SAADIA’S BIBLICAL EXEGESIS AND 
HIS POETIC PRACTICE

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Rav Saadia Gaon is one of the most prominent Jewish authors of the Middle Ages. Each of his works is stamped with the seal of originality. Moreover, in many of his works he created new fields of Jewish knowledge. Among them is the field of biblical commentary, in which the Bible is treated not only as a source of Jewish law and history, but also as literature, as a supreme source of the Hebrew language and its normative grammar, and finally, as an ultimate authority for Jewish thought. However, part of his vast and diversified work is influenced by tradition. This is true specifically of his poetry, in part of which we can easily discern the impact of the paytanic tradition, especially the works of Rav Elazar ben Qillir (Tobi, 1980, I, pp. 58–205). But even in his poetry Saadia is a great innovator who founded a new school of medieval Hebrew literature, a school to which the famous Jewish poets of Spain are related.

It is our intention in this article to compare Saadia’s biblical commentary with his poetry, in order to examine to what extent these two fields of creativity are related. The need and justification for this examination

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1. The most basic and comprehensive existing work on Saadia is still that of Malter (1921). An important bibliography is included in Allony (1969, pp. 564–575).
2. Until now, there has been no comprehensive work about the biblical commentary of Saadia. That lack has to be related, mainly, to the fact that most of his biblical works were not printed. Saadia’s biblical works were edited mainly by three scholars: Derenbourg (1893–1899), Qafih (1966–1976) and Zucker (1984). The research in Saadia’s biblical work is carried out especially by Zucker in his numerous books and articles. For details concerning Saadia’s printed works see Kasher-Mandlebaum (1979, use the Index, p. 724). See also Tobi (1980, I, p. 387, n. 4).
reside in the fact that, on the one hand, Saadia was the first in Jewish history to deal with the poetic values of the Bible, and, on the other, he included in his poetry a vast amount of biblical material, in accordance with his paytanic tradition. Moreover, he set up a comprehensive linguistic method, relying almost exclusively on biblical Hebrew. This comparative work will be done, then, in three areas: grammar, semantics and exegesis.

But first let us study Saadia's approach to the Bible as a work which not only deserves, but indeed obliges, a literary-linguistic examination, in order to obtain its most complete and accurate understanding, as a divine creation intended to direct not only Jewish life, but all human life.

Saadia was the first author in Jewish literature to deal with poetics. He wrote two special works, in which the main subject, or one of the main subjects, was poetics. One is Hāʾegrōn, whose Arabic title is Kitāb ʿUṣūl al-Šīʿr al-ʿIrānī, that is, The Book of the Elements of the Hebrew Poetry.4 The other is Seper Haggālūy or Kitāb al-ʿTārīd, that is, The Book of the Expelled.5 However, poetics was dealt with by Saadia not only in these two works, but in most of his other works,6 especially in his linguistic works,7 and in what is our main concern here, his biblical commentary.8

It should be noted that Saadia's dealing with poetics was not due to an appreciation of artistic work as such. As a neo-Platonist he believed that art had no autonomous status. Certainly, this was in opposition to Aristotelian views about mimesis and catharsis in art, and its autonomy.9 However, Saadia claimed that the Bible could not be fully understood unless its poetic rules were known. We quote his explicit words at the end of the Hebrew introductory section in his Hāʾegrōn, after he sums up his views of the poetic rules:

4. The various known fragments of that work were collected by Allony (1969).
5. Some passages were published by Harkavy (1892, pp. 135–235). For the different printed passages of Sēper Haggālūy see Stern (1955, pp. 133–134).
6. Like his Arabic commentary on Sēper Yesirāh (Qāfih, 1972) and his philosophic work, Kitāb al-ʿAmānāt wal-ʿIthārāt (Qāfih, 1970).
8. Some passages from Saadia's various genres are discussed in Tobi (1980, 1, pp. 229–250).
9. Arab authors were influenced by Aristotle's Poetics, only from the time of Saadia's contemporary Abū Naṣr al-Ḥārābī (see Cantarino, 1975, pp. 109ff). On the distinction between Plato's and Aristotle's views on poetry see Spiegel (1971, pp. 54ff, 126ff). The Poetics of Aristotle were first translated into Arabic by Abū Biṣr Maltā ibn Yūnus al-Qunnaʿī (d. 940. see Cantarino, 1975, p. 66).
This view is not original to Saadia, nor to other Jewish authors. It had been posited in the Arab literature of generations previous to Saadia. The first students of the Arabic language and poetry in the eighth century claimed that it was needed for understanding the Qurʾān (Cantarino, 1975, p. 12).

