

SAADIA'S BIBLICAL EXEGESIS AND HIS POETIC PRACTICE

by

YOSEF TOBI

University of Haifa, Israel

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.¹ 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.² 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 El'azar 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.³

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), Qāfiḥ (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).

3. See Zulay (1964, pp. 19–40, 99–106); Tobi (1980, I, pp. 298–304). As regards the modern research on the poetic work of Saadia from the time of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* until recently, see Tobi (1980, I, pp. 1–13).

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 *Hā³egrôn*, whose Arabic title is *Kitāb³ Uṣūl al-Ši'r al-^cIbrānī*, that is, *The Book of the Elements of the Hebrew Poetry*.⁴ The other is *Seper Haggālūy* or *Kitāb al-Ṭarīd*, 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 *Hā³egrôn*, 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 Yeširāh* (Qāfiḥ, 1972) and his philosophic work, *Kitāb al-Amānāt wal-^ctiqādāt* (Qāfiḥ, 1970).

7. Like *Kutub al-Luḡah* (Skoss, 1955; Goldenberg, 1973/4).

8. Some passages from Saadia's various genres are discussed in Tobi (1980, I, pp. 229–250).

9. Arab authors were influenced by Aristotle's *Poetics*, only from the time of Saadia's contemporary Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (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 Bišr Maltā ibn Yūnus al-Qunnā³ī (d. 940. see Cantarino, 1975, p. 66).

אלה חוקות השיר וכל החידות, ענף כל גזע, מהם אלפים לרוב, לכל [מ]שכילי עם כי מבקשי יי יבינו כל; חקרו זאת [בני יש]ראל, דרשו דבר יי, שאלו נא לדור ראשון, והכונו נא לספר אבותינו, להבין מליצת הקורש דברי בני אלים [ואמרי הח]זים קדוש ישראל הוא צום ורוחו הכינם: כי המה [יורו]נו את חוקיו, עינינו [ת]פקחנה, אזנינו תפתחנה, ולבבנו יבין [ושב]נו ונרפא לנו: אז נבין דעת אלהינו, ורוח חנו ישפוך עלינו, כי נשיר שירו, ונהללה עזו, נפלאותיו נשיחה עד עולמי עד.¹⁰

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 Qur^ʿān (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 *ʿēn haššēm*, “God’s eye”, or *yad haššēm*, “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, הוא אש אוכלה הוא [Deut

10. Allony (1969, pp. 160–162). Saadia includes similar words in relation to the knowledge of biblical expressions and idioms in the Arabic introduction (*op. cit.*, pp. 150–153).

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 Yeširāh* (see Qāfiḥ, 1972, introduction, pp. 25–26; 2:3, p. 80; 4:1, p. 106), and *Kitāb al-Amānāt wal-ʿItiqādāt* (see Qāfiḥ, 1970, pp. 96–102), and that this approach is connected with his *muʿtazilī* views (see Zucker, 1955/6; Zucker, 1959, pp. 229–236; Goldziher, 1951, pp. 78–81). This method in the biblical commentary, which is called *taʿwīl*, as a parallelism to a certain method in Islamic commentary of the Qur^ʿān, 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-Marāqib*, (Nemoy, 1940–1943, Vol. II, part 4, chapter (*bāb*) 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.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 Saadia's poetry. On the contrary, they are more frequent in his new poetic genres, mainly in the *Tôkēhā* "im lepi bohorkā" and in his *Baqqāšôt*. In the *Yôšerôt*, the metaphoric expressions are proportionally numerous in the lyric components, that is, the *Me'ôrôt*, the *Ḥavā*, the *Haššēm malkēnū* and the *Ve'ad 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.¹³ However, it seems necessary to say something about his *Kitāb al-Taṛīd*. 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, שמע בני מוסר אביך ואל חטש תורה אמך, 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 *Tôrā* only to the *mother*, but rather they both (*Mūsār* and *Tôrā*) are attached to each one of them."

In his commentary to *Sēper Yeširāh* (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

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 Qāfiḥ (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 Qāfiḥ, 1970, pp. 219–220; p. 328). I am indebted to Prof. Bernard Septimus of Harvard University for the English translation.

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.¹⁴

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 Middôt* (32 Measures) written by Rav Shemu²el ben Hofni, one of the last Geonim of Sura, who relied much on Saadia's biblical commentary.¹⁵ 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*.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ These rational motives are manifestly expressed

14. For details see Tobi (1980, I, pp. 271–272).

15. See Zucker (1954); Zucker (1959, pp. 237–266); Greenbaum (1979, pp. 93–95, 8).

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, 1973/4, 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).

