

## SUPPLEMENT

### הפיוטים של ארבע הפרשיות

*Why are we allowed to interrupt the first three ברכות of שמונה עשרה during הזרת פיוטים with the recital of דו"ש"ן?*

A. Orynowski, on page 34 of his book: תולדות השירה העברית בימי הבינים gives us some historical background on this issue:

הגאונים הראשונים הביטו בעין זעומה על הפיוטים וסרבו לתת להם מקום בתפלות הצבור, כי חשבו את אמירתם להפסק וערבוב סדר התפלה הנהוג ועומד מדורות קדמונים. בסדורו של רב עמרם גאון חסרים עדיין הפיוטים לגמרי, אולם הוא כבר התיר את אמירתם מרשות ברבים.

"ונראים הדברים-אומר החכם ראה"ו'- כי מה שהתיר הגאונים נגד שורת הדין לספח אל התפלה את הפיוטים החדשים, היה זה כהפסת דעת העם, אשר היה כרוך אחרי הפיוטים, אשר הלבישו דברי אגדה בלבוש מליצה ושיר. המדקדקים במצות התפלה, אשר היה לבם נוקפם על הדבר הזה, שאלו שאלותיהם מן הגאונים, אם מותר לעשות כן, ויהי כראותם, כי לא הניאו אותם הגאונים לאומרם ואף הסכימו לספחם אל התפלה, אז מעט מעט היה הדבר למנהג מוסכם. . . ועוד סיבה אחרת היתה נגד פני הגאונים, כי ראו בפיוטים דבר שהזמן דורש אותו. זמנם היה זמן פריחת הקראים עויני הרבנים עד מות והתלמוד עד להשחית, והכשילו רבים בתורה אף מן הדבקים בתורת הקבלה, וכן ראינו מתוך כתבי תשובותיהם, כי היו אנשים גם בין הרבניים, אשר היו ממאנים לאמר דברי משנה ותלמוד בהגדה של פסח; ועל כן היו פיוטי הקליר דרושים לחפציהם, כי הם היו פיוטים ממין מיוחד, כי כולם היו נוסדים על מדרשי הרבנים, שנאוי הקראים, והיתה כונתם בהיתר אמירתם עם תפילות הצבור לעשות פרסום נגד הקראים. וכן אמר הגאון רב נוטרונאי, שהרשות נתונה לאמר דברי פיוטים, משום שמרבים בהם דברי אגדה, ומכיון שהוקדשו מסבה צודקת, הוקדשו גם בדורות הבאים, ביחוד באשכנז וצרפת ( "דור דור ודורשיו", ה"ד).

Why were the Karaites such a threat to Rabbinic Judaism? To answer that question I am providing two chapters from the book: *THE JEWS OF IRAQ 3000 Years of History and Culture* by Nissim Rejwan, Professor at Hebrew University:

1. Rabbi Isaac Hirsch Weiss (1815-1905)-Talmudist, born in Austria. Known for writing the book: דור דור ודורשיו; a history of Halacha.

## CHAPTER 14

**Messianism and Karaism: Rabbinic Judaism Challenged**

Speculation, the probing of things secret and mysterious, mysticism, and finally messianism -- these are but different though widely and radically divergent degrees of the same phenomenon. The Jews of Babylonia, before as well as after the close of the Talmudic era, were constantly exposed to such influences, and though they were fully occupied with legal deductions and biblical and mishnaic interpretation, they could not withstand the lure of what was taking place in their midst and on their borders. Though they tended clearly to disdain probing into things secret, to try to lift the veil from 'what is above and what is below, what was in the beginning, and what will be in the end', some of their best intellects showed clear signs of restlessness. The common people were the first to come in contact and be affected by the crude superstitions of Chaldaic lore and custom, but even the learned could not entirely shake these off. This was true also of the wild speculation then rife among the sects on the borders of Christianity, and later of the no less intensive, almost feverish religious, juridical and theological disputations which plagued Islam at a fairly early stage.

The very soil was impregnated with a succession of religious systems in which, as in Manicheism, mystic notions were blended, for the elect to take hold on. Jewish mysticism in the times of the Gaons revelled in the contemplation of the divine majesty, which took on grossly anthropomorphic forms. Those of sober mind were hostile to the fantastic writings of this genre. Nevertheless the boast of mystic profundity and of intimate intercourse with the prophet Elijah secured in 814 the headship of the school at Pumbeditha to the aged Joseph ben Abba. His successor Abraham ben Sherira (816-28) was reputed to be able to prognosticate events from the soft murmur of palms on calm days. (Max Margolis and Alexander Marx, *History of the Jewish People*, p. 258).

From this to the claims of the composers of apocalypses and even to those of the false Messiahs the distance was not so great. Indeed, in the *Geonic* period many new apocalypses were composed, similar in form and style to those of the Maccabean and Roman periods. Dealing with eschatology (the doctrine of the last things) and comprising such works as the *Book of Jubilees*, the *Book of Enoch*, the *Book of Zerubbabel* and others, apocalypses were written mostly anonymously by a class of visionaries who directed their hopes to a future in which the present temporal and religious world order would give way to a supernatural and eternal world brought about by divine intervention through some universal catastrophe. In these booklets, the eschatological future is always depicted as being connected with the coming of a heavenly Messiah, an event which is invariably claimed to occur just a little ahead of the date of writing. To this consummation, man cannot contribute it any way; no action of his can serve either to speed it on or to retard it. The event has been predetermined from the beginning in the counsels of God, and all that the faithful are

bidden to do is to have patience and trustingly await the miraculous deliverance and the reward that is theirs.

The *Geonic* period also witnessed the revival of religious mysticism, a phenomenon well known to Islam in its post-conquest days, and which took the form of a systematic effort to experience the immediate presence of God. The phenomenon was not quite new to Judaism; it was known in Talmudic times though in a different form -- the mysteries of creation, the lore of God's chariot-throne. But the rabbis regarded these matters as deep secrets into which only the most soberly pious could be initiated. With the passage of time, and starting with the eighth century, what used to be committed as secret doctrine to a privileged few became the manifest pursuit of the many. The mystics now developed a regular technique of contemplation, and they recorded their inner experience in documents which furnished detailed descriptions of the progress of the soul through various levels of the spiritual world until it arrives at the very chariot of God and knows the unspeakable bliss of the Divine Presence.

What distinguishes Jewish mysticism from its Muslim and Christian counterparts is a clear tendency towards messianism. This form of mysticism sees the whole of creation engaged in a struggle for redemption from evil and seeks salvation in the establishment of the universal kingdom of God. With the spread of this messianic streak, people's souls became accessible to anyone who appealed to their imagination. And these were not in short supply, especially in times of hardship. There were those who claimed to 'calculate the end' by deftly manipulating the obscure numbers in the Book of Daniel.

In the more distant provinces of Persia, in the eighth century, Jewish masses were stirred by a false Messiah who came from Ispahan and who held out the promise of restoration of the Holy Land and bade his followers abandon their possessions. This pretender to the messianic dignity, who was a tailor by profession nicknamed Abu Issa, managed to gather an army of Jews, who though poorly equipped trusted in their leader's miraculous powers and started their march to Palestine. One version of Abu Issa's story has it that, faced with an army of non-Jews, he roped his followers off and announced that the enemy could not get inside the circle. The miracle duly worked, we are told; but in a battle which was finally fought with their enemies the Jews were badly beaten and scattered, while Abu Issa chose to die by his own hands.

