Studies in Saadia Gaon’s Arabic Translations

Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

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The Ohio State University

2012

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Abstract

With these three chapters analyzing Saadiah’s bible translations, exegesis, and liturgical translations, it will be demonstrated that Saadiah’s use of Arabic terminology allowed him to create an innovative form of the expression of Jewish ideas. In the case of the Pentateuch translations, the Arabic terminology that was analyzed served to preserve not only a very literal meaning of the text in the vernacular of the Jewish masses but also the sacred nature of the text by utilizing terms which possess a sacred nature in the Qur’an and Islamic texts. In his translations of the baqqashot, Saadiah includes names for God which occur in Islamic prayer and includes terminology that describes its actual choreography. In this way, Saadiah allowed for the prayer to not only serve as a form of Jewish piety, but also to resemble the Muslim piety for the sake of his readers. The interpretation of the first Psalm also displays an innovative form of the expression of Jewish ideas by supplying a multiplicity of meanings for some words, a feat which is not common in the Jewish literature that preceded him.
Acknowledgments

This thesis represents the culmination of three years of study in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures at the Ohio State University. My studies were funded in part by the Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowship.

I would like to thank the members of my thesis committee my advisor Dr. Daniel Frank, who has generously offered to me his help and encouragement on every aspect of this project, and Dr. Michael Swartz, who has helped me gain a background in the classical Jewish sources.

I thank Dr. Samuel Meier whose excellence in teaching initially encouraged me to undertake the academic study of religion.

I am grateful to Dr. G. Tamer whose enthusiastic response to portions of this thesis was an inspiration to continue.
Vita

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All biblical citations are excerpted from the *New Jewish Publication Society* translation with some exceptions for clarity. I have transliterated Hebrew vowels without diacritics. The vocal schwa is written as “е.” I have transliterated Arabic vowels with diacritics. Short vowels appear as $a$, $i$, and $u$, and long vowels appear as $\ddot{a}$, $\ddot{i}$, and $\ddot{u}$. The following is a table of transliterated consonants.

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Saadiah b. Yūsuf al-Fayyūmī Gaon\(^1\) was born in Egypt in 882 and died in Baghdad in 942 after serving as the Gaon of the Suran Academy and as an important authority on matters of Jewish law and learning throughout Jewish communities in the Islamic world, which was the homeland for the vast majority of Jews at that time. During his lifetime, Saadiah became one of the most productive scholars in all of Jewish history. He wrote in a language that Jews had spoken since the Muslim conquests of the seventh century but one that had not been a literary language in a great capacity. Saadiah was one of the first, and certainly the most prominent among his generation, to write primarily in Judeo-Arabic. Saadiah wrote many responsa, the first *siddur*, a Hebrew dictionary, grammatical works, a philosophical treatise, biblical commentaries, as well as

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\(^1\) The proper transliteration of his name in Hebrew is *se'adyah* (סעדיה) and in Arabic “*sa’īd*.” This paper will use the spelling “Saadiah,” in accordance with Halkin, Abraham, Israel Ta-Shma, Abraham Halkin, Haggai Ben-Shammai, and Abraham Habermann. “Saadiah (ben Joseph) Gaon.” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 17. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007. 606-614. 22 vols. p. 660.
other books in Judeo-Arabic. Saadiah also singlehandedly translated nearly the entire Hebrew Bible into Arabic.²

Though Saadiah’s work in the tenth century represents the first large corpus of literature by a single author in Judeo-Arabic, his writings were not the first. He was a contemporary of the Karaite Jacob al-Qirqisânî, who composed bible commentaries, a treatise on biblical law, and essays in the art of biblical interpretation in Judeo-Arabic.³ Aramaic was the dominant language of the geonim before Saadiah, yet scholars have identified several Arabic translations of geonic works and biblical translations that were written before Saadiah’s birth.⁴ In searching for other early examples of Judeo-Arabic culture outside of the corpus of extant manuscripts, we can look to ḥadīṯ material of admittedly Jewish origin, which are termed in Islamic tradition as Isra’iliyât. Many of these traditions, which mainly consist of reformulations of rabbinic material attributed to the companions of the prophet or the prophet himself, may have their origins in the seventh century.⁵ The existence of narratives in the Qur’ân which concern

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biblical figures may indicate that Jews possessed an expression of their traditions in the Arabic language on the Arabian peninsula as early as the sixth century.\textsuperscript{6}

It would not be until the tenth century that Judeo-Arabic works became common. Two of Saadia's contemporaries, Isaac Israeli (c. 855-c. 955) and al-Muqammiş ibn Marwân al-Râqi (c. 900), produced philosophical works in Arabic, yet their impact on Jewish culture would not be as great. However, it is known that the former corresponded with Saadiah, and thus it is possible that Isaac Israeli influenced his works.\textsuperscript{7} Along with al-Muqammiş, tenth century Judeo-Arabic literature was greatly influenced by the Muʿtazilite thinkers of Baghdad. Saadiah was one of the first Jewish thinkers who was influenced by Muʿtazilites, and this trend continued in the Islamic east by his intellectual descendant Samuel b. Ḥofni as well as by his Karaite opponents Yaʿqūb al-Qirqisānī (first half of the tenth century) and Yūṣūf al-Bāṣīr (first half of the eleventh century).\textsuperscript{8} Beginning with these authors, Judeo-Arabic would serve almost exclusively as the language of Jewish discourse for several centuries in the Islamic world from Iraq to al-Andalūs.

\textsuperscript{6} This notion was popularized in the 19th century by Abraham Geiger. See A. Geiger, \textit{Was hat Muhammad aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?} Bonn: F. Baaden, 1833.


Concerning the impact of Arabo-Islamic sources on Saadiah’s work, special mention should be made of his grammatical work *Sefer Ha-Agron*. In the introduction to this work, Saadiah informs his readers that he is indebted to Muslim writers, claiming that “one of the worthies among the Ishmaelites, realizing to his sorrow that the people do not use the Arabic language correctly [and] wrote a short treatise for them, from which they might learn proper usages.” The author of whom Saadiah speaks is unknown, yet it indicates that Saadiah was well informed by Islamic works. Saadiah wished to use the techniques he described in order to serve a Jewish function. Concerning Jewish poets, Saadiah continues:

Similarly, I have noticed that many of the Israelites do not observe even the common rules for the correct use of our [Hebrew] language, much less the more difficult rules, so that that when they speak in prose most of it is faulty, and when they write poetry only a few of the ancient rules are observed, and the majority of them are neglected . . . this has induced me to compose a work in two parts containing most of the [Hebrew words].