Moreover, Saadia inclined to deal with the biblical text, especially with its metaphoric language, as literature, due to his philosophical tendency to remove every anthropomorphic meaning from biblical idioms like ʿen hasṣēm, "God’s eye", or yad hasṣēm, "God’s hand".11

Let us see one example from his biblical commentary in which he deals with poetics:

An intelligent man should always take Scripture according to the literal sense of its words, namely, the [sense] commonly accepted by native speakers of its language. . . But if he sees that learning that speech with the plain sense of its words would lead to belief in one of the four things which I have mentioned, then he should know that that speech is not literal but that it rather contains one or more words which are metaphoric. And when he discovers what kind of metaphor it is, thus restoring it to its correct meaning, that verse will be in agreement with sense perception, reason, the other verse [which seemed to contradict it] and tradition. I should now continue, giving examples of those four . . . And what is relevant to the second kind is the verse, [Deut


11. We cannot discuss the matter in detail, but it should be noted here that the issue is dealt with by Saadia in many of his works, like the commentary on Sēper Yeṣīrāh (see Qāfiḥ, 1972, introduction, pp. 25–26; 2:3, p. 80; 4:1, p. 106), and Kitāb al-Amānāt wal-iṭiqādāt (see Qāfiḥ, 1970, pp. 96–102), and that this approach is connected with his muʿtazīlī views (see Zucker, 1955/6; Zucker, 1959, pp. 229–236; Goldziher, 1951, pp. 78–81). This method in the biblical commentary, which is called tāʿwīl, as a parallelism to a certain method in Islamic commentary of the Qurʾān, was developed first in Jewish literature by the Karaites. See for instance Qirqisānī’s Introduction to Genesis (Hirschfeld, 1918), which contains 24 rules for biblical commentary; and his Kitāb al-Anwār wal-Marāqīb. (Nemoy, 1940–1943, Vol. II, part 4, chapter (bāh) 23, pp. 387–388; chapter 25, pp. 390–393, etc.).
4:24]. Were we to accept this literally, reason would oppose and deny it. For reason determines that every fire is created (since it is dependent) and is subject to change. Whereas it [i.e., reason] determines that none of this may be ascribed to the Creator. But by assuming that there is, in this speech, some metaphor, reason and Scripture will be in agreement.\textsuperscript{12}

On the other hand, Saadia is the first Hebrew poet of the paytanic school who used original metaphoric words and idioms in his poetry. As the paytanic tradition does not ascribe importance to metaphoric expressions (Fleischer, 1975, pp. 105–106, 266), they are quite rare in the classical paytanic genres in Saadai's poetry. On the contrary, they are more frequent in his new poetic genres, mainly in the Tōḵēhā "’im lepi bohorkā" and in his Baqqāšōt. In the Yōšerōt, the metaphoric expressions are proportionally numerous in the lyric components, that is, the Meʾōʾrōt, the ṢAhavā, the Ḥassēm malkēnû and the Veʾad mātay (Tobi, 1980, I, pp. 266–267).

Of course, we cannot survey here everything written by Saadia in his biblical commentary and how it applied to his poetry.\textsuperscript{13} However, it seems necessary to say something about his Kitāb al-Ṭarīḍ. In its first edition in Hebrew, that book was called Sēper haggālūy and it aimed to be a masterpiece of the Hebrew language. In its second edition, Saadia explained its words and expressions with an Arabic commentary. In general, Saadia relied on biblical words and combinations in his Arabic commentary.

In his commentary to Prov 1:8, Saadia wrote: "It is the Hebrew speaker’s manner to attach two things to two persons, while it is intended that these two things have to be attached to each person . . . as is here. Mūsār is not attached only to the father and Tōrā only to the mother, but rather they both (Mūsār and Tōrā) are attached to each one of them.”