17. See Kahle (1959, pp. 75–91); Dotan (1967) and (1971, pp. 1401–1482, especially pp. 1461–1466); Allony (1975, pp. 231–265).

18. See Allony (1969, pp. 32–51, 85–89, 103–115); Goldenberg (1973/4) and (1979, pp. 83–99).

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 *Hā'egrōn* had been carried out by Saadia in Egypt, before he reached Erez-Israel and Babylonia, the strongholds of the Karaites.

in *Seper hā³egrôn*,²⁰ *Kutub al-lugah*²¹ 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 multilateral 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 *dāgēš*, 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 Labraṭ—because of this, in a special book *Seper tešūḥôt Dunaš Hallevi*

20. See Allony (1969, the Hebrew Introduction, pp. 158–159/40–44, and the Arabic Introduction, pp. 150–152/33–39).

21. One can gather it from its two other titles, *Sēper šahôt lešon haqqōdeš* and *Kitāb Fašīh Luḡat al-ʿIbrāniyyīn* (*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 *Baqqāšōt* (*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).

24. Allony (1969, pp. 45–51), suggests the first possibility. Goldenberg (1973/4, pp. 275–284) criticizes him and prefers the second one. See also Goldenberg (1971, pp. 1609–1616). For Allony’s reaction see Allony (1974, pp. 202–224). See also Tobi (1980, I, pp. 242–243).

ben Labraṭ 'al rabby Se'adyā Gā'ōn (ed. Schröter, 1866). Let us see some examples:

1. The word *וְהִתְאַשְׁשׁוּ* (Isa 46:8) is translated by Saadia, *וַאֲיִסוּ* "to despair of." In other words, he explains that word not by its normative triliteral root (*אשש*) but by its biliteral root (*אש*), which is the same for *יאש* because the first letter in *יאש*, the *yod*, is weak and is omitted. Dunash, in his criticism, writes:²⁵

And he (Saadia) explained *וְהִתְאַשְׁשׁוּ* by the meaning of *יאוש*, making a serious mistake. That is because the meaning of the Hebrew word *יאוש* comes from the triliteral root from which in its verbal form, the first letter, the *yod*, is (sometimes) omitted. From that verb it was said (Ecc 2:20), *וְסִבּוֹתַי אֲנִי לִיאֵשׁ אֶת לִבִּי*. If he (Isaiah) would have wanted to say it with the meaning of *יאוש* he would have had to say *וְהִתְיאֲשׁוּ*. Therefore, I explained it by meaning of *איִשׁוּשׁ*, i.e., "they strengthened in God's piety."

2. The word *מְאִירוֹת* (Isa 27:11), is translated by Saadia into *תַּגְנוּיָהָא*, i.e., "will pick or gather her." It means that Saadia explained the word by the meaning of the root *ארה*, not by that of the root *אור*, as would be expected, had he used the normative triliteral root. That, of course, is because Saadia believed that the roots *אור* and *ארה* may have the same meaning, as they are basically the same root—*אר*. The second letter *ו* in *אור*, and the third letter *ה* in *ארה* 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: *וַיִּשַׁע ה' אֶל הַכֵּל וְאֶל מִנְחָתוֹ*.²⁷

I have translated *וַיִּשַׁע* as *קבול*, "acceptance," because those two letters *שע*, in all places in which they are used, have in our language (Hebrew) seven meanings: (a) salvation and deliverance, like *עַל אֲלֵהִים יִשְׁעֵי* (Ps 62:8), *אֲרָאֲנוּ כִּי־שַׁע אֲלֵהִים* (*Ibid.* 50:23); (b) acceptance and willingness, *וַיִּשַׁע ה'*; (c) neglect and disregard, *אֶל הַכֵּל וְאֶל מִנְחָתוֹ* (Job 14:6); (d) applying to *וַיִּשַׁע ה' אֶל עוֹשֵׂהוּ* (Isa 13:7); (e) occupying oneself,

25. Schröter (1866, pp. 16–17, n. 51). See also Ibn Ezra (1895, p. 26, n. 48).

26. Schröter (1866, pp. 1–2, n. 3). For Ibn Ezra's defence see Ibn Ezra (1895, p. 14, n. 3).

27. A passage from a fragment edited by Qāfih (1963, p. 171), in Hebrew translation.

וְאֵל יִשְׁעוּ בְּדַבְרֵי שְׂקָר (Exod 5:9); (f) going up, מִקְרָקֶר קָר וְשׁוֹעַ אֶל הַהָר (Isa 22:5); (g) generosity, וְלִכְיִלִּי לֹא יֵאָמֵר שׁוֹעַ (Ibid. 32:5). Every word which is similar to one of those (seven meanings) has to be joined to it. But פְּקוּדָה (Ezek 23:23) and שׁוֹעַ (Ezek 23:23) are names of sites in Babylonia, סוּרָא, אֶלְגִּידִּים, בִּטְרִיָּה.