It was also his goal with this book to correct the ways of Jewish thinkers who did not understand the Bible. As this was one of his earliest works, it can be seen as one of the first Judeo-Arabic works to express the need for Arabic Bible translations and interpretations for the Jewish masses.

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9 This translation is from H. Malter, *Saadia Gaon*, p. 39.

10 Ibid., p. 40.

In the present study, I shall focus upon some of the ways in which Saadiah incorporates the Arabic language into his thought and how he uses Arabic to discuss Jewish topics and themes. Just as Arabic and Hebrew are cognate languages, Arabic-Islamic religious terminology and Hebrew-Jewish religious terminology often overlap naturally. As Jews began to write more in Arabic in Saadiah’s time, they began to borrow terminology and concepts which did not exist in classical Jewish sources. The following three chapters will consist of the analysis of three works by Saadiah: his translation of the Pentateuch, his Arabic translations of his own liturgical poems, and his commentary on the first Psalm. In each of these genres, Saadiah’s use of language shows the extent to which Arabic effected his thought and his interpretation of Hebrew texts. His use of Arabic, moreover, would transform the way in which Hebrew texts had been understood by previous generations.
CHAPTER 1

SAADIAH’S ARABIC BIBLE TRANSLATIONS: SOME LEXICOGRAPHICAL ISSUES

1.1 Introduction to Saadiah’s Arabic Bible Translations

Biblical translations have historically marked turning points within the cultures that produced them. With the compositions of the Greek Septuagint (3rd-2nd c.), Aramaic Targumim (1st c. BCE-CE), Syriac Peshitta (2nd c. CE), Latin Vulgate (4th c. CE) and others, the Christian and Jewish communities who became the beneficiaries of these monumental works integrated their verses into their scholarly, liturgical, and even colloquial discourse of religion. In other words, biblical translations have shaped the self-identity of Jews and Christians and have allowed them to express the sacred in innovative ways. For most, the goal has not been to translate the text word-for-word, but rather to translate the text from within the framework of the semantic environment and literary conventions of the target language. This reality is especially true for the early tenth century composition of Saadiah’s Arabic Pentateuch (Tafsīr al-Tawrāt). The
present chapter will examine some semantic elements of Saadiah’s Pentateuch\(^\text{12}\) as well as to discuss a number of lexicographic matters that modern scholars have yet to analyze in depth with respect to this influential work. A brief analysis of Saadiah’s Arabic diction will demonstrate how he adapted Islamic terminology into sacred expressions of Jewish piety.

1.2 *Arabic Bible Translations Composed Before Saadiah’s *Tafsîr

Though Saadiah’s *Tafsîr* was likely the first rendering of the entire Bible into Arabic, translations of biblical verses or entire books into Arabic, orally or textually, predated Saadiah by centuries. Meira Polliack believes that the pre-Islamic Jews of the Ḥijāz likely explained their holy scripture in a manner that “may have taken the form of oral translations which were selective and paraphrastic in nature.”\(^\text{13}\) Scholars know very little about the Jews of the Ḥijāz before Muḥammad’s time and their translation practices that may have taken place. In a *ḥadîth* reported by al-Bukhârî in the name of the šâhib Abû Hurayrā, it is held that “Jews and Christians (ahl al-kitâb) would recite the Torah (tawrât) in Hebrew (bi-l-‘ibrâniyya) and translate and explain it (yufassirûnaha) into Arabic

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\(^\text{12}\) For this study, I have focused mainly on Saadiah’s Arabic Pentateuch and not on his translations or *tafsîr* of other biblical books, the examination of which would be a good way to expand the present work.

to the Muslims (ahl al-'islām)).14 These early oral, impromptu interpretations may have laid the foundation for later Judeo-Arabic Bible translations in the lands of Islamic expansion, yet scholars will likely never recover any documented material from this time period. Scholars have not recovered any reports of Christian Bible translations from within the milieu of the first Muslim community, and it is possible that none were composed until the eighth century in Palestine.15 No Samaritan Pentateuch translations into Arabic are attested before Saadiah.16

Joshua Blau argues that the oldest pre-Saadianic Rabbinate Arabic translations of biblical material transcribed in Hebrew letters is a fragment from the Cairo Genizah, composed no later than the year 900, of Proverbs 16:24-17:26.17 Whether or not Saadiah used materials such as this one in order to produce his Tafsīr18 is unclear, yet some scholars strongly believe that Saadiah depended upon written fragments.19 It is possible that Rabbinate figures also produced Arabic translations in Tiberias, which was the epicenter of the scholarly


15 M. Polliack, Karaite Tradition, p. 5.

16 M. Polliack, Karaite Tradition, p. 8 n. 24.


18 Tafsīr in this examination will refer to Saadiah’s translation of the Pentateuch only, unless otherwise stated.

examination of the text of the Hebrew Bible from the seventh century until the eleventh century. According to an account by the Muslim historian al-Mas‘ūdī (893-956) of his travels to Palestine, he indicates that he “met with two of the revered men on whom the Jews rely for the interpretation (tafsīr) of the twenty four Hebrew Books of their Scriptures and their translation (tarjama) into Arabic.”20 Al-Mas‘ūdī identifies these two scholars as the Rabbinites (ashma‘thī) Abū Kathīr Yaḥyā b. Zakariyyā (d. 932), a Tiberian scribe, and his student Sa‘īd b. Ya‘qūb al-Fayyūmī, who is almost certainly Saadia Gaon. If it is accurate, this report by al-Mas‘ūdī indicates, that large-scale Hebrew Bible translations into Arabic by Rabbinate figures did take place in Tiberias before Saadiah’s completion of the Tafsīr.21 However, some scholars believe that the activities of the most influential Tiberian scholars, namely the Ben-Asher family, were affiliated with the Karaite movement.22 Whether or not this is the case, it is clear