A disciple of Abu Issa's, Yudghan of Hamadan, was not daunted; he proclaimed himself a prophet and a forerunner of the Messiah, and some of his Jewish followers acclaimed him as 'shepherd' (*al-Ra'i*). According to one report, he was a shepherd by profession. In the end Yudghan was also defeated and killed. It is noteworthy that most of these pretenders, and their followers, used to make light of various rabbinic precepts, some of them even ruling that the observance of the Sabbath and festivals was not obligatory in exile. They were also generally given to ascetic exercises and abstained from meat and wine and increased the number of daily prayers.

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Common to all these movements was one form or another of anti-Talmudism, and opposition to the line of traditional development which the Talmud connoted. But this undercurrent of anti-rabbinism and anti-Talmudism was itself not new. Already during the Amoraic period there were some murmurings against the sages and their work of interpretation and preservation of the Oral Law. 'What good have the sages ever done us?' was a complaint heard in certain quarters long before the completion of the Talmud. Exactly what the resentment was directed against is not clear, for -- as we are told in *Sanhedrin* 99b f. -- even as the complainers and critics disapproved of the law which forbade the eating of ravens, so they objected to the permission to eat dove's meat.

These anti-rabbinic tendencies, which characterized all the apocalyptic, mystical and messianic movements, failed to leave a lasting mark or in any serious way affect the authority of the Talmud -with the exception of one, Karaism, with which we will deal in this chapter and which managed to survive up till our own day though its effects on Jewish life and Jewish theology remains at best marginal. Rabbinic Judaism, in short, managed to weather one crisis after another, starting with the rise of various messianic pretenders before the Muslim conquest and continuing with an assortment of sectarian movements which emerged under the impact of Muhammed's successful challenge to the existing political and religious order. Salo Baron remarks on the relative paucity and historical insignificance of these movements, calling the phenomenon 'amazing'. He explains: 'With all the research hitherto done by modern scholars, intensely interested in any form of Jewish heterodoxy as well as in yearnings for the return to Zion, only about half a dozen non-Karaite heresiarchs and less than a score of messianic pretenders, including all the former, are known to us by name in the long and crucial period of seven centuries following the religious consolidation of the Babylonian Talmud.'

During this 700-year period, one of the main tasks of the Babylonian Jewish leadership was to guard important Jewish principles and precepts from outside influences, especially those emanating from Persia. For the truth is that, along with whatever indigenous echoes excited their imagination, the Jews of Babylonia and of Persia were exposed to ample stimulus from a variety of non-Jewish sects, particularly from the far-off provinces of Persia.

The old Persian Empire [writes one modern Jewish historian] had for centuries been the battle ground of numerous conflicting cultures. The ancient religion of Babylon still exerted its influence, surviving in various sects, such as the Mandeans, and transmitted through other channels. The religion of Zoroaster had reigned supreme for centuries. Persia was the home of Manicheism which, despite all persecutions, still had numerous adherents and spread its powerful influence far beyond the boundaries of Persia. The tenets of Mazdak outlived the destruction of its believers and continued as an important spiritual factor. The Neoplatonic and Gnostic doctrines, which very early asserted their influence through the medium of the above sects, had been, as it were, personally introduced in the middle of the sixth century through the exiled philosophies of Byzantium. Among these agencies must also be

counted the ancient paganism or the so-called Sabeism of Harran, whose adherents were also largely represented in Mesopotamia, not to speak of the great Jewish and Christian centres and perhaps Hindu influences. All these variegated elements, often in a modified or mutilated form, found expression in a motley multitude of Shiitic sects with a weird mixture of all possible doctrines and practices which were artificially harmonized with the official religion by means of allegorical interpretation.

It was this Shiite deposit, the writer goes on to demonstrate, that assisted the political anarchy of the eighth century; it also found receptive temperaments in certain contemporary Jewish circles.

The various messianic movements, and the variety of signs of active dissent which surfaced in Mesopotamia and Persia from the seventh century onwards, were based on a strange mixture of ideas and motives. There was, to start with, a desire among a fairly large number of Jews to throw off the yoke of their new Muslim masters -- a desire which was somehow bound up with rebelliousness against the Jewish establishment of the day. Secondly, one of the things advocated by the messianic pretenders was a relaxation of the laws of *kasbrut* (dietary regulations) as well as some other basic changes and revisions of what was then accepted as normative Judaism. Among these was the call to increase to seven the number of times a man must pray every day, and even the recognition of both Muhammed and Jesus as prophets.

These were rather radical departures from Judaism and some Jewish scholars find it astonishing that they should have found supporters among the common people. Solomon Grayzel has written:

It merely proves that the influence of ideas current among non-Jews was great among the Jews, and that the power of the Talmud was still weak, since the Geonim had not yet gained control over the spiritual life of the people. Thus the freedom of movement and of contact with their neighbours had served to weaken Jewish unity as long as Jewish knowledge and faith had not counterbalanced the influence of the environment. For generations after the downfall of the false prophets, a considerable number of Jews still believed in them and their principles. In the course of time their followers were either absorbed by the Muhammedans or returned to the Jewish fold. The net result was a loss in Jewish numbers.

But the loss could not have been great quantitatively nor, with the exception of Karaism, was the rift with these sects and movements either long or lasting. As Shahrastani, a contemporary Muslim student of religion, remarks after listing the names and surveying the teachings of a number of Jewish heterodoxies, all Jews, regardless of their sectarian divergence, believed in monotheism, the uniqueness of the Torah revealed to Moses, the observance of the Sabbath, and the coming of the Messiah, 'the shining star, which will illumine the world'.

The *Gaonate*, whose origins can be traced back to the last two decades of the sixth century but which some historians insist on dating only from the year AD 657, no doubt constitutes the most significant development in Jewish history and in the life of Jews world-wide. It is no wonder, therefore, that historians speak of this episode as 'the *Geonic* Period' in Jewish history -- a span of just less than five centuries generally fixed as starting with the appointment of the first *Gaon*, the head of the academy of Pumbeditha, in 589 and as ending in 1038 With the death of the last of the *Geonim*, Rab Hai *Gaon*. During this period, calculations show that forty-nine *Geonim* headed the Pumbeditha academy, and forty-two headed the academy of Sura. After Hai's death, the two institutions of *Gaonate* and Exilarchate were combined in the person of the Exilarch, with the result that neither office ever again managed to maintain more than a semblance of its past glory. The man who assumed the enhanced function after Hai's death was the scholarly Exilarch Hezekiah, who perished shortly afterwards as a result of a wave of anti-Jewish persecutions.

Throughout its years of existence the *Gaonate* sustained a number of grave setbacks, beginning as early as the year 767 with the outbreak of the Karaite schism and continuing with periodic fierce clashes between the two supreme authorities, the *Geonim* and the Exilarchs. In order to understand better the Karaite movement, we must try and view it in the context of Jewish religious history as a whole.