In his commentary to Sēper Yeṣirāh (4:8), Saadia said the same thing, but added that “it is the custom of the Holy scriptures and the scholars,” and that it is used also in “belles-lettres.” The custom referred to is

\textsuperscript{12} The original Arabic version of this passage was published for the first time by Zucker (1959, pp. 230–231), with Hebrew translation, and then by Qāfīh (1963, p. 162, Hebrew translation only). Now it is included in the entire edition of Saadia to Genesis (Bereshit-Toledot), by Zucker (1984, pp. 18, 191–192). A short version of the whole issue is included in Kitāb al-Amānāt, the 7th chapter in its two versions (see Qāfīh, 1970, pp. 219–220; p. 328). I am indebted to Prof. Bernard Septimus of Harvard University for the English translation.

\textsuperscript{13} In fact, such research has not been done.
known as Biblical Parallelism. Saadia used the various forms of that literary figure in his poetry.  

To end the discussion of the relation between Saadia’s biblical commentary and his views about poetics, it should be noted that in the tenth century, Jewish scholars, of whom Saadia was the most eminent, began using rhetorical principles to deal with those parts of the Bible which are not halakhic. The summing up of these principles is concluded in the book of Lab Middōt (32 Measures) written by Rav Shemu’el ben Hofni, one of the last Geonim of Sura, who relied much on Saadia’s biblical commentary. The new tools of research used by Jewish scholars of that time show the influence of the Arabic literature. This is clear not only from the use of Arabic rhetorical terms, but also from the type of research itself.

I. LINGUISTICS—GRAMMAR

Saadia was the first Jewish scholar to write a comprehensive work on Hebrew grammar: Kutub al-Lugah. What had been written before him by the scholars of Tiberias was not based on scientific method; rather, it was a summary of Massoretic rules. As expected, Saadia was strongly influenced by Arab grammarians. His grammar deals with biblical Hebrew, and from many points of view it was the basis upon which Jewish grammarians in Spain built their grammatical compositions. Furthermore, Saadia dealt with biblical Hebrew grammar because he wanted to renew the use of Hebrew after it had been neglected by the Jewish people and had come to be in a poor position in relation to that of the Arabic of those times, in order to restore its position of older times. These rational motives are manifestly expressed

15. See Zucker (1954); Zucker (1959, pp. 237–266); Greenbaum (1979, pp. 93–95).  
16. This work is also known in its Hebrew title, Sēper ṣaḥōt lešōn haqqōdeš. A few passages only of its twelve chapters were published by Bacher and Skoss (see Goldenberg, 1973, p. 119). An abridged contents of its first ten chapters is brought by Skoss (1955). For our concern here the second chapter is important, of which some paragraphs were published by Harkavy (1908, pp. 30–38). See also Skoss (1955, pp. 7–11).
19. See Allony (1969, pp. 26–31) and (1973). It is not clear, as yet, whether there is any connection between Saadia’s engagement in biblical Hebrew grammar and his struggle against the Karaites. It should be pointed out that the first edition of Ḥaʾegrōn had been carried out by Saadia in Egypt, before he reached Erez-Israel and Babylonia, the strongholds of the Karaites.
in Seper hā'egrôn,20 Kutub al-lugah21 and Seper haggālūy (Harkavy, 1892, pp. 154–157). That is why, among other reasons, he wrote his Tafsīr to the Bible. In its two aspects, the literal translation and the long commentary, both in Arabic, it was intended to help Jews become more acquainted with the language of the Holy Bible, the most important book of Judaism.22 This is also why he was almost the first author in Hebrew literature to write in biblical style. As a matter of fact, he was the first great promoter of biblical style.23

It is not our task here to discuss the complicated issue of whether the method of multiliteral roots did exist in the history of Hebrew philology, that is, that Hebrew roots may be composed of one letter, two letters or three, or whether the method of trilateral root ever existed.24 On that issue scholars are divided. However, it seems clear that Saadia knew the method of the trilateral roots, as can be seen in the third chapter of his Kutub al-lugah—the “Chapter of Conjugation and Declension” (Skoss, 1955, pp. 11–18; Goldenberg, 1979). It can also be seen in the second chapter of that book, the “Chapter of Strengthening (or Adornment) and Omission” (Skoss, 1955, pp. 7–11), in which Saadia explains the omission of a weak letter in the root; for example, the first letter, which is nun in the future tense, and its compensation—the dāgeš, as is conventional in the trilateral root method.