20 M. Polliack, Karaite Tradition, p. 11.

21 M. Polliack asserts that “Saadiah began composing his Arabic Bible versions after leaving Egypt, possibly while residing in Tiberias” (M. Polliack, Karaite Tradition, p. 77), a date which corresponds to sometime in the 920s.

that the main Karaite Bible translations into Arabic began at around the same time that Saadiah commenced his work.\textsuperscript{23}

1.3 \textit{The Jewish Demand for Arabic Bible Translations}

The fact that large-scale Karaite and Rabbinite Arabic translations of the Hebrew Bible arose contemporaneously implies that the Jewish, both traditional and sectarian, adoption of Arabic as a spoken language in the Arab lands resulted in the demand for comprehensive interpretations. The purpose of the \textit{Tafsīr} and other translations is seemingly a manifestation of the same purpose served by the Targumim, which were read after the recitation of the Hebrew text in the synagogue, a practice which is mandated in the Talmud,\textsuperscript{24} though “there is no determining evidence that the \textit{Tafsīr} was actually recited after the reading of the Torah or alongside the Aramaic Targum.”\textsuperscript{25} Even if the original liturgical function of the \textit{Tafsīr} is a mystery, the demand for such a work for its use in the religious

\textsuperscript{23} M. Polliack, \textit{Karaite Traditions}, p. 14f. She claims (p. 15) that “the earliest evidence for continuous translations of portions from the Hebrew Bible is found in the work of Karaite exegetes from Palestine of the first half of the tenth century. The oldest and most substantial of these are by Salmon ben Yeroḥam, a contemporary of Saadiah.” D. Frank indicates that Salmon composed his earliest exegetical works during the mid-tenth century, c. 955-956. See D. Frank, \textit{Search Scripture Well: Karaite Exegetes and the Origins of the Jewish Bible Commentary in the Islamic East, Études sur le Judaïsme Médiéval}, ed. P. B. Fenton, vol. 29. Leiden: Brill, 2004, p. 13.

\textsuperscript{24} See BT \textit{Berachot} 8a. The practice of reading the Targumim was not entirely supplanted by Arabic translations in Arab lands, as the Jews of Yemen never ceased to recited the Targumim in their synagogues and continue to do so in the Land of Israel to this day.

\textsuperscript{25} M. Polliack, \textit{Karaite Tradition}, p. 13 n. 46.
academies of Sura and Pumbedita and even private homes was likely strong.\textsuperscript{26} It is Rippin’s opinion that, as the Hebrew original and the varied Aramaic Targumim became less accessible to an Arabic speaking society, Saadiah’s intention was to gather all of the innovative, yet nebulously arranged Arabic translations into a monolithic unit.\textsuperscript{27} However, to do so may have been considered by the elite Jewish classes to be a dangerous pursuit due to the inevitability of the integration of Islamic religious terminology into the Jewish Scriptures. In fact, Polliack argues that the geonic institutions of Babylonia, the hub of halakhic scholarship during Saadiah’s lifetime, “strongly discouraged the writing down of [Arabic] traditions.”\textsuperscript{28} Rippin continues by asserting that “by employing Arabic as the vehicle of discourse, it was inevitable that his translation would be influenced by the Muslim community around him.”\textsuperscript{29}

1.4 \textit{The Intended Reading Audience for the Tafṣr}

Scholars have debated the question of whether the original \textit{Tafṣr} was written in Hebrew or Arabic letters, a matter which is of great significance to the

\textsuperscript{26} In D. M. Freidenreich’s (p. 359-60) opinion, “Saadiah was interested in the education and guidance of the assimilated Jewish masses who no longer understood Hebrew.” See D. M. Freidenreich, “The Use of Islamic Sources in Saadiah Gaon’s “Tafṣr” of the Torah,” \textit{The Jewish Quarterly Review}, new series, vol. 93. no. 3. (2003): 353-95.


\textsuperscript{28} M. Polliack, \textit{Karaite Tradition}, p. 13.

\textsuperscript{29} A. Rippin, “Sa’adya Gaon and Genesis 22,” p. 34.
stated thesis of this paper.\textsuperscript{30} If Saadiah composed the \textit{Tafsir} in Arabic letters for a Muslim audience, then the notion of integrating Islamic concepts would be for the sake of explaining Jewish ideas in an apologetic fashion and in a manner to which Muslims could relate. If Saadiah composed it in Hebrew letters for a Jewish audience, then the integration of Islamic concepts would be for the purpose of establishing a sacred Arabic vocabulary for the benefit of his co-religionists. Saadiah’s biographer Henry Malter believed that Saadiah composed all of his works in Arabic letters only later to be transcribed into Hebrew letters by copyists.\textsuperscript{31} An often cited opinion of Abraham Ibn Ezra (d. 1164) offers the most compelling evidence that the \textit{Tafsir} was written in Arabic letters. In Ibn Ezra’s words, Saadiah translated the Torah “in the Ishmaelite language and in their script.”\textsuperscript{32} Razhabi notes that some contemporary scholars understand Ibn Ezra’s account to be accurate,\textsuperscript{33} perhaps in light of the discovery of some extant fragments of the \textit{Tafsir} written in Arabic letters.\textsuperscript{34} Blau points out that Ibn Ezra