In the evolution of Jewish religious thought there had always been two main trends. One of these regarded Judaism as a living, organic tradition, continually growing and developing yet in essence always the same, and represented in every age by its rabbis and teachers; the other viewed it as fixed and immutable, with its final expression in a specific code of law. During the period of the second Temple these two trends were represented respectively by the Pharisees and Sadducees. The former were distinguished from the latter by their adherence to the Oral Law, and were noted for their skilful interpretation of the Torah. The Pharisaic line was continued by the rabbis of the Talmudic period and henceforth by their successors, who together form the tradition of Rabbinic Judaism. It is thus accurate to say that the entire subsequent development of Judaism bears the indelible stamp of Pharisaism.

The other leading trend in Judaism, whose proponents were known as Sadducees, derives its name from the priestly house of Zadok, the ancestors of the Hasmoneans, and is thus connected both with the Hasmonean dynasty and with the Temple hierarchy. The Sadducees' distinctive doctrine was a rejection of the Oral Law and consequently of the work of the rabbis. They emerged at a time in which the contrast became sharply polarized between the non-priestly, popular, rabbinic type of Judaism developed since the days of Ezra and which was close to the life of peasants and artisans, and the more conservative, almost fundamentalist tendencies of a powerful and wealthy priesthood, whose interests coincided with those of the aristocracy and the landowners. It was only natural, therefore, that with the destruction of the Temple the Sadducees should have lost both their ideological and social centre and lapsed into near oblivion.

Although they were virtually finished as a distinct sect in Judaism, the trends which the Sadducees represented continued. Although dormant throughout the Talmudic period, this trend was none the less awaiting an opportune moment to rise to the surface. This was duly furnished by the world-shattering events which had been taking place since the middle of the seventh century with the creation of the Muslim Empire and the fierce controversies that erupted among peoples and sects living in such proximity to the then established centre of Jewish life -- Babylonia. These heated controversies were strangely analogous to those that had raged among the Jews throughout their history. They concerned such topics as the genuineness of certain traditions allegedly going back to Muhammed, and they also touched upon the fundamentals of the relation between tradition and Scripture. Watching their close neighbours debating fine points of difference about a *hadith* (a saying reported to have been uttered by Muhammed) and travelling hundreds of miles to verify its authenticity generations after their prophet's death, many an enquiring Jew started wondering about their own Oral Law and whether some of its traditions were not equally doubtful and even spurious. The time, so it seemed to some members of the growing Jewish intelligentsia, was ripe for doctrinal readjustments and for throwing off the shackles of a confining tradition, whose divine origin they now seriously questioned.

It was at this juncture that a personality appeared on the scene that was to sound the keynote for breaking away from tradition and going back to 'fundamentals', namely the Scriptures themselves. According to one tradition emanating from rabbinic sources, the occasion for the rebellion against the rabbis and all they stood for was a dispute over a succession to the office of the Exilarch in the year 767. The story goes that one 'Anan ben David was in the line of succession to the Exilarchate. The two *Geonim*, however, had reason to suspect his orthodoxy, as he had lived for some time in Persia, the centre of a number of Jewish heresies. They therefore chose as the new Exilarch 'Anan's younger brother Hananiah, a man of inferior scholarship and apparently a far more pliable person. The election, as was customary, was duly confirmed by the caliph and Hananiah was installed as Exilarch in 767. It was 'Anan's refusal to accept this decision that set in motion a chain of developments which resulted in the rise of Karaism, a considerable force in Jewish life and thought which persisted for a number of centuries and spread to every important part of the Jewish world.

The following rabbinic account of the rise of Karaism is curiously preserved for us in a book written by a Karaite, Elijah ben Abraham, and entitled *The Rift between the Karaites and the Rabbanites (Hilluk ha-Karaim veba-Rabbanim)*. It is possible that the account is an extract from Rab Saadia Gaon's lost Arabic polemic, *Refutation of 'Anan*, written about the year 905, when Saadia was still in Egypt and but twenty-three years of age. Generally speaking, the facts given here are accurate, and the tone itself seems to justify the opinion that the Karaites and the rabbinites -- like the Protestants and the Catholics in a later period -- 'disliked each other so cordially that it was difficult for, either side to write dispassionately'. (Jacob R. Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World*, pp. 233-4.)

'Anan [so the rabbinite's account goes] had a younger brother whose name was Hananiah. Now 'Anan was greater than his brother in knowledge of the Torah and older in years, but the schools of the generation were not willing to set him as Exilarch because of the unmitigated unruliness and irreverence which characterized him. The sages, therefore, turned to Hananiah his brother because of his great modesty, shyness, and fear of God, and made him Exilarch. Then 'Anan became incensed, he and every scoundrel that was left of the Sadducean and Boethusian breed, and he secretly determined to make a schism in Judaism because he feared the government of the day. These heretics appointed 'Anan as their Exilarch.

This matter was made known to the authorities on a Sunday and it was ordered that he be put into jail until Friday, when he was to be hanged. There, in the prison, he met a certain Muslim scholar who was also imprisoned and was to be hanged also on that very Friday, for he had rebelled against the religion of Muhammed. The Muslim gave him a piece of advice ' and this is what he said to him: 'Are there not in the Torah commands which may permit of two interpretations?' 'Anan answered: "There certainly are." Then he said to him: "Take some point and interpret it differently from those who follow your brother Hananiah; only be sure your partisans agree to it, and don't fail also to give a bribe to the Vizier. Perhaps he will give you permission to speak. Then prostrate yourself and say: "My lord King, have you appointed my brother over one religion or two?" And when he will answer you: "Over one religion", then say to him: "But I and my brother rule over two different religions!" Then you will surely be saved, if you will only make clear to him the religious differences between your faith and the faith of your brother, and if your followers agree with you. Talk like this and when the King [al-Mansur, 754-75] hears these things, he'll keep quiet.'

'Anan thereupon set out to deceive his own group and said to them: 'Last night Elijah appeared to me in a dream and said to me: "You deserve to die because you have transgressed against that which is written in the Torah." '

Through his sharp sophistry he taught them these things, and in order to save himself from violent death and to win a victory he spent a lot of money bribing his way until the King gave him permission to speak. Then he began saying: "The religion of my brother is dependent, in making the calendar, on astronomical calculations of the months and year, but my religion is dependent on the actual observation of the new moon and the signs of the ripening grain." Now since that King made his calculation, too, through actual observation of the new moon and the signs of the ripening grain, he was pacified and reconciled to 'Anan.

Written as it was some 140 years after the event, this narrative must be treated with skepticism. What we learn from it, however, is that after being thrown into prison for insubordination, 'Anan's neck was saved only when he proclaimed himself leader of a new



religious denomination, a separate sect -- a phenomenon which the government of the day tolerated amongst the *dhimmis*. It is widely thought, incidentally, that the Muslim scholar referred to here was none other than Abu Hanifa, the founder of one of the great schools of Muslim jurisprudence. It remains a moot point, however, whether 'Anan, whose quarrel with the Jewish establishment of the day started as a political struggle for succession, had ever thought of establishing a new sect and of starting a conflict relating to control over the whole domain of Jewish law. According to Baron, 'Anan -- like Abu Hanifa -- may merely have intended to establish another school of jurisprudence, rather than a sect, and that this was why he evidently refrained from injecting any serious dogmatic deviation from orthodox Judaism.