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.²⁸ 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* (פ"נ) or end with *alef* (ל"א) or *he* (ל"ה) in the same manner as roots whose second letter is *vav* (ע"ו). Thus he writes א) for the past tense: צוֹתָהּ instead of צוּתָהּ (Zulay, 1964, p. 187); פְּצַתָּהּ instead of פְּצִיתָהּ,²⁹ and עָשָׂה instead of עָשָׂה;³⁰ ב) for the verbal noun with the accusativial suffixes: לְרַצּוֹ instead of לְרִצּוֹתוֹ (*Siddûr*, p. 202/234; Levine, 1943, p. 508/8) and לְהַתְעוֹ instead of לְהַתְעוֹתוֹ (Schirmann, 1966, p. 41/63); c) and for the imperative: בִּיטָהּ instead of הִבִּיטָהּ (*Siddûr*, p. 331/1; 333/11) and טִיף instead of הִטִּיף (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, *he* 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 ע"ו.

Saadia was aware of this manner, which was conventional in the *Piyyûf*, but he did not explain it with the trilateral root, as can be concluded from his commentary to *Seper Yeşîrâh*:

וְצָר בּוֹ The proposed meaning of that is וְצָר בּוֹ. However, he (the author) omitted the *yod* like all the omissions in the Bible, as it is said נַחְנוּ וְנִעְבֹּר (Num 32:32, instead of אֲנַחְנוּ); and in the Mishna it is said וְכַשְׁהוּיָק (Mishnah, *Baba Qamma*, 1:1); and in the poetic compositions of the poets it is said וְרָךְ, instead of וְרָךְ; עָץ instead of עָצָה; and וְרָשׁ instead of וְרָשׁ; and so there is much which is like that (Qāfiḥ, 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 *Seper*

28. See Zulay (1943, pp. 217–223); *idem* (1946, pp. 161–248); *idem* (1964, pp. 17–18); Spiegel (1963, pp. 397–400); Mirsky (1968, pp. 129–139); Fleischer (1975, pp. 269–271).

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

30. *Siddûr*, p. 302/8; *Ibid.*, p. 412/67; Zulay (1964, p. 87/65); Tobi (1980, II, p. 103/5).

Yeşîrâh, he compared those cases which were mentioned above to the manner in Arabic of saying **יא צאחב** instead of **יא צאחב**, and **פאן יך** instead of **פאן יכן** (Qāfiḥ, 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 **שרית** instead of **שאריית** and **קורים** instead of **קוראים** (Skoss, 1955, p. 8).

Another basis of Saadia's linguistic method is the analogy (היקש-*qiyās*). 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 Baṣrah 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 (Shin'ar, 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 **רְחָמִים** (*Siddūr*, p. 54/11–12) and **חֲלָמִישִׁים** (Zulay, 1964, p. 128/14), while in the Bible only the singular forms exist **רַחֵם** and **חֲלָמִישׁ**. Conversely, he uses the singular forms **אוֹתִיָּהּ** (Levine, 1943, p. 520/4) and **אֲשְׁמֹר** (*Siddūr*, p. 411/50), while in the Bible there are only the plural forms **אוֹתֵינוּ** and **אֲשְׁמֹרוּ**. He derives new verbs from given nouns: **לְהֶאֱמִית** (*Siddūr*, p. 06/312) from **אֶמֶת**; **טִינֹר** (*Siddūr*, p. 208/364) from **טִנְיָא** (Aramaic!); and **יִצְנֹר** (*Siddūr*, p. 285/106) from **צִינֹר**; and nouns from verbs: **לְעֵסוֹת** (*Siddūr*, p. 241/486) from **לָעַס**; **לְהֶלְעִיט** (*Siddūr*, p. 411/46) from **לָעַט**; **מְחַלְהָמִים** (*Siddūr*, p. 325/21) from **חָלַם**. He does the same thing with a noun from a noun (**טוֹטְרָה** [Zulay, 1964, p. 151/17] from **טוֹטְפָה**), nouns and verbs from particles (**טִירוֹם** [Zulay, 1964, p. 175/9] from **טָרַם** and **הִמְאָר** [Zulay, 1964, 91/156] from **מָאֵר**), and so on. Furthermore, he also uses the *qiyās* for widening the semantic fields of words, as when he uses the word **רְאָוָה** (Harkavy, 1892, p. 181/16–17) with the meaning of **עִיּוֹן**