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{30} For a summary of this debate, see J. Blau, \textit{The Emergence and Linguistic Background of Judaeo-Arabic: A study of the origins of Middle Arabic}. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965, pp. 38-41.
  \item \textsuperscript{31} H. Malter, \textit{Saadia Gaon}, p. 142 n. 305. This view is also held by Abraham Meir Habermann, who gives this opinion in his article on Saadiah in the \textit{Encyclopaedia Judaica} 2nd ed., vol. 17, p. 613.
  \item \textsuperscript{32} From Abraham ibn Ezra’s commentary to Genesis 2:11. In this work, Ibn Ezra berates Saadiah’s procedure in the matter of translating numerous proper names occurring in the Bible, particularly those designating tribes or nations and places, from the Targum and insinuated that Saadiah chose to do this lest the Muslim readers would think that there were commandments that the Jews could not interpret. See H. Malter, \textit{Saadia Gaon}, p. 145.
  \item \textsuperscript{33} Y. Ratzaby, \textit{Ozar ha-lashon ha-‘aravi be-tafsir R. Saadiah Gaon}. Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1985, p. 17.
  \item \textsuperscript{34} See H. Lazarus-Yafeh, \textit{Intertwined Worlds}, p. 117 n. 21 for a list of manuscripts of the \textit{Tafsir} in Arabic letters.
\end{itemize}
may have seen copies of Saadiah’s Bible translations that were transcribed into Arabic letters by Christians of Egypt, who had used them for their own purposes.\(^{35}\) Blau also indicates that an Egyptian document published by Mark Cohen and Sasson Somekh from the second half of the tenth century, which discusses a translation made by the Jews of Saadiah’s Siddur into Arabic used during the majlis of the vizier Ibn Killis (d. 991), may identify the *Sitz im Leben* in which there arose a need for the transcription into Arabic characters of Saadia’s *Tafsîr.*\(^{36}\) According to this evidence, it is likely that Saadiah composed the *Tafsîr* in Hebrew letters, yet it was later transcribed into Arabic letters for the purposes of inter-faith discussions in the court of Ibn Killis.

There are several reasons to assume that the *Tafsîr* was not written for a Muslim audience. One compelling reason why the *Tafsîr* could not have been originally written in Arabic letters is, according to Steinschneider, the fact that Muslim rulers commonly “prohibited the use of the Arabic language and writing to Christians and Jews, which should have affected that the latter wrote their Arabic matters in Hebrew characters.”\(^{37}\) It will be the conjecture of the present examination that Saadiah composed his *Tafsîr* in Hebrew characters in accordance with the aforementioned evidence and Saadiah’s stated purpose for its

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composition. In his introduction to the *Tafsīr*, Saadiah writes, “I have written this book at the request of some one who asked me to set apart the plain text of the Torah in a separate book, which would not be combined with any discussion on language usage.” Such a book containing the plain text of the Torah along with explanation could only refer to one of his *perushim* (commentaries) of the biblical books, which were halakhic, didactic documents that Saadiah could have only written for Jewish audiences.

1.5 *Qur’ānic Interpretation and Saadiah’s Exegetical Method*

The nature of Saadiah’s attitude toward the Torah vis-à-vis the Islamic attitude toward the Qur’ān is an important aspect of this examination. Scholars have noted that Saadiah held the Hebrew Bible to be the Jewish analogy to the Qur’ān, and in many places, Saadiah refers to the Jewish Scriptures as “al-qur’ān.” Lazarus-Yafeh notes that he was also not afraid to quote the Qur’ān. Saadiah’s vocabulary, particularly regarding terminology he uses to describe his exegetical methods, derives in large measure from Islamic usage. The word he uses to name his translation, *tafsīr*, is significant in and of itself. Al-Farāhīdī (d. 791) defines *tafsīr* as “the clarification (*bayān*) and elaboration (*tafsīl*) of the book.

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38 This translations is according to M. Polliack, *Karaite Tradition*, p. 82.


(al-kitāb),” i.e. the Qur’an. Saadiah likely knew that Muslims reserved this term exclusively for Qur’anic interpretation and chose it based on this quality. Polliack states that Saadiah’s choice of the word tafsīr suggests that he felt that “the Hebrew Bible, like the Qur’an, is essentially inimitable, and that his task as a translator is not to imitate the Hebrew text in the Arabic tongue, but to decode it within a coherent interpretive system and thus re-create it in a new cultural context.”

Ben-Shammai, as well, has observed the connection between the methods of tafsīr and Saadiah’s interpretive methods.

A salient feature of Saadiah’s interpretive style is his avoidance of anthropomorphic imagery of God, even if the Hebrew source uses such language. This practice was also a feature of targumic usage, especially Onkelos. Scholars also attribute this feature to his knowledge of Kalām and particularly mu’tazilī theology. As an example, Saadiah translates the words of God in Exodus 3:20 – I will stretch out my hand and smite Egypt – as “I will send out my plague and

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41 Al-Farāḥīḍi, Kitāb al-‘Ayn, vol. 7, p. 247. All references to Kitāb al-‘Ayn are from Al-Khalil b. Ahmad Al-Farāḥīḍi (718-791), Kitāb al-‘Ayn, ed. Mahdī al-Makhzūmī and Ibrāhīm Al-Sāmarrā‘ī, 8 volumes, Beirut.

42 M. Polliack, Karaite Tradition, p. 86.

43 See H. Ben-Shammai, “The Tension between Literal Interpretation and Exegetical Freedom,” pp. 36-37. Ben-Shammai discusses Saadiah’s exposition of his exegetical method and Saadiah’s understanding of the zāhir (plain meaning) and the bātin (hidden meaning) of scriptural passages. These terms, as Ben-Shammai notes, appear as terms in Islamic exegesis.

44 See S. Stroumsa, “Saadya and Jewish Kalām,” pp. 71–90. It is clear, however, that the avoidance of anthropomorphic images of God did not begin with Saadiah, and that clear manifestations of this phenomenon appear in the Targums, yet only sporadically. See Malter, Saadia Gaon, p. 144. His note incorrectly attributes this feature to the Onkelos, yet the Targum Jonathan is clearly that which interprets the text and freely amends anthropomorphic images. See Encyclopaedia Judaica 2nd. ed, vol. 17, p. 612.

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smite Egypt” (\textit{ab’athu āfaī fi-adribu l-miṣriyyīna}).\footnote{All references to Saadiah’s \textit{Tafsīr} are from Saadiah Gaon, \textit{Version Arabe du Penteteuque}, ed. J. Derenbourg. Paris: 1893.}  Saadiah also sought to rephrase seemingly illogical statements in Bible. In his translation of Genesis 37:2 – \textit{This, then, is the line of Jacob Joseph was seventeen years old} – Saadiah resolves the issue of the juxtaposition of the names Jacob and Joseph by translating the verse: “This, then, is the story of the line of Jacob when Joseph was seventeen years old . . .” The present examination will not deal with these types of translations in the \textit{Tafsīr}. The following discussion will instead focus on some semantic elements of Saadiah’s interpretive language.