It is interesting to note that almost all the accounts we have of the rise of the Karaite schism and of the great debates which accompanied it date from at least 130 years after the event. This is true not only of the accounts left by the rabbinites but also of the various defences and pleas written by the Karaites themselves. One such apologia, written at some date between the years 960 and 1000, is by the Jerusalem Karaite Sahl ben Masliah Ha-Kohen; it is included in an openly missionary and propagandist pamphlet entitled *Tokabat Megullah (An Open Rebuke)*. It is a rather fierce attack on the rabbinic tradition as a whole, and it goes to the core of the Karaite ideology by advising the individual Jew to turn directly to the Bible for guidance and, on the basis of his own reasoning, to determine the laws which he must observe.

One of the more curious aspects of the rise and growth of Karaism was the apparent reluctance of the Jewish establishment of the day to react to it. The first rabbinite leader on record as reacting to the Karaite schism was Natronai bar Hilai *Gaon*, who headed the academy of Sura nearly 100 years after 'Anan challenged the rabbinites -- and this only in the form of a *responsum*. Answering some unknown enquirer, the *Gaon* was brief and rather summary in his verdict. 'Anan, he wrote, had instigated his followers to ridicule the words of the Talmudic sages; he promised his followers: 'I shall prepare for you a Talmud of my own'; and he and his followers were heretics who should be 'banished, not allowed to pray with Jews in the synagogue and be segregated until they mend their ways and pledge themselves to observe the customs of the two academies'. Another *Gaon*, Hai ben David of Pumbeditha (890-97), is reported to have translated 'Anan's work into Arabic or Hebrew; but neither he nor his father, who collaborated with him in the project, could find 'anything of which they could not trace the source in the doctrine of the rabbinites'.

This somewhat startling conclusion may have meant nothing more than that the rabbinites wanted it to be noted that 'Anan utterly lacked originality. The evidence, however, points to something far more significant. The rabbinite leadership was either no match for 'Anan and his new doctrines or it simply did not consider the schism to be a serious threat to the established order. The fact that the rabbinites evinced little concern about the new schism, and the lack of any serious reaction to it for close on a century, belies the idea that the rise of Karaism shook the Jewish community to its foundations, and that the danger of a

complete breakdown was averted only by the intervention of the militant and superlatively gifted Saadia *Gaon*.

Baron goes even further and calls this idea 'part of a scholarly mythology which has grown up since the days of Pinsker and Graetz'. He raises a major issue in Babylonian Jewish historiography when he adds:

Blinded by the flashes of light thrown on the theretofore obscure, Karaite history by newly discovered documents, spurious as well as genuine, the generation of scholars living between 1850 and 1880 proceeded to rewrite in a 'pan-Karaite' vein the entire cultural history of the Jewish people in the crucial centuries after the rise of Islam. Before long all the revolutionary discoveries of that period in Hebrew philology, Bible exegesis, and philosophy were ascribed to Karaites or, at best, to Rabbinites reacting to the rise of the new sect. These exaggerations of literary history have . . . been effectively disproved by more recent painstaking research which, at times, went to the opposite extreme of denying even some indubitable pioneering merits of Karaite authors. But there remained the residual conviction of the great impact of Karaite propaganda on all Jewish life and letters of the period. This view, too, requires considerable qualification.

However, even if Baron's radically dissenting version of this episode in Babylonian Jewish history is completely valid, and historians like Graetz and Pinsker grossly overestimated the importance of the Karaites, the fact remains that by the time Saadia wrote his first attack on Karaism some 140 years after the outbreak of the schism the Karaites were not only still there but were growing in numbers and in intellectual vigour alike. The source of this vitality seems to have resided in one of the Karaites' main articles of faith, namely their refusal to bow to authority of any kind, not excluding that of their leaders. It was the boast of 'Anan's followers and heirs that no two of their number agreed. 'Anan himself had undermined authority by his ambiguous ruling 'Search the Scriptures diligently, and lean not upon my opinion.' Anyone might interpret Scripture according to his own lights, and no one's ruling need be accepted by others. 'Anan, however, continued to be venerated by later generations among those who attached themselves to his movement, and he was looked up to as the 'principal teacher'. Although in the course of time the 'Ananites disappeared, making way for men who governed their lives in accordance with newer teachings, 'Anan remained the Karaites' first teacher and his person was invested with a legendary halo.

The movement started by 'Anan ben David in 767 was not originally called Karaism, a term derived from the word *Mikrah* (Scripture). The term was coined only in the third decade of the ninth century, with the emergence of a second prominent Karaite, Benjamin of Nehawend. This man exercised such an influence, and his contribution was so crucial, that some historians believe that were it not for him the movement would have disintegrated completely; so much so, indeed, that when Arab chroniclers spoke of the

Karaites they referred to them as 'the companions of 'Anan and Benjamin'. It was in the days of Benjamin's leadership that his followers came to be called 'Children of Scripture' (*Bene Mikrah*), and subsequently 'Scripturists' or 'Scripturalists' (*Karaim*). With his profounder understanding and his milder approach, Benjamin helped consolidate the movement; he abandoned his sect's traditionally unquestioning opposition to the rabbinites and did not hesitate even to adopt a number of rabbinic ordinances or accept rabbinic interpretations of the Law which 'Anan had rejected. 'I have compiled for you this Code', he declared in the introduction to *Benjamin's Portion*, which he wrote in Hebrew, 'that you may judge your Karaite brethren. I cite in every instance the Scriptural source. As for those laws which the Rabbinites follow, but for which I was not able to find support in the Scriptures, I wrote them as well, that you might follow them if you so choose.' Thus Benjamin, true Karaite that he was, left his followers free to disregard his own authority.

Another outstanding Karaite leader and theoretician was Daniel ibn Musa al-Qumisi, who rose to prominence at the end of the ninth century. Austere and somewhat more limited in intellectual range than Benjamin, al-Qumisi in his later years became radically opposed to 'Anan and the 'Ananites. In contrast to Benjamin, he rejected reason as a means of deciding religious law. He spurned the allegorical method so widespread in his day and adhered strictly to the simple, natural sense of the Scriptural text. He was, however, far from consistent on this point. To give one example: taking literally such biblical phrases as 'I am the Lord that healeth thee' (Exodus 15: 26), many 'Ananites roundly rejected medical treatment of any kind, and al-Qumisi agreed with them. However, he rejected Benjamin's vision of a divine government of the world through intermediary 'angels' -- a rejection which did not result from an excess of rationalism. Indeed, a later Karaite intellectual, al-Qirqisani, censures al-Qumisi for his inconsistency in employing rigorous logical reasoning to the interpretation of Scripture and yet being 'dissatisfied with rationalism to such an extent that he reviles both it and its devotees many times in his work'.

With al-Qumisi the first period in the history of the Karaite sect came to a close. However, despite the movement's persistent efforts to arrive at a measure of fixity in matters of religious observance, it was hesitant about committing itself to the reign of authority. As a matter of fact, neither in 'Anan nor in Benjamin, nor in their various successors, do we reach a crystallization of authority or a recognized legal code. Nevertheless, by the middle of the tenth century or thereabouts the writings of such teachers as Benjamin and al-Qumisi formed part of an equipment which the Karaites had as they moved to more favourable centres. 'A beginning had been made; a literature was being produced, both in Aramaic and in Hebrew; the movement had a distinct identity; it had already included a few forceful personalities. It could afford, therefore, to adopt a more aggressive tone.'