31. See Zulay (1964, pp. 19ff); Fleischer (1965, pp. 392ff); Goldenberg (1973/4, pp. 129ff).

(consideration), because seeing is done by עֵינַיִם (eyes). The conventional meaning of רָאוּהָ is “display,” as is well known.

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

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

We should not derive a word from קָרַשׁ and say קָרַשְׁדוּנָה, as we should not derive a word from רָגַל and say רָגַלְדוּנָה. 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 עָשׂ (Job 4:19) and עִישׁ (Job 38:32), two nouns for one thing; we should not derive from it and say חֵשׁ (instead of חֵישׁ), like עָשׂ . . . and we should not say כְּגַד שֵׁשׁ instead of כְּגַד שֵׁשׁ because שֵׁישׁ is named שֵׁשׁ, as it is said עַל רִצְפַת בְּהַט וְשֵׁשׁ (Esth 1:6).

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

. . . I have derived the word תְּחַבְּהַט from what it was said (Esth 1:6) עַל רִצְפַת בְּהַט וְשֵׁשׁ (a verb from noun) . . . and מְלַחַח from (Isa 51:6) וְנִמְלַחְחוּ (Qal, active conjugation from *nip^cal*, passive conjugation) . . . and I have derived לַעֲנֵן from לַעֲנָה, because it is the custom to make the masculine form from the feminine form. And I have made תַּגְּמֹל instead of גְּמֹל, strengthening the word by the ת (in the Arabic origin: בַּחפְכִּיִם אֲלָחֻ, 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 Dunash³² 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 *Yôṣēr* of Shabbath *Miqqēš* which coincides with *Roš-Hōdeš* and *Hanukkāh*, Saadia writes (Tobi, 1980, II, p. 1/11) הוֹתֵר אֶסְרִי בְּלֹא, וְצוּעֵינִי. צוּעֵינִי is an emblematic name for the people of Israel; לֹא צוּעֵינִי means Egypt, as צוּעֵינִי is an emblematic name for the Egyptians, because צוּעַן was a site in Egypt. All that is understandable in accordance with paytanic manner. The difficulty is in the first word הוֹתֵר: being an imperative derivation from the root יתר, 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 הוֹתֵר or another derivation of its root יתר in the Bible, we will find the same word in Ps 79:11: הוֹתֵר בְּנֵי תְמוּתָהּ. Saadia's translation for that Biblical verse is, אַטְלַק דְּרִי אֶלְאִמָּתָה, "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 הוֹתֵר as being a derivation from the root הִתִּיר, "open chains," and not from the real root, according to the normative grammar, יתר. For him, both are equal, because the two constant letters תר are common.

2. In the *Yôṣēr* of Šabbāt *Peqūdē*, Saadia writes (Tobi, 1980, II, p. 19/83–84):

קִטְוֵן אַחִים תַּתָּה רֹאשׁ נְגִיד לְכַרְךָ וְלִיקוּב
רְזִם. וַיִּדַּר נְדָרִים לְמִצּוֹא מְנוּחַ מִקְּוֹב

32. Schröter (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 *Hoša' nôt* (*Siddūr*, p. 242/11) the word נד 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 *Hoša' nôt* is unquestionable. For Dunash's criticism concerning Saadia's translation, see Schröter (1866, p. 5, n. 14); for Ibn Ezra's defence see Ibn Ezra (1895, p. 17, n. 13).

אָחִים קטון אָחִים 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, רָזַם (?); and vowed to be saved from death. The difficulty lies in the word רָזַם. But if we look at the Bible, we find the unique Biblical word, from the same root רָזַם, in Job 15:12: וּמָה יִרְזַמֶּנּוּ עֵינֶיךָ. Saadia's translation is: וּמָה תוֹלָאָה עֵינַיךְ i.e., that which your eyes governed, or in the real meaning, your broad and profound knowledge. So, Saadia explains the root רָזַם from the noun רוֹזֵן, "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 *Yôšēr* for Šabbāt *Pequdē*, Saadia writes (Tobi, 1980, II, p. 20/101):