A term that Saadiah employs in light of its significance in \textit{tafsīr} literature is “\textit{zāhir},” which he uses in his introduction to \textit{The Book of Beliefs and Opinions} concerning his exegetical methods in the following manner: “every statement found in the scriptures must be taken in its external [i.e. literal] (\textit{zāhir}) sense.”\footnote{H. Ben-Shammai, “Comparative Observations on Saadia's Method,” p. 35.} Saadiah goes on to contrast the \textit{zāhir} with \textit{ta’wil}. Whereas the former is his main form of interpretation, Saadiah reserved the latter for cases in which a verse cannot be interpreted literally on the grounds of sense perception (logical impossibility), anthropomorphism, abrogation by another verse, or a halakhic dictum which interprets the verse on its own.\footnote{This is a brief summary of Saadiah’s explanation of \textit{ta’wil} interpretation.} As Ben-Shammai notes, Saadiah borrowed these terms from the tradition of Qur’ānic interpretation and gives a specific example in which Ṭabarī (d. 932), Saadiah’s contemporary, uses these
two terms in his comment on Q. 2:221. Saadiah’s exegetical vocabulary, however, is merely a minor manifestation of his reliance upon Islamic religious terminology.

Another significant parallel between the Islamic attitude toward the Qur’ān and Saadiah’s attitude toward the Hebrew Bible is his distinction between muḥkam (clear) and mutashābih (ambiguous) biblical verses. In the introduction to his Commentary on Genesis, Saadiah states that “it is incumbent upon anyone who interprets [the Bible] that he consider [passages] that are in accordance with the rational principles which precede them and the traditions which follow them as reflecting clear language (muḥkamāt) and that he consider [passages] that contradict one of these to be ambiguous (mutashābihāt).” The distinction between verses here should be understood in light of that between zāhir and taʾwil as discussed in the previous paragraph. It seems that, according to Saadiah, that verses that are muḥkamāt should be interpreted (i.e. translated) in a manner of zāhir, while verses that are mutashābihāt ought to be interpreted in a manner of taʾwil. Though even Jewish mufassirūn like Saadiah frequently use these terms in their discourse, the origin of this dichotomy is Q 3:7, with which Saadiah was

48 H. Ben-Shammai, “Comparative Observations on Saadia's Method,” p. 38. He quotes Tabari: “This is precisely a verse whose external meaning (zahiruhā) is general [or generalized], but its inner meaning [or true] interpretation (tawiluhā) is particular. Wasserstrom (p. 142) notes that Saadiah employed tawil in accordance with Mu'tazili tendencies.

49 I offer the definitions “clear” and “ambiguous” only for the lay reader. Scholars of the Qur’ān will immediately identify these translations as being inexact.


likely familiar. Further analysis of some other aspects of Saadiah’s use of language will further show his reliance upon Islamic literature.

The most significant aspect of Islamic literary conventions that Saadiah employs is the use of the Classical Arabic register (as opposed to the colloquial register), which is the style of all formal Islamic discourse. Razhabi notes that “a comparison of [Saadiah’s] vocabulary in [his] Tafsīr to that of his contemporary Karaite translators of the Bible shows that he was more exceptional than them in his tendency to approach Classical Arabic.” Saadiah’s innovation was so influential that it initiated a renaissance throughout all fields of Judeo-Arabic literature. According to Benjamin Hary, the composition of the Tafsīr marked the beginning of the period of Classical Judeo-Arabic, which he characterizes as more adherent to the model of Classical Arabic. Malter goes as far as to say that it “ushered in a new epoch in the history of civilization in general and of the Jews in particular.” Saadiah’s use of a higher register of language in his Tafsīr


53 Y. Razhabi, Osar ha-lashon, p. 24. Saadiah makes explicit reference to his own register of language in his literature. For example, as Razhabi point out, Saadiah writes in his commentary to Lev. 5:6: “My translation for ‘and he brought (wahēbi’) his guilt offering (ʾāšmō) is qurbānīhu, because one does not say in Arabic ‘he brought a guilt offering to God (yaʾū’ aynahu lillāh)’.” This is my translation from Razhabi, p. 24.

54 B. Hary, Translating Religion: Linguistic Analysis of Judeo-Arabic Sacred Texts from Egypt, Études sur le Judaïsme Médiéval, vol. 38. Leiden: Brill, 2009, p. 36. Saadiah’s translation was not, however, void of colloquialisms. See Y. Razhabi, Osar ha-lashon, p. 27f., in which he provides a list of colloquialisms to be found in the Tafsīr.

55 H. Malter, Saadia Gaon, p. 141.
demonstrates that he sought to merge biblical ideas with expressions of Islamic piety.

1.6 Sanctity of the Text

The question of the sanctity of the Tafsir remains the topic of debate. Hary claims that “translations of sacred texts such as the Bible into Jewish varieties are more sacred than other writings in Jewish varieties, whose sanctity derives merely from their use of the hebrew alphabet - a marker of Jewish religion and culture.” Hary calls this “sanctity by association.” In other words, Hary believes that Jews of Arabic speaking lands who inherited the Tafsir considered it to be sacred in spite of the target language, not by virtue of it. However, this examination will aim to demonstrate that Saadiah not only attempts to translate the semantic value of the text, but also its sacred value. He does so by choosing words that possess a strongly sacred connotation in Islam.

The effect of this sanctity was significant in that it brought to Arabic-speaking Jews a new way to study their religion. Scheindlin holds the opinion that Saadiah was a “great innovator” in bringing the discussion of the Hebrew Bible back into the course of study of the geonim, who “rarely bothered to explain a passage in the Bible, except in the context of a talmudic discussion” before Saadiah. Scheindlin notes poignantly that “the bible had not even been part of

56 B. Hary, Translating Religion, p. 56.
the curriculum.”\textsuperscript{58} Goitein even suggested that the \textit{Tafsīr} was regularly memorized in the same vein as other sacred documents.\textsuperscript{59} The medieval Jewish scholars who studied the \textit{Tafsīr} viewed it as an authoritative document to the extent that Rabbanite scribes of Judeo-Arabic based all of their orthographic conventions on it.\textsuperscript{60} With this in mind, the present examination will explain the manner in which Saadiah instilled the \textit{Tafsīr} with sanctity, to which the Arabic-speaking Rabbinite Jews of the time seem to have held.