Al-Qirqisani taught that 'intellect is the foundation upon which every doctrine should be built', and that 'all knowledge should be derived by means of reason only'; he even advanced a purely psycho-physiological explanation of dreams, whose divinatory functions are so frequently stressed in Scripture. However, only a few among the Karaites dared to

deny physical resurrection, or to interpret it in the sense of Israel's future deliverance from exile. In view of their extreme nationalism, moreover, the early Karaites gave even freer rein to messianic speculation than their rabbinite contemporaries; we even know of one Karaite messianic pretender, Solomon Ha-Kohen, who proclaimed himself the Messiah about the year 1121.

All this, however, could not affect what seems to be the central point of conflict between the Karaites and the rabbinites, which was the reason why normative Judaism could not accept the tenets of Karaism. The point, as Rabbi Goldin suggests, was that the Karaites' anti-Talmudism amounted to a denial of history. As Goldin asserts:

We fail utterly to understand the movement if we see in it a form of anti-nomianism. Not only 'Anan but also every Karaite of note was preoccupied with law. What finally petrified Karaism was in truth a combination of factors, not the least of which was its failure to appreciate that Talmudic law had been an organic product. No *tour de force* could take its place. Before long Karaite protagonists, too, had to appeal to an inherited corpus of teaching, which, they insisted, was Scripture made explicit. . . . An undeveloped historical sense afflicted the schismatics in practically every period. .

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The ultimate fate of Karaism, however, is not representative of its state in the tenth century. At that point in Jewish history its threat to the unity of Jewish life was serious and the silence of the *Geonim* was poor strategy.

## CHAPTER 15 Saadia's Legacy

The challenge posed by the Karaites to some of the basic tenets of Judaism seems to have remained unanswered for a considerable number of years, either because the rabbinites did not take it seriously or for lack of interest and stamina. But a response had to come, and it finally came with the appearance on the scene of a young man by the name of Saadia ben Joseph. It is a curious fact of Jewish history at that phase that Saadia (whom the Arabs knew as Saad ibn Yusuf al-Fayyumi) was born not in Mesopotamia but in Egypt, although he and his works are justly considered part of the cultural and religious heritage of Babylonian Jewry.

Born in the district of al-Fayyum in upper Egypt in 892 AD, Saadia left his native land in 915, travelled in Syria and Palestine, and finally settled in Iraq, where, in 922, he became a leading member (*Aluf*) of the academy of Sura. Six years later, due to his brilliance as a scholar and the volume of work he had managed to produce, Saadia was appointed *Gaon*. He died, still holding the office, at the age of fifty.

In order fully to appreciate Saadia's work, as well as some of the reasons which led to his unprecedented appointment to the *Gaonate* of Sura, it must be kept in mind that the

Karaites did not present the only challenge to Judaism in those days. Baghdad in the final decades of the ninth century was the capital and metropolis of an empire not only great politically but intellectually as well, and the Jews there could not help being affected. In the Introduction to his major philosophical work, *Kitab al-Amanat wal-I'tiqadat (The Book of Doctrines and Beliefs)*, written in 933, Saadia draws a grim picture of the confusion he saw reigning in the religio-intellectual life of his Jewish contemporaries. He lists four categories of men, classifying them on the basis of doubt and certainty, error and truth:

Some there are who have arrived at the truth and rejoice in the knowledge that they possess it. . . . Others have arrived at the truth, but doubt it; they fail to know it for a certainty and to hold on to it . . . still others confidently affirm that which is false in the belief that it is true . . . others again base their conduct on a certain belief for a time, and then reject it on account of some defect they find in it; then they change over to another belief and renounce it in turn because of something in it which seems questionable to them; then they go over to yet another belief for a while, and drop it because of some point which, in their opinion, renders it invalid. . . .

In other words, there were those who possessed both truth and certainty; others who possessed truth but lacked certainty; a third category of men who lacked truth but possessed certainty; and finally those who lacked both truth and certainty.

That this confusion was the lot of both Jewish and Muslim intellectuals in the Baghdad of the tenth century is amply illustrated by a story told by a Muslim historian who lived there in those days. This historian, called al-Humaydi, relates the experience of a Muslim theologian from Spain who visited Baghdad, identified as Abu Omar Ahmad ibn Muhammed ibn Sa'idi. We are told that this theologian, upon his return to Spain, was asked by a fellow theologian whether he had an opportunity of attending, during his stay in Baghdad, one of the assemblies regularly held by the Mutakallimun, a school of Muslim theologians who generally opposed their orthodox counterparts. Sa'idi's answer was:

'Yes, I attended twice, but I refused to go there for a third time.' Upon being asked why, he said: 'For this simple reason, which you will appreciate: At the first meeting there were present not only people of various [Islamic] sects, but also unbelievers, Magians, materialists, atheists, Jews and Christians -- in short, unbelievers of all kinds. Each group had its own leader, whose task it was to defend its views, and every time of the leaders entered the room his followers rose to their feet and remained standing until he took his seat. In the meanwhile, the hall had become overcrowded with people. One of the unbelievers rose and said to the assembly: "We are meeting here for a discussion. Its conditions are known to all. You, Muslims, are not allowed to argue from your books and prophetic traditions since we deny both. Everybody, therefore, has to limit himself to rational arguments." The whole assembly applauded these words. So you can imagine that after these words I decided to withdraw. They proposed to me that I should attend another meeting in a

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different hall, but I found the same calamity there.'

Obviously this depiction of the state of intellectual and religious life among the Muslims of those days must be taken with some reservations. But there seems to be no doubt whatever that disruption of the kind described by Sa'idi was rampant among Jews as well as Muslims in the Baghdad of those days. The fact is that, between the latter decades of the eighth century, which witnessed the birth of Karaism, and the first decades of the tenth century, when Saadia launched his single-minded campaign against error and doubt and for what he saw as truth and certainty, Jewish life found itself threatened from several sects and circles besides that of the Karaites. In addition to these, there existed a number of minor but apparently active and influential sects and groups which presented a variety of challenges to the Jewish establishment of the day. Al-Qirqisani, the Karaite, describes some of these in *Kitab al-Anwar (The Book of Lights)*. There was, for one, the Maghariyya sect, which seems to have owed its existence to the influence of the Philonic tradition; like Philo, they indulged in an allegorical interpretation of the Bible, and their Angel doctrine echoes in some way Philo's Logos conception. Another group of Jews had strong leanings towards the Manichean religion. The spokesman and theoretician of this group was the formidable Hiwi al-Balkhi (middle of the ninth century), who wrote a book in which he propounded 200 questions against the teaching of the Pentateuch; he even denied the unity of God, His omnipotence and omniscience. He denied free will and the possibility of miracles, and went so far as to object to circumcision. What was surprising, and rather disturbing to the leaders of Babylonian Jewry, was that his book created quite a stir, and his ideas found many adherents and were even taught to schoolchildren.

