-88.

⁶⁰ See Greenbaum, *Biblical Commentary* (1978), Introduction 34-50; Zucker, *Commentary* (1984), Introduction 25-33.