In his biblical commentary, Saadia frequently ignores the trilateral root method. He was trenchantly criticized by his pupil—Dunash ben Labrat—because of this, in a special book Seper tešûbôt Dunaš Hallevi

21. One can gather it from its two other titles, Seper sahot lešon haqqūdeš and Kitāb Fāsiḥ Luqat al-ībrāniyyīn (Book of Eloquence of the Language of the Hebrews), connecting with the fact that it deals with biblical Hebrew.
22. See Zucker (1959, pp. 9–11). But see Hirschberg’s view (1962, pp. 414–416), that Saadia wrote his Arabic translation as a literary work applied to the scholars without any “nationalistic” motives.
23. His most famous works written in biblical style are the Two Baqqāsūt (Siddūr, pp. 47–81), which were later highly praised by R. Abraham Ibn Ezra (his commentary to Eccl 5:1) as a masterpiece of an excellent Hebrew style. On other works of Saadia written in biblical style see Tobi, (1980, I, pp. 14–57). The biblical style in Saadia’s poetry is discussed by Zulay (1964, pp. 31–40). See also Tobi (1980, I, pp. 270–276); Rabin (1943, pp. 127–138).
hen Labraf ‘al rabby Se’adya Ga’ton (ed. Schröter, 1866). Let us see some examples:

1. The word ראתה (Isa 46:8) is translated by Saadia, יִרְאוּ “to despair of.” In other words, he explains that word not by its normative triliteral root (שַׁבָּא) but by its biliteral root (שַׁבָּא), which is the same for שַׁבָּא because the first letter in שַׁבָּא, the יֹד, is weak and is omitted. Dunash, in his criticism, writes: 25

   And he (Saadia) explained ראתה by the meaning of יִרְאוּ, making a serious mistake. That is because the meaning of the Hebrew word ראתה comes from the triliteral root from which in its verbal form, the first letter, the יֹד, is (sometimes) omitted. From that verb it was said (Eccl 2:20), תֹּרֶם אַל יִרְאוּ. If he (Isaiah) would have wanted to say it with the meaning of ראתה he would have had to say ראתה וְיִרְאוּ. Therefore, I explained it by meaning of יִרְאוּ, i.e., “they strengthened in God’s piety.”

2. The word נָעַרְיָה (Isa 27:11), is translated by Saadia into יִפְקָדָה, i.e., “will pick or gather her.” It means that Saadia explained the word by the meaning of the root נָאֵר, not by that of the root נָעַר, as would be expected, had he used the normative triliteral root. That, of course, is because Saadia believed that the roots נָאֵר and נָעַר may have the same meaning, as they are basically the same root—נָאֵר. The second letter נ in נָעַר, and the third letter ה in הָעַר may be neglected, as they are omitted in some conjugations. And again, this way of explanation is vigorously criticized and rejected by Dunash. 26

That Saadia used the method of the biliteral root to explain biblical words can be learned not only by induction from his biblical translation and commentary, or from the criticism of Dunash, but also from clear words expressed by him here and there in his biblical commentary. Let us take one paragraph from his commentary to Gen 4:4:

I have translated יִרְאוּ as יִרְאוּ, “acceptance,” because those two letters יִרְאוּ, in all places in which they are used, have in our language (Hebrew) seven meanings: (a) salvation and deliverance, like יִרְאוּ (Ps 62:8), יִרְאוּ (Ibid. 50:23); (b) acceptance and willingness, יִרְאוּ (Job 14:6); (c) neglect and disregard, יִרְאוּ (Isa 13:7); (d) applying to יִרְאוּ (Isa 13:7); (e) occupying oneself,

26. Schröter (1866, pp. 1–2, n. 3). For Ibn Ezra’s defence see Ibn Ezra (1895, p. 14, n. 3).
As we have said, the method of the multiliteral root, which was used by Saadia in his biblical commentary, is contradictory to his main method in *Kutub al-Lugah*. That method was that which the paytanim used in their poetry. Saadia also made extensive use of this method, i.e., paytanic declensions and conjugations in his poetry (Tobi, 1980, I, pp. 246–277).