1.7 \textit{Semantic Features of Saadiah’s Religious Terminology in the Tafsīr}

In general, Saadiah readily incorporated Islamic religious terms into his discourse. According to Cohen, Saadiah “could refer unself-consciously to the Torah as \textit{sharī‘ah}, the Hebrew Bible as \textit{Qur‘ān}, the direction facing Jerusalem while praying as the \textit{qiblah}, and the prayer-leader (\textit{hazzan}) as \textit{imām}.”\textsuperscript{61} These noteworthy examples are a clear indication of Saadiah’s attitude toward language. Scholars have also looked more closely at terms within his \textit{Tafsīr}. According to Rippin, Saadiah “employed the target language in a way that displayed an attitude of integration toward the surrounding Arabic-Islamic culture.”\textsuperscript{62} An appropriate example of this is the manner in which Saadiah renders names of biblical figures.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., p. 40.


\textsuperscript{60} M. Polliack, \textit{Karaite Tradition}, p. 10.

\textsuperscript{61} M. Cohen, \textit{Between Crescent and Cross}, p. 115.

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., p. 115.
Saadiah uses Qur’ānic forms of names such as μūsā for Moses, Ḣabīm for Abraham, Ya’qūb for Jacob, etc. When Saadiah encounters ēbēd YHWH (the servant of YHWH, i.e. Moses), he renders it as rasūl allāh (the messenger of God). It is a non-literal translation, and it embodies the emotional underpinnings that Muslims associate with Muḥammad. Whether Saadiah uses it as a polemical statement, in order to refute the legitimacy of Muḥammad’s prophethood, or as a powerful epithet, his reliance on its theological connotation is evident.

Saadiah also chose translations based upon Islamic law in order to explicate Hebrew terms from the Pentateuch. In his translation of Deuteronomy 23:18, Saadiah translates the phrase lo’ tihyeh qedeshah mibeno’y išrā’el (no Israelite woman shall be a cult prostitute) as lā takun min banāti isrā’īla mumta’atun (There shall be no temporary wife among the daughters of Israel). Though temple prostitution ( qedeshah) was forbidden to the Israelites, the commandment did not serve Jewish communities in Saadiah’s time. He instead substitutes the associated concept of temporary marriage (mut’ah) in Islamic law, even though the Talmud does not explicitly forbid the latter practice. Saadiah translates sense for sense by applying a term whose significance connotes depravity for an original Hebrew term that could be interpreted with the same connotation.

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64 See Ibid., p. 368f.
As the previous discussion has shown, the content of Islamic literature has played a large roll in Saadia’s prose style. Freidenreich argues that “Saadia deliberately and selectively relied on Islamic sources”\(^65\) and “catered to the concerns of Jews whose religious, intellectual, and aesthetic norms were deeply influenced by the Arab culture and Muslim environment in which they lived.”\(^66\)

The present examination will show that this thesis is particularly true regarding Saadia’s expression of the sacred relationship between God and the Jewish people. The following sections will discuss Saadia’s translation of three words:

\textit{torah} (law of the covenant), \textit{berit} (covenant), \textit{hesed} (the love of the covenant).

### 1.8 Saadia’s Translation of the Word berit

Saadia uses three words to translate the Hebrew word for “covenant”:

\textit{‘ahd} (sixty-nine occurrences),\(^67\) \textit{shahādah} (three occurrences),\(^68\) and \textit{īmān} (one occurrence).\(^69\) The word \textit{‘ahd}, upon which Saadia relies most strongly, very closely approaches the meaning of \textit{berit} by its use in the Qur’ān, in which it appears twenty-nine times. This is apparent in the case of Q 2:40: \textit{yā bānī isrāʾīl adhkurū niʿmatī llatī anʿamtu ʿalaykum waʿawfū biʿahdī ụfī biʿahdikum} - O

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\(^{65}\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 360.

\(^{66}\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 357.

\(^{67}\) Gen. 6:18; 9:9, 11, 12, 13, 15, 17; 14:13; 15:18; 17:2, 4, 7, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 19, 21; 21:27, 32; 26:28; 31:44; Ex. 2:24; 6:5; 19:5; 23:32; 24:7, 8; 31:16; 34:10, 12, 15, 27, 28; Lev. 2:13; 24:8; 26:25, 25, 42, 42, 42, 44, 45; Nm. 10:33; 14:44; 18:19; 25:12, 13; Deut. 4:13, 23, 31; 5:2, 3; 7:2, 9, 12; 8:18; 10:8; 23:9; 17:2; 28:69, 69; 29:8, 11, 13, 20; 31:9, 26.

\(^{68}\) Deut. 9:9, 15; 31:25.

\(^{69}\) Gen. 9:16.
children of Israel, recall the favor that I bestowed upon you and be faithful to (your) covenant with me as I will be faithful to (my) covenant with you. This use of the word ‘ahd closely resembles the idea of the reciprocal nature of the berit between God and man as it is in Gen. 17:2: we-‘etna beriti beni uvenekha – And I will establish my covenant between me and between you. The word ‘ahd also appears in the Qur‘an as a contract between two humans just as the word berit serves the same purpose in the Pentateuch.\textsuperscript{70} Al-Farāhīdī defines ‘ahd as tagaddumun ilā sāḥibin bi-shay‘in - returning something to an owner - and as mawthiq - contract or agreement.\textsuperscript{71} Both of these definitions throw light on Saadiah’s use of this word as a substitute for the notion of berit. The covenant between man and God is an agreement in which man returns to something to God, namely sacrifice.