Belatedly perhaps but with due determination, the rabbinites finally decided to meet these growing challenges. They must have realized, in the process, that the most effective method of fighting the enemy was by employing his own weapons, so they set out to widen the range of their studies by going beyond the subjects covered by Talmudists. In Rabbi Epstein's words, 'While the onslaught of the Karaites led the rabbinites to pay greater attention to biblical exegesis, Hebrew grammar and philology, the challenge of rationalism gave a strong impetus among them to the cultivation of philosophy, logic, and the physical sciences.' It is not at all unlikely that Saadia's appointment to the *Gaonate* of Sura in 928 was motivated partly or even largely by the need to meet these challenges. After all, not only was Saadia not a native Babylonian but he did not have any of the family connections that had usually been indispensable to aspirants to that office, which for two centuries had been in the almost exclusive possession of three families.

No less significant than the reality of the challenges was the fact that by the tenth century Sura had only a distinguished past to boast of. The dearth of outstanding scholars had brought the institution to a low ebb, and when Yom Tob Kahana, the *Gaon* who was a weaver by trade and who held the office for only two years, died in 928, the Exilarch David ben Zakkai thought of closing the school altogether -- a step which would have pleased the ambitious head of the now Baghdad-based rival academy of Pumbeditha, Kohen-Tzedek II

(917-36). However, a nominal head was appointed to the office in the person of Nathan ben Yehudai, whose sudden death soon afterwards was taken as a warning that it would be sinful to terminate the existence of the venerable seat of learning. The choice now before the Exilarch was narrowed down to two candidates -- Tzemah ben Shahin and Saadia. According to one widely accepted account, ben Shahin was a learned man of a distinguished family, and ben Zakkai sought the advice of Nissi Naharwandi, who had just declined an offer of the *Gaonate* of Sura on the ground that the head of the academy was called 'Light of the World' while he, Naharwandi, was blind.

Naharwandi advised the Exilarch to appoint ben Shahin and not Saadia, even though the latter was a great man and a distinguished scholar. 'He fears no man, however,' he explained, 'and kotows to no one because of his great wisdom, his spirit, his eloquence and his fear of sin.' But the Exilarch had already made up his mind and Saadia was duly named *Gaon* of Sura and induced into office in the presence of Kohen-Tzedek II and the scholars of the Pumbeditha academy. This was a decision that the Exilarch was going to regret having made.

Saadia al-Fayyumi was already a known name in the Jewish world of learning when he was named *Gaon* of Sura. For a number of years his name had figured prominently in literary and intellectual circles. At the age of twenty, while still in Egypt, he had compiled a Hebrew lexicon and a rhyming dictionary, for which -- he said in a highly instructive introduction to the dictionary -- there was a contemporary need. What prompted him to prepare the work, he added, was that Jews were rapidly forgetting how to express themselves properly in their own language. It is interesting to note here that the foundation for Saadia's vast erudition had already been laid in the land of his birth, where there had been a revival of Jewish communal life and of Jewish learning since the Muslim conquest of Egypt in 655. The largest and most flourishing Jewish settlement was in the capital Fostat (Old Cairo) and was presided over in the middle of the ninth century by a Babylonian Jew, Abu 'Ali Hasan al-Baghdadi, referred to above. What must have irked young Saadia and led him to his attempts at a Hebrew revival was that the Jews of his native land spoke the language of the governing Arab classes, while his younger contemporaries were eagerly absorbing the dominant culture. By that time the Karaites, too, had penetrated some Jewish circles in Egypt and were propagating their views, which again aroused Saadia, who composed his first anti-Karaite work, *Kitab al-Rad 'ala 'Anan (The Refutation of 'Anan)*, when he was twenty-three years old.

Saadia was never to abandon his battle against the Karaites, and he fought sectarianism of any type, which he thought undermined the survival of the Jewish people. He did not hesitate to engage in controversies, nor did he deal with them kindly. One of these is especially worth mentioning, since among other things it brought Saadia fame and renown. The controversy originated in an action taken by the head of a Palestinian academy concerning the Jewish calendar. It is worth noting here that following the Muslim conquest of Palestine the 'lot' of the Jews there was greatly improved. In the words of one of their

leaders, Yehudai: 'When the Ishmaelites came, they left them [the Jews] free to occupy themselves with the Torah.' Palestine thus regained some of its ancient status as the seat and arbiter of Jewish learning. The revival was such that heads of the higher Palestinian schools of learning began to style themselves *Gaons*, like their Babylonian counterparts. In two crucial spheres, too, the Babylonians deferred to the Palestinians, namely in matters pertaining to the letter of Scripture and in the regulation of the calendar. This latter subject was a sensitive and rather intricate point of unceasing controversy. In the old days, when the empirical method prevailed of accepting the evidence of anyone who chanced to see the new moon in a clear sky, it had been the prerogative of the Palestinian patriarchal court to sanctify the new moon. Similarly, when owing to a discrepancy between the solar and the lunar calendars the vernal season would have occurred at too early a date, it had been the rule of the patriarch to postpone the Passover festival by intercalating a thirteenth month before the month of Nisan. In later times, when observation gave way to astrological calculation, the intricacies of computation often seemed to be attended by mystery, and the teachers of Babylonia had to travel to Palestine to get instruction. As late as AD 835, the Exilarch recognized as ancient custom for himself and the heads of the academies and for all the Jewish people to accept the calendar as sent out by the authorities in Palestine. Later, however, owing partly to the ascendancy of Babylonia and partly to the uniformly established method of computation, the practice fell into disuse and the Babylonians made themselves independent of the Holy Land.

Things went smoothly until, in the autumn of 921, one zealous Palestinian *Gaon* and dignitary, Aaron ben Meir, came out with what he regarded as an improvement in the calendar and sought thereby to re-establish the ancient authority of the Palestinian establishment. Accordingly, the improved calendar was proclaimed from the Mount of Olives, in keeping with a now discarded custom. It is quite possible that, were it not for Saadia's firm objections, the Babylonian authorities would have yielded on this point. In the event, when the news reached Saadia, who was then sojourning in Aleppo, he immediately started remonstrating with ben Meir by letter and a fierce controversy developed.

To start with, it turned out that ben Meir had previously visited Baghdad and won the adherence of the *Gaon* of Pumbeditha, apparently in return for the support he extended to him against a rival. By the time Saadia arrived, however, that particular internal quarrel had been resolved, and he was able to persuade the authorities to address a joint letter to the author of the new calendar, asking him civilly to withdraw his proclamation that the coming Passover would fall on Sunday instead of Tuesday. Ben Meir, however, would not yield, insisting that the calculations of the Babylonians were in error. To this Saadia replied to the effect that the Palestinians' claims were baseless. Incriminations and recriminations were thus hurled and the tone of the missives grew in bitterness. Meanwhile, some Jewish communities celebrated the holidays according to ben Meir's calendar, others according to the dates set by the Babylonians, and the confusion which ensued was noticed even by non-Jews. The rift, breaking at a time in which the Karaites seemed particularly active, must have persuaded Saadia even more that ben Meir's dissenting plans had to be defeated. In



the course of the controversy, he proved his mettle, meeting invective with invective and -- what was far more important -demonstrating his vast learning and his grasp of an intricate subject. At the request of the Exilarch, whose support he enjoyed, Saadia composed a *Book of Seasons*, in which he effectively refuted ben Meir's assertions. The work was widely circulated among Jewish communities far and near, and it came to be recited annually in the month preceding the new year. Saadia emerged victorious from a controversy which, though it must have made him enemies, won him a number of admirers in high places. A few years after this controversy Saadia was named *Gaon* of Sura, and for two years all went well as far as relations with the Exilarch were concerned. But the almost inevitable rupture came soon enough, the occasion being a lawsuit which involved a settlement of a large estate consisting of property and a large sum of money which fell to some men through inheritance and which they desired to divide. This led to a dispute between the heirs, who in the end agreed to pay the Exilarch ten per cent of all the estate in return for removing all complaints against themselves and to settle the case. Since all such legal papers had to be confirmed by the heads of the academies of Sura and Pumbeditha, the Exilarch after signing the documents ordered the parties to go to the two *Gaons* who would confirm them. They went first to Saadia, who after examining the papers asked them to get first the signature of Kohen-Tzedek 11, the *Gaon* of Pumbeditha. However, when they came back with the required signature affixed on the papers, Saadia refused to sign them. The Exilarch became insistent, sending his son Judah with an explicit order to the *Gaon* to sign. 'Tell your father', Saadia told Judah, 'that it is written in the Torah (Deut. 1:17): "Ye shall not respect persons in judgement."'