Saadia sometimes conjugates roots which begin with nun (ן) or end with alef (א) or he (ה) in the same manner as roots whose second letter is vav (ו). Thus he writes a) for the past tense:  instead of  (Zulay, 1964, p. 187), instead of (Zulay, 1964, p. 187), instead of (Zulay, 1964, p. 187) and b) for the verbal noun with the accusatival suffixes: instead of (Siddur, p. 202/234; Levine, 1943, p. 508/8) and instead of (Schirmann, 1966, p. 41/63); c) and for the imperative: instead of (Siddur, p. 331/1; 333/11) and instead of (Zulay, 1964, p. 94/239). All this is in accordance with his view that those weak letters in the root, like nun and lamed for the first letter, and alef for the last letter, may be omitted not only when it is common in the Bible, on which he based the normative grammar in *Kutub al-Lugah*, but constantly, so they can be conjugated as roots of ו.

Saadia was aware of this manner, which was conventional in the *Piyyūt*, but he did not explain it with the triliteral root, as can be concluded from his commentary to *Sefer Yeṣirah*:

The proposed meaning of that is ר י ר. However, he (the author) omitted the yod like all the omissions in the Bible, as it is said הנח אכד (Num 32:32, instead of אכד); and in the Mishna it is said instead of (Mishnah, *Baba Qamma*, 1:1); and in the poetic compositions of the poets it is said instead of (Qaftih, 1972, p. 132).

Saadia included all these cases under the same phenomenon, which he named “the Omission.” In the same way, in the commentary of *Sefer*

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29. Davidson (1915, p. 50/23). Rabin’s suggestion (1943, p. 131), that Saadia conjugated it from the Hebrew root ו י ר is doubtful.

Yeširāh, he compared those cases which were mentioned above to the manner in Arabic of saying لَا نَأْدُوُّ instead of لَا نَأْدُوُّ, and كَيْفَ لَنَأْدُوُّ instead of كَيْفَ لَنَأْدُوُّ (Qāfīh, 1972, p. 132). And even in the third chapter of Kutub al-Lugah, the “Chapter of Strengthening and Omission,” he joined together the phenomena of the usually omitted weak letters of the root with that of omitted letters only when it is confirmed by the Massorah, like ضَرَّعُ instead of ضَرَّعَ and كُرِيم instead of كُرِيَم (Skoss, 1955, p. 8).

Another basis of Saadia’s linguistic method is the analogy (القياس). In Hebrew, according to Saadia’s view, you may—in fact, you are advised—to derive a verb from a noun and vice versa; to use a verb in any conjugation with the same meaning of that verb in any other conjugation; or to derive from some root new forms of singular and plural which are conventional in other roots.31

The various opinions concerning analogy in language are known from the dispute between the schools of Kūfah and Basrah in the Muslim world (Weil, 1913, pp. 105–109; Kopf, 1976, pp. 89–114). It is apparent that Saadia’s views concerning that issue were like that of Ibn Qutaybah (826–889), i.e., the intermediate attitude (Shinar, 1974, pp. 58–60). In fact, Saadia’s views were close to the scholars of Kūfah, who said it was permissible to create new words by deriving nouns from verbs (Tobi, 1980, I, pp. 243–244).

Saadia gave concrete form to this idea in his poetry as in his biblical commentary. For example, we can find in his poetry the plural forms of מָלְאָם (Siddur, p. 54/11–12) and מָלְאָם (Zulay, 1964, p. 128/14), while in the Bible only the singular forms exist מָלְאָם and מָלְאָם. Conversely, he uses the singular forms מָלְאָם (Levine, 1943, p. 520/4) and מָלְאָם (Siddur, p. 411/50), while in the Bible there are only the plural forms מָלְאָם and מָלְאָם. He derives new verbs from given nouns: מָלְאָם (Siddur, p. 06/312) from מָלְאָם; מָלְאָם (Siddur, p. 208/364) from מָלְאָם; מָלְאָם (Siddur, p. 285/106) from מָלְאָם; מָלְאָם (Siddur, p. 241/486) from מָלְאָם; מָלְאָם (Siddur, p. 411/46) from מָלְאָם; מָלְאָם (Siddur, p. 325/21) from מָלְאָם. He does the same thing with a noun from a noun [Zulay, 1964, p. 151/17] from מָלְאָם, nouns and verbs from particles (Siddur, p. 175/9) from מָלְאָם, and so on. Furthermore, he also uses the qiyās for widening the semantic fields of words, as when he uses the word מָלְאָם (Harkavy, 1892, p. 181/16–17) with the meaning of מָלְאָם.