זֶרְקוּ כְּכֹלִי אֵין חֶפֶץ כְּצֹאֲצָאִים וְהַצְפִּיעוּת

[The people of Israel in their exile] "are thrown like something unwanted, like excrement and feces." The expression וְהַצְפִּיעוּת כְּצֹאֲצָאִים can be expounded through the biblical verse in Ezek 4:12, 15: וְהָיָא בְּגִלְלֵי צֹאֲת . . . נִתְחִי לָךְ אֶת צְפִיעֵי הַבְּקָר תַּחַת גִּלְלֵי הָאָדָם. But the literary origin of the expression is in Isa 22:23: וְתָלוּ עָלָיו כָּל כְּבוֹד בֵּית אָבִיו. The literary origin of the expression is in Isa 22:23: וְתָלוּ עָלָיו כָּל כְּבוֹד בֵּית אָבִיו, where it is translated and explained by Saadia as "offspring and descendants."

2. In his *Gešem* (a kind of *piyyut*), Saadia writes (Zulay, 1964, p. 84/8): צְקוּנִי שָׂא עִת קְדָקוֹד לְשׁוּחַ "(God) receive my prayer, while I am bowing my head". The word צְקוּנִי is explained as a noun, according to the paytanic interpretation of the word, which is taken from Isa 26:16: ה' בָּצַר פְּקָדוֹךָ צְקוּן לְחַשׁ מוֹסְרֶךָ לְמוֹ. But in his biblical translation and commentary Saadia explained that word as a verb and not as a noun: the past form of the root יָצַק for the third person, plural—"they poured," or in the real meaning, "they prayed."

Another interesting feature of Saadia's linguistic method is his conscious tendency to connect Hebrew roots and their meanings with etymologically similar Arabic roots and their meanings. Many scholars who have dealt with Saadia's Arabic translation have noted that he frequently used Arabic words, the roots of which are similar to the Hebrew words.³⁴ In the same way, we find in his poetry some words

34. See Malter (1921, p. 145 and n. 315); Allony (1969, pp. 56–57); Zucker (1959, p. 267).

which cannot be explained, except by their Arabic meaning. For instance, the emblematic expression for the Torah, גְבוּרַת יוֹמִים (*Yôṣēr* for Šabbāt *Peqûdē*, Tobi, 1980, II, p. 15/4), has to be explained by the Arabic meaning of the root *jby* in the 8th conjugation, ²*ijtabā*. 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: וְאֵדְהִי אֶצְלוֹ אִמּוֹן וְאֵדְהִי שְׁעֵשׂוּעִים יוֹם יוֹם מִשְׁחַקָּתָ לְפָנָיו כְּכֹל עֵת, that the Torah was created two thousand years before Genesis. Likewise the word חֲטָב (*Yôṣēr* for Šabbāt *Šemîni*, Zulay, 1964, p. 151/20), must be explained as “wood,” “timber,” according to the meaning of the Arabic word *ḥaṭab*.

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 *risālah* of Yehuda ibn Quraysh (Bargés-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 *Yôṣērôt*, in which he deals with the contents of weekly biblical sections which have to be read on the Shabbath for which the *Yôṣēr* was composed. Let us look at one case which is interesting from another point of view. There is a disagreement between the Amoraim (Babli, *Zebāhîm*, 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 *Yôṣēr* 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; Qāfiḥ, 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 *Yosefot* he uses the names of Ithiel and Lemoel as emblematic names for King Solomon³⁵ 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 **נְשִׂאִים וְרוּחַ וְגֶשֶׁם אֵין** 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 *Barkī nap̄ši* (a *piyyut* for the Day of Atonement) he writes (Zulay, 1964, p. 151/14): **נְשִׂאִים וְרוּחַ הִבְיִאוּ אֲבָנֵי שֹהֶם**, 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: **וַהֲנִשְׂאִים הִבְיִאוּ אֶת אֲבָנֵי הַשֹּׁהַם**, Saadia’s translation is: **וְאֵלֵאשְׂרָאֵף** and the noblemen brought onyx stones.”³⁷

Saadia’s general tendency to keep away from Talmudic and Midrashic interpretations³⁸ became one of the main features of the Hispano-Hebrew school of *piyyût*, 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,

35. *Yôšēr* for Šabbāt *Vayyaq̄hēl* (Tobi, 1980, II, pp. 11/54, 12/68).

36. *Yôšēr* for Šabbāt *depur’ anûṭā* (*Siddûr*, p. 383/15, 1).

37. For the different exegeses compare *Midrāš haggādōl* 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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