More interesting translations are the two which Saadiah uses much more rarely: shahādah and īmān. The only instances in which Saadiah uses these terms as substitutes for berit come within the context of either the tablets of the covenant (Deut. 9:9, 15) – luḥot ha-berit – and the ark of the covenant (Deut. 31:25) – aron ha-berit, which houses the tablets.\textsuperscript{72} Saadiah renders the former as

\textsuperscript{70} See, for example, Q 7:22 and Gen. 21:32. The former is a reference to the pagan people who did not keep their promises, while the latter involves Abraham and Abimelech creating a covenant between one another.

\textsuperscript{71} Kitāb al-‘Ayn, vol. 2, p. 102.

\textsuperscript{72} The word ‘ahd is still used for berit in other occurrences of aron berit (ark of the covenant). The only other place in the Pentateuch where the phrase “tablets of the commandment” occurs is Deut. 9:11 – At the end of those forty days and forty nights, the Lord gave me the two tablets of stone, the Tablets of the Covenant – which Saadiah renders as wa-kāna dhālikā ba‘ada arba‘īna yavman wa-arba‘īna laylatan dafa‘ahimā ilayya. Saadiah never uses the phrase lawḥā al-‘ahd.
lawḥa l-shahādah\footnote{lawḥay il-shahādah (Deut. 9:9) and lawḥa l-shahādah (Deut. 9:15).} and the latter as šundāq al-shahādah. This translation more closely resembles the Hebrew phrase luḥot ha-ʿedut – the tablets of the testimony.\footnote{See, for example, Exodus 31:18.} However, Saadia uses lawḥa al-shahādah for both concepts. It is likely that Saadia aims to display the commandments written on the tablets as being the Jewish declaration of faith just as the Islamic shahādah - the declaration of God’s unity and Muḥammad’s prophethood - acts as the Islamic declaration of faith.

Saadia’s rendering of berit as īmān in Gen. 9:16 also serves as evidence of Saadia’s dependence upon Islamic religious terminology. According to Saadia’s Arabic version of this verse, God speaks to Noah, saying: fa-ṭaṣīr ʿul-qawsu fī l-ghimāmi ʿazharuhā dhikran li-ʿīmān il-dahri min allāhi li-kulli nafṣin hayyatin – literally, “And the bow shall be in the clouds, and I will look upon it as a remembrance of the eternal faith between God and all of the living things.” The sense of the word berit in this verse is that of God’s promise of safety to his people. In this way, Saadia may have been invoking the negative definition for īmān, which is didd al-khawf – the opposite of fear – according to Al-Farāḥīdī.\footnote{Kitāb al-ʿAyn, vol. 7, p. 388.} By substituting īmān for berit, Saadia effectively borrows the Islamic concept of faith, in the sense of believing in divine safety, in order to elucidate and expand the idea of the the covenant.
Saadiah’s Translation of the Word torah

As this examination has already noted, Saadiah readily offered the word *sharī′ah* as a translation for the word *torah*. However, in his *Tafsīr*, Saadiah uses three words to translate *tora*: *sharī′ah* 34 times,76 *tawrāh* 19 times,77 and *dalālah* twice.78 All three of these translations indicate something significant about the way Saadiah viewed the Pentateuch.

The significance of Saadiah’s use of the word *sharī′ah* for the vast majority of occurrences of the word *torah* in the Pentateuch is an example of his goal to judaize an Islamic religious term. In the Qur’ān, the word *sharī′ah* appears only once in this form, and it is worthy of note for this matter. The Qur’ān speaks of the children of Israel in Q 45:16-18:

(16) We gave scripture, wisdom, and prophethood to the Children of Israel; We provided them with good things and favored them above others; (17) We gave them clear proof in matters [of religion]. They differed among themselves out of mutual rivalry, only after knowledge came to them: on the Day of Resurrection your Lord will judge between them regarding their differences. (18) Now We have set you [Muhammad] on a clear religious path, so follow it. Do not follow the desires of those who lack [true] knowledge.79

In these verses, the Qur’ān describes the *sharī′ah* as a path to follow that is more correct than the manner of behavior of the Jews, who lacked true knowledge. In

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77 Deut. 1:5; 4:8; 17:18, 19; 27:3, 8, 26; 28: 58, 61, 29:20, 28; 30:10; 31:11, 12, 24, 26; 32:46; 33:4, 10.

78 Lev. 26:24; Deut. 17:11

79 Arberry Qur’ān translation.
light of this verse, Saadiah makes a positive statement about the veracity of the Torah, both written and oral, that those who follow it possess true knowledge.\footnote{By Saadiah’s lifetime, the term \textit{tôrâ šeba’al peh} (Torah in the mouth i.e. oral law) was commonly used to refer to the Mishnah and Talmud.} Al-Ṭabarî, Saadiah’s near contemporary, agrees with Saadiah to an extent in his comment on this verse, writing on the authority of Qatādah that “the Torah, the Gospels, and the Qur’ān have each their own \textit{sharī‘ah}.”\footnote{Al-Ṭabarî on Q 5:48. According to the translation of Calder in "SHarī‘a." \textit{Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition}. Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W. P. Heinrichs. Brill, 2011.} By substituting \textit{sharī‘ah} for \textit{torah}, Saadiah effectively portrays the laws of the oral and written Torah as legitimate.

Saadiah twice translates \textit{torah} as \textit{dalālah} (guidance), a word that shares a similar meaning with \textit{sharī‘ah}, in Lev. 26:46 and Deut. 17:11. In both of these verses, the word \textit{torah} appears with the word \textit{mishpaṭ} (ordinance), which Saadiah translates as \textit{ḥukm} – “legal judgment” – in both instances. Saadiah therewith draws a connection between the \textit{ḥukm} and \textit{torah}, asserting that the Torah is the source of judgment, which guides the Jewish people as he implies.