31. See Zulay (1964, pp. 19ff); Fleischer (1965, pp. 392ff); Goldenberg (1973/4, pp. 129ff).
(consideration), because seeing is done by עיניים (eyes). The conventional meaning of הנצן is “display,” as is well known.

In his biblical commentary, we find that Saadia translates the word הנצן (Prov 4:9) into הבטן, meaning, “it will protect you.” First Saadia ignores here the triliteral root בטן which has the meaning of “deliver up” or “hand over,” and explains it with the meaning of the root בטן, which in two letters בטן is equal to בטן. Furthermore, he explains the verb הנצן as a conjugated derivation of the noun הנצן, of which the root is בטן. It is characteristic of Saadia that he translates the word בטן (Isa 64:6) into ואסלקנה, “you had delivered us up,” by the meaning of the root בטן, as in the Aramaic Targum of the Bible, while the normative meaning has to be derived from the root בוט, i.e., “melting,” “dissolving,” or “banishing,” “exiling.” As might be expected, Saadia is criticized by Dunash for his explanations of the two words, בטון and בוטון.

In general, Dunash criticizes Saadia’s use of analogy in language when the latter explains the unique word בוטון (Judg 3:22) as a derivation of the word בוטון. Dunash says with unconcealed mockery (Schröter, 1866, pp. 24–25, n. 95):

We should not derive a word from בר ולב and say ובטרות, as we should not derive a word from לבר and say ונצרות. If we name one thing with two or three nouns, we should not name another thing which has a noun on the same paradigm equal to one of the first thing, with a noun the paradigm of which is equal to the second noun of the first thing. As it is written ולב (Job 4:19) and ולב (Job 38:32), two nouns for one thing: we should not derive from it and say וב (instead of וב), like וב . . . and we should not say וב instead of וב because וב is named וב, as it is said אול ואדרת בטון ולב (Esth 1:6).

Saadia explains his own use of linguistic analogy in his Arabic commentary of Sefer Haggâlûy (Harkavy, 1892, pp. 186–188):

... I have derived the word בהכרה from what it was said (Esth 1:6) בהכרה ובטון ולב (a verb from noun) . . . and have derived ימקהל from (Isa 51:6) ימקהל nip’al, passive conjugation) . . . and I have derived מ from לעב, because it is the custom to make the masculine form from the feminine form. And I have made והמה instead of והמה, strengthening the word by the ה (in the Arabic origin: הכותב עלאה, creating a noun from a certain root according to the paradigm of a noun from another root). . . .

It should be noted that analogy was used already by the paytanim, before Saadia, for creating new words; but only in Saadia’s poetry, linguistic books and biblical commentary, was it crystallized as a method,
which was later criticized by Spanish scholars such as Dunash and Moshe Ibn Ezra (Halkin, 1975, pp. 203–205, 209; Ibn Ezra, 1827, p. 23b). Thus we can say that Saadia’s linguistic method in his poetry was basically the same as that of paytanim. This method he used to explain biblical words.

II. LINGUISTICS—SEMANTICS

In general, there is an affinity between Saadia’s biblical commentary and his poetry. Complicated words and idioms in his poetry can be expounded through his biblical commentary, provided they are to be found in the Bible.33

Let us take some typical instances:

1. In the Ḩayyār of Shabbath Miqqēṣ which coincides with Ṭoṣ-Hōdeš and Ḥanukkah, Saadia writes (Tobi, 1980, II, p. 1/11),

The word אֶֽלֶ֑יִּים is an emblematic name for the people of Israel; צִוְּאֵיתַנָּם means Egypt, as צִוְּאֵיתַנָּם is an emblematic name for the Egyptians, because צִוְּאֵיתַנָּם was a site in Egypt. All that is understandable in accordance with paytanic manner. The difficulty is in the first word הָוָה: being an imperative derivation from the root רָחַ, it implies that the poet asks God to leave Israel in its Egyptian exile. Of course, this interpretation of Saadia’s verse is unacceptable. But if we look for the word הָוָה or another derivation of its root רָחַ in the Bible, we will find the same word in Ps 79:11: הָוָה כִּי חָמְתָה. Saadia’s translation for that Biblical verse is, אַלְּכֵל רוּי אֱלֹהֵנָה, “liberate those (the people of Israel) who were doomed to die.” And in the same way in Saadia’s verse, “liberate my (people) who are prisoners in the Egyptian jail.”