Threats ensued, and during one of his missions Judah even raised his hand to strike Saadia. Finally the exasperated Exilarch deposed the *Gaon* of Sura and appointed Joseph ben Jacob bar Satia to the vacant office. He then pronounced the ban on Saadia, who retaliated by excommunicating the Exilarch and appointing his younger brother Hasan as successor to the Exilarchate. Obviously a great survivor and with a lot of money and influence, David ben Zakkai remained in his office, either because Hasan died or owing to the caliph's support. For seven years, Babylonian Jewry was divided into two opposing camps, with the majority of the wealthy and prominent families siding with Saadia, while the Exilarch was aided and abetted by his influential friends. Saadia lived in retirement in Baghdad, writing some of his most important works, including *The Book of Doctrines and Beliefs*. After seven years, the people wearied of the strife and, when the Exilarch declined to sustain an appeal by Saadia on the part of a Suran litigant and had him flogged, there was universal clamour for reconciliation. The two men were brought together on the eve of Purim in the year 937, and after a touching ceremony embraced. Saadia returned to his post and directed the work of his academy for five more years. He died in 942, reportedly of melancholia.

Tenth-century Baghdad, where Saadia *Gaon* wrote his major philosophical work while in forced retirement in 933, was a place torn between religious and intellectual extremes. Conflicting philosophical creeds abounded, and the impact of works translated from Greek since the middle of the eighth century was becoming visible. Saadia himself depicted the

situation in moving terms in the Introduction to *The Book of Doctrines and Beliefs*:

When I considered these evils, my heart grieved for my race, the race of mankind, and my soul was moved on account of our own people Israel, as I saw in my time many of the believers clinging to unsound doctrines and mistaken beliefs while many of those who deny the faith boast of their unbelief and despise the men of truth, although they are themselves in error. . . . I felt that to help them was my duty, and guiding them aright an obligation upon me.

The great philosopher-poet Abu el-'Alaa al-Mu'arri, a contemporary of Saadia's, was similarly troubled by the intellectual confusion. 'Muslims, Jews, Christians and Magians,' he lamented, 'they all are walking in error and darkness. There are only two kinds of people left in the world; the one group is intelligent, but lacking in faith; the other has faith, but is lacking in intelligence.' What Saadia, as a teacher of his people and as a member of 'the race of mankind', tried to do was to introduce some order into the general confusion. In this monumental undertaking, his sole guide was reason, by way of which, he felt, man would ultimately apprehend the existence and nature of God.

Saadia's belief in the power of reason was such that he felt that man would have acquired knowledge of God even without revelation, which according to him hastened the process and acted as a guide during this quest. In what amounts to a hymn to reason, Saadia writes in Book Four of *The Book of Doctrines and Beliefs*:

By virtue of it man preserves the memory of deeds that happened long ago, and by virtue of it he foresees many of the things that will occur in the future. By virtue of it he is able to subdue the animals so that they may till the earth for him and bring in its produce. By virtue of it he is able to draw the water from the depth of the earth to its surface; he even invents irrigating wheels that draw the water automatically. By virtue of it he is able to build lofty mansions, to make magnificent garments, and to prepare delicate dishes. By virtue of it he is able to organize armies and camps, and to exercise kingship and authority for establishing order and civilization among men. By virtue of it he is able to study the nature of the celestial spheres, the course of the planets, their dimensions, their distances from one another, as well as other matters relating to them.

Throughout this book, Saadia takes a position of strict rationalism. Judaism, he argues, is in harmony with the dictates of reason. Revelation may give us some truths which we could not prove by logic alone, but it never teaches us anything unacceptable to logic and good sense. Many of the basic tenets of religion can be demonstrated by reasoning, and Saadia duly offered such rational proofs for the existence and unity of God. The great advantage of revelation, he argued further, is that it provides certainty -- since we might make errors in the use of logical proofs -- and that, moreover, it makes the truth available and clear to the simple and uneducated who have not the time, talent or maturity for philosophical study. It is precisely for the benefit of such minds that the Bible was written in a concrete

and vivid style. Saadia, in short, undertook to establish a rational, Jewish creed and to demonstrate the soundness of the religious heritage. *The Book of Doctrines and Beliefs* is unanimously considered to have been the first comprehensive and systematic attempt ever made to give a rational basis to Jewish religious doctrine and practice, a landmark in Jewish religious and philosophical thinking, the like of which was not undertaken until Maimonides wrote his epoch-making *Guide for the Perplexed* two and a half centuries later.

That Saadia proclaimed the supremacy of reason ('*aq̄l*'), that his thinking was so totally dominated by an uncompromising rationalism, does not mean that he was not aware of a certain anti-rationalist strain within Jewry that would forbid philosophical enquiry. 'How can we undertake to pursue knowledge by means of speculation and enquiry with the object of attaining mathematical certainty seeing that our people reject this manner of speculation as leading to unbelief [*kufr*] and the adoption of heretical views [*ẓandaqa*]'? To this hypothetical objection, so carefully worded by the author himself, Saadia has a ready answer equally well formulated:

Our answer is that only the ignorant speak thus. Similarly one will find that the ignorant people in our town are of the opinion that everyone who goes to India becomes rich. So, too, some of the ignorant people in our nation are said to think that the eclipse of the moon occurs whenever something resembling a dragon swallows the moon. Some of the ignorant people of Arabia are said to hold the opinion that unless a man's camel is slaughtered over his grave, he will have to appear on foot on Judgement Day. There exist many more ridiculous opinions like these.

Responding to another objection, namely 'that the greatest of the Sages of Israel prohibited [speculation], and particularly the speculation on the origin of Time and Space, when they declared. "Whosoever speculates on four things should better not have been created: on what is above and what is below, what was in beginning, and what will be in the end." [Hagigah 2:1]', he writes:

Our answer is this: It cannot be thought that the Sages should have wished to prohibit us from rational enquiry seeing that our Creator has commanded us to engage in such enquiry in addition to accepting the reliable Tradition. Thus He said, 'Know ye not? Hear ye not? Hath it not been told you from the beginning? Have ye not understood the foundations of the earth?' [Isaiah 40:21] The pious men said to each other, 'Let us choose for us that which is right; let us know among ourselves what is good' [Job 34:41], and, indeed, the five men, namely Job, Eliphaz, Bildad, Zopher and Elihu, had long discussions on this subject.