Attention should be paid to the fact that Saadia explains the word הָוָה as being a derivation from the root רָחַ, הָוָה, “open chains,” and not from the real root, according to the normative grammar, רָחַ. For him, both are equal, because the two constant letters ר are common.

2. In the Ḩayyār of Sabbath Peqûdē, Saadia writes (Tobi, 1980, II, p. 19/83–84):

32. Schrörter (1866, pp. 24–25, n. 95; p. 31, n. 105; p. 33, n. 108).

33. The first scholar to compare Saadia’s poetry with his biblical commentary was Sachs (1892, p. 109, n.b.). Sachs found that in a set of Ḥoṣaʾnît (Siddûr, p. 242/11) the word דָּעַ is used with the very same meaning by which Saadia translates it in Gen 30:11, i.e., “said” or “saying.” From that he gathered that Saadia’s authorship as regards the Ḥoṣaʾnît is unquestionable. For Dunash’s criticism concerning Saadia’s translation, see Schrörter (1866, p. 5, n. 14); for Ibn Ezra’s defence see Ibn Ezra (1895, p. 17, n. 13).
is an emblematic name for David, who was the youngest among his brothers. So the meaning of the two verses is: David, the youngest brother, whom You, God, had designated to be a leader, a chief, to bless and curse, זר (=?); and vowed to be saved from death. The difficulty lies in the word זר. But if we look at the Bible, we find the unique Biblical word, from the same root דר, in Job 15:12: הַכֹּ><ָהָה נֹאָא הַתָּה הָעְיָ נָא. Saadia's translation is: דֶּרֶּמֶד נַגְּלָא מַעְדֵּנֶא הָעְיָ נָא, i.e., that which your eyes governed, or in the real meaning, your broad and profound knowledge. So, Saadia explains the root דר from the noun דֶּרֶּמֶד, "prince," "governor," and this meaning is used in his poetic verse.

On the other hand, there are considerable numbers of words in Saadia’s poetry which cannot be explained by their meaning in his biblical commentary; rather they have a different meaning. For example:

1. In his Yoseh for Sabbat Pequde, Saadia writes (Tobi, 1980, II, p. 20/101):

ותכעכליאאיחתמסהצאצאיאיםזאצפאיהו
[The people of Israel in their exile] “are thrown like something unwanted, like excrement and feces.” The expression כליאאניאצפאיהו can be expounded through the biblical verse in Ezek 4:12, 15: רָתָיַה בֵּילָעְיָ צַא אָה נָה בֵּילָעְיָ נָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָעָה יָע
which cannot be explained, except by their Arabic meaning. For instance, the emblematic expression for the Torah, נביה יהוה (Yôšèr for Sabbath Peqûdê, Tobi, 1980, II, p. 15/4), has to be explained by the Arabic meaning of the root jiḥ in the 8th conjugation, َّتَجَبَّا. It means, the Torah, which was chosen, preferred, two thousand years before creation. Of course Saadia alludes here to the homiletic interpretation of Prov 8:30: ﷺلا نَّبَيَّة أُولُوتُها إِلَّا مَنْ عُرِفَ تَأْمُّهُ لَعَنَّهُمْ خَلَى، that the Torah was created two thousand years before Genesis. Likewise the word ﷺ (Yôšèr for Sabbath Semînî, Zulay, 1964, p. 151/20), must be explained as “wood,” “timber,” according to the meaning of the Arabic word ḥafîb.

It should be noted that the connection between Hebrew and Arabic later becomes one of the most important features in the development of Hebrew philology and Hebrew literature—poetry and prose—in Medieval times, beginning with the famous risâlah of Yehuda ibn Quraysh (Bargès-Goldberg, 1857).