It is impossible not to marvel, reading these remarks, at the matter-of-fact, relaxed and rather devastating way in which Saadia dismisses beliefs and attitudes that were widespread even in those days of intellectual unrest. It is also interesting to note the inroads and influences which Greek thought and philosophy had on his writing.

Two more outstanding features of Saadia's work are worth mentioning, namely the orderly, methodical fashion in which he expressed his thoughts and the fact that his works, wide-ranging and varied though they were in their scope, were all intended to fill a pressing need and addressed to a popular rather than a specialized audience. Although in many instances only fragments of his writings have been preserved, even these reveal his lucidity of manner and outlook. As Judah Goldin has remarked:

Saadia's codifications of the law became models for future codifiers. . . . Before he undertook to treat details, he prepared an introduction to the subject matter as a whole. The very fact, incidentally, that he recognized the purpose and value of introductory discussions is a commentary on his approach to the craft of teaching and writing. His introductions not only outlined the principal ideas of the books, but also furnished him with an opportunity to discuss problems which might occur to a reflective student.

Thus, in his introductory analysis of the Pentateuch he speaks of 'three kinds of education, of which one is stronger than the others'. After examining the several kinds of education, he sums up:

And God has revealed, in this Book which is dedicated to the education of His servants, the three methods. . . . He commands piety and prohibits sin; He announces the reward of good actions and the punishment of evil actions; and finally He gives the history of those who lived on earth before us -- the salvation of those who have been virtuous and the punishment of those who have been wicked. [2](#)

That Saadia's various works were all intended to fill a popular need is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that his very first effort was the compilation of a Hebrew lexicon, followed by a rhyming dictionary. Seeing how sectarianism was endangering the unity of Jewish life and the Jewish heritage, he then addressed himself to the task of combating the 'Ananites and systematically refuting their anti-Talmudism. And this is true of all his other works.

In his prayer book he omitted reference to authorities as he discussed the laws of worship, since his audience was the folk at large, not the small scholarly circle. When he saw how his generation, ignorant of Hebrew, was forgetting the Bible, he translated it for their benefit. Where mere translation would still leave difficulty, he paraphrased. The philosophical speculations of the age challenged the teachings of traditional Judaism; he undertook in his *Doctrines and Beliefs*, therefore, to establish a rational Jewish creed and to demonstrate the soundness of the religious heritage.

Some students of the period consider Saadia's translation of the Bible to be his crowning achievement. This Arabic version of the Scriptures, accompanied in certain books or parts of books by a commentary, was in its way an epoch-making undertaking. The translation was intended for the common people, the Jews living in the vast Muslim Empire and fast

absorbing the Arabic language and Arab culture. Discarding the habitual forced interpretation so often indulged in by the rabbis, Saadia in his translation and commentaries broke the ground for a rational, systematic exposition. The work, which students of JudeoArabic culture still hold in awe, yielded stores of information to successive generations of biblical scholars as a whole. What made these scholars especially grateful to Saadia was that, apart from rendering the Bible into Arabic, Saadia composed an independent treatise in which he made suggestions as to the meaning and import of some ninety words which are found but once in the Bible, 'having neither brother nor friend' but still capable of being understood with the aid of the later Hebrew or the cognate Arabic.

As a philosopher, too, Saadia has justly been called 'the father of medieval Jewish philosophy'. Not only was he the first to undertake a systematic philosophical justification of Judaism, but he was the first also to develop the notions of Islamic theology and philosophy in an independent manner. This latter accomplishment was of crucial importance because, as Julius Guttmann explains in his history of Jewish philosophies of religion, the same needs which brought about the development of the Muslim philosophy of religion produced its Jewish counterpart:

This Islamic background determines the character of medieval Jewish philosophy from beginning to end. Even more than Islamic philosophy, it was definitely a philosophy of religion. Whereas the Islamic Neoplatonists and Aristotelians dealt with the full range of philosophy, Jewish thinkers relied for the most part on the work of their Islamic predecessors in regard to general philosophic questions, and concentrated on more specifically religio-philosophic problems.

In this Saadia was no exception. For his fundamental theses, he relied on the Kalam (speech, scholastic theology), inclining toward its rationalist Mu'tazilite version which approximated the Jewish position both in its strict and uncompromising treatment of the concept of God's unity and in its insistence on the doctrine of free will. 'Saadia followed the Mu'tazilite convention even in the formal structure of his book by having the chapter on God's justice follow the chapter on the unity of God. But apart from this he handled the traditional scholastic themes with great freedom.'

Preoccupied as he was with what appear to be purely theological problems, Saadia had his feet firmly on the ground. To be sure, the Torah by virtue of its intrinsic worth is both eternal and immutable; but it is not unrelated to life. In fact, the Torah is of little use to those who proclaim that 'the best thing for man to do is to devote himself to worship of G-d, fast during the day, and spend the night in praise of God, and relinquish all worldly occupation'. In the first place, the eternity of the Torah is bound up with the eternity of the Jewish people, and with their very existence as a people. 'Israel is a nation only by virtue of its Torah', and since God through His prophets guaranteed the eternity of Israel, the Torah, too, must of necessity endure to eternity. Secondly, the Torah has little meaning if it is to be divorced from human and social activities. If life is renounced for the sake of

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worship of God, Saadia insists, then we have no chance to obey or disobey many of the religious observances decreed therein. 'How shall the hermit observe the laws of correct weights and measures? . . . Which part of the civil law will he fulfill with truth and justice? . . . And so it is with regard to the laws of sowing, of tithes, of charity and similar precepts.

Nor was Saadia an uncompromising doctrinaire, although as we have seen he knew how to take a firm stand when matters of principle were involved. An Arab historian, Ibn al-Hiti, relates a story about Saadia attending the funeral in Aleppo of the Karaite leader Salmon ben Yeruhim, who among other things had accused the rabbinites of abandoning the Ten Commandments and whom Saadia had fought tooth and nail during his lifetime. Saadia, says al-Hiti in what may be an apocryphal report, attended the funeral 'with his garment torn, girded with a rope and barefoot'. As if to lend credence to the story, Saadia in al-Hiti's account is further reported to have declared on the occasion: 'We both derived much profit from our controversies.'

He was equally magnanimous in his attitude to the man who had sought his personal downfall and caused him so much distress, the Exilarch David ben Zakkai. When David died, in 940, Saadia used his influence to have the deceased Exilarch's son Judah installed in the office. But Judah held the Exilarchate for barely seven months; he died, leaving a boy of twelve years, and Saadia took his erstwhile enemy's grandson to his house and reared him with fatherly care. Two years later Saadia died, and the boy Solomon eventually became the next Exilarch.

Saadia left a great and many-faceted legacy. There was almost no field of Jewish literature and thought that did not interest him intensely, and in many of these he was the true pioneer. Perhaps the best and most eloquent tribute to his work was the one made by Maimonides, who in many ways followed in the steps of his eminent precursor and predecessor. 'Were it not for Saadia,' wrote Maimonides in his *Iggeret Teman* (*Epistle to Yemen*), 'the Torah would almost have disappeared from the midst of Israel; for it was he who made manifest what was obscure therein, made strong what had been weakened.'

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