III. EXEGESIS

Saadia explains biblical matters in an identical manner in his biblical commentary and in his poetry. This is intended mainly with regard to certain components in his Yošèrôt, in which he deals with the contents of weekly biblical sections which have to be read on the Shabbath for which the Yôšèr was composed. Let us look at one case which is interesting from another point of view. There is a disagreement between the Amoraim (Babli, Zebâhîm, 116:1) as to whether Jethro came to the desert of Sinai before the giving of the Law or after it. From what is written in Saadia’s Yôšèr for Shabbath Yitro (Zulay, 1964, p. 171/7) it has to be concluded that it was after the giving of the Law. In contradiction, Abraham ibn Ezra says in his commentary to Exod 18:5 that Saadia’s view is that it was before the giving of the Law. Thus, we might say that the contradiction may exist in Saadia’s writings, as maintained in the criticism against Saadia’s writings by Mebasser Hallevy (Zucker, 1955). But in this specific case we have the opposite view of Abraham Maimonides’ son, who writes clearly that Saadia’s opinion was that Jethro came to the desert of Sinai after the giving of the Law (Wiezenberg, 1958, pp. 294-295; Qâšîh, 1963, p. 62).

Nevertheless, there is a clear distinction, from that point of view, between Saadia’s biblical commentary and his poetry. In his poetry he includes midrashic and Talmudic matters or interprets words according to the writings of the sages, while in his biblical commentary he tends to the philosophical-rationalistic school. Here again we shall discuss two examples:
1. In his commentary to Prov 30:1, Saadia says that Agur Bin Yakeh, Ithiel and Lemoel are names of three sages. Though he mentions the Talmudic interpretation that all of them are emblematic names of King Solomon, he rejects it. Yet in his Yoṣerot he uses the names of Ithiel and Lemoel as emblematic names for King Solomon\(^{35}\) and the name of Agur Bin Yakeh as an emblematic name for all the prophets and sages.\(^{36}\)

2. The verse in Prov 25:14 is translated and interpreted by Saadia in this way: “as when there are clouds and winds but no rain.” In the same way, in his Barki napṣi (a piyyut for the Day of Atonement) he writes (Zulay, 1964, p. 151/14): נָשָׂאָם רֵחַ וְנָגֵשׁ אֲנֵךְ, i.e., “the clouds brought onyx stones.” That use of the expression is based on the Talmudic interpretation in Babli Yoma 75:1. But in Exod 35:27: נָשָׂאָם נְבוֹאָא אֶת אַכְּפֵי חָשָׁם, Saadia’s translation is: נָשָׂאָם נְבוֹאָא אֶת אַכְּפֵי חָשָׁם אֲנֵךְ, “and the noblemen brought onyx stones.”\(^{37}\)

Saadia’s general tendency to keep away from Talmudic and Midrashic interpretations\(^{38}\) became one of the main features of the Hispano-Hebrew school of piyyūṭ, as can be learnt from Abraham Ibn Ezra’s incisive criticism of the paytanic school in his commentary to Eccl 5:1 (see Fleischer, 1975, p. 416).

The admission of philosophical interpretation and philosophical topics in medieval Hebrew poetry was done almost for the first time by Saadia (see Zulay, 1964, pp. 99ff; Tobi, 1980, I, pp. 292–293). That feature was characteristic of Saadia’s poetry as well of his biblical commentary.

To sum up: Saadia’s biblical translation and commentary constitute a very significant source of understanding his poetic works, especially concerning the meaning he attached to the different words. Moreover, in both these literary genres Saadia relied on the exegetic-paytanic linguistic method, i.e., identification of sound-closed roots, overlooking “weak” letters not existing in all conjugations. This is not in accordance with the method he described in his grammar books, where there is some knowledge of three letters in the root, under the influences of Arabic grammar. In contrast, there is less correlation in the exegesis of biblical words, since in poetry he depends more on rabbinical midrashim, reflecting the influence of the Hebrew paytanic tradition; while in biblical commentary he often ignores these rabbinical midrashim. In other words,

36. Yoṣer for Šabbāt depur’ anūṯ (Siddūr, p. 383/15, 1).
37. For the different exegeses compare Midrāṣ haggāḏōl for this verse.
38. On Saadia’s lack of awareness of Halakha, and talmudic and midrashic biblical interpretation, see Zucker (1959, pp. 319–480).
as described, Saadia is much more conservative in poetry than in biblical commentary.

Of course, the variant tendencies are understandable, as Saadia was the first of the Jewish sages to seek to develop Jewish culture and tradition using contemporary vehicles. He thus borrowed from Graeco-Arab culture, while not neglecting traditional approaches.

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