It is worthy of note that Saadiah translates \textit{torah} with the arabicized word \textit{tawrāt} 19 out of 21 times in the Book of Deuteronomy. Saadiah’s virtual rejection of the word \textit{sharī‘ah} in his translation of Deuteronomy is peculiar, yet it could stem from the fact that the nature of the word \textit{torah} changes in Deuteronomy in that mention of it signifies a completed document. For example, Deut. 17:18 reads, “When he is seated on his royal throne, he shall have a copy of this
Teaching (torah) written for him on a scroll,” which Saadiah renders *wa-kamā yajlisu ‘alā kursiyyi mulkihi fa-taktubu lahu naskhata hādhā l-tawrātī fī sifrin*. In this way, Saadiah displays the Torah as being a revealed book, which is the significance of the word *tawrāt* in the Qur’ān. By translating *torah* with its direct cognate, Saadiah incorporates the Islamic notion of *tanzīl al-tawrāt* (the revelation of the Torah) into his *Tafsīr*. It should be noted that Saadiah also judaized the notion of *tanzīl al-zabūr* (the revelation of the Psalms), which had not previously been a part of standard Jewish thought. On the contrary, Davidic authorship was a popular notion, but Saadiah interprets the Psalms as being sent down to David from God.\(^8^2\) Saadiah’s treatment of the Psalms and the Pentateuch in this way demonstrates his acceptance of Islamic theological notions regarding the Jewish scriptures.

1.10  *Saadiah’s Translation of the Word ḥesed*

The Hebrew word *ḥesed* is, for modern scholars, one of the most difficult words to properly translate into English. It means “love,” “kindness,” or “mercy” in the context of God’s relationship with the covenant community, as Deut. 7:12 demonstrates: “And if you obey these rules and observe them carefully, the Lord your God will maintain for you the covenant (*berit*) and the kindness (*ḥesed*) that He made on oath with your fathers.” Arabic does not possess a proper semantic

cognate for *hesed,* and Saadiah only translates it in two ways,\(^{83}\) with the words *faḍl* (abundance or favor) 14 times\(^{84}\) and *iḥsān* (doing good) 6 times.\(^{85}\) Saadiah does not differentiate the semantic domain of the word *hesed* with these two separate translations in any noticeable way. For example, the word *hesed* occurs with the significance of kindness that one mortal being bestows upon another, whereas it more often occurs with the significance of kindness bestowed by God to the covenant community. This is the most salient distinction between two different uses of the word, yet Saadiah does not draw upon it by reserving *faḍl* for one meaning and *iḥsān* for the other.\(^{86}\) Instead, Saadiah uses these two terms almost interchangeably. In fact, he sometimes renders the word *hesed* in two different ways within the same chapter.\(^{87}\) With *faḍl* and *iḥsān,* Saadiah aimed to describe God’s abundance and his good deeds that he has for believers according to the significance of these two words in the Qur’ān.

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\(^{83}\) There is, however, an occurrence of the word *hesed* in Lev. 20:17 in which it is used as a euphemism, and it in fact means the opposite of “love” or “kindness.” Lev. 20:17 reads: If a man marries his sister, the daughter of either his father or his mother, so that he sees her nakedness and she sees his nakedness, it is a disgrace (*hesed*). Saadiah renders “it is a shameful thing” as *faḍhālika ‘ārun.*

\(^{84}\) Gen. 19:19; 20:13; 24:27, 49; 32:11; 39:21; 40:14; 47:29; Ex. 15:13; 34:6, 7; Num. 14:18, 19; Deut: 7:12.

\(^{85}\) Gen. 21:23; 24:12, 14; Ex. 20:5; Deut. 5:9; 7:9.

\(^{86}\) As an example, Saadiah renders the mortal-to-mortal *hesed* in Gen. 21:23 (between Abraham and Abimelech) as *iḥsān* and that in Gen. 20:13 (between Abraham and Sarah) as *faḍl.*

\(^{87}\) See Deut. 7:9 and 7:12, in which he renders *hesed as iḥsān* and *faḍl* respectively. In these verses, the word *hesed* appears in virtually the same context.
The *fadl* of God in the Qur’ān is a common feature of the text, occurring 84 times,⁸⁸ 80 of which all explicitly state that God is the source of *fadl*. An example that Saadiah himself may have had in mind is Q:75: “And of them are those who made a covenant with God (*man ʿāhada llāha*), if He give us out of His grace (*min fadlihi*), we will certainly give alms and be of the righteous.” The meaning of *fadl* in this verse closely approaches the significance of *hesed* in the Bible as it has already been discussed. Al-Farāhīdī writes that *fadl* is synonymous to *maʿrūf*,⁹⁰ which can mean “kindness” or “something that is beneficial,” yet he does not explicitly evoke God as the source of *fadl*. He also offers that the sentence *afḍala fulānun ʿalā fulānin* (so-and-so bestows *fadl* upon so-and-so) is equivalent to the statement *anālahu min fadlihi wa-ʿaḥsana ilayhi* (he procured for him some of his *fadl* and bestowed *iḥsān* upon him).⁹¹ This statement is particularly enlightening to this matter, in that it equates *fadl* with *iḥsān*.

A comparison between the function of *iḥsān* and the verbal form *aḥsana* in the Qur’ān and its function in Saadiah’s *Tafsīr* does not show a strong affinity. In the Qur’ān, *iḥsān* is mostly a quality of human beings, whereas it is a quality of God in the *Tafsīr*. However, a few verses feature the 4th form of the root *ḥ*-s-*n* in

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⁸⁸ In verses 7:39; 11:27; and 24:22, *fadl* occurs with the significance of one entity having favor over another. For example, 11:27 reads, “We see in you no favor over us” (*wa-mā narā lakum ʿalaynā min faḍlin*). Another meaning is manifest in Q 2:237, which reads “Do not forget the giving of free gifts between you” (*wa-lā tansū l-faḍla baynakum*).

⁹⁰ *Kitāb al-ʿAyn*, vol. 7, p. 43.

⁹¹ *Kitāb al-ʿAyn*, vol. 7. p. 44.
which God is the bestower of *ihsān*. The best example is Q 28:77, which reads *wa-‘ahsin kamā ahsana llāhu ilayka* (do good as God has done good to you). This verse somewhat captures the notion of a *berit*, in that it is a reciprocal relationship, however, this is certainly not the normative meaning. The most common connotations of the word *ihsān* in the Qur’ān are its description of how one should act toward a parent. Unfortunately, *Kitāb al-‘Ayn* lacks an entry for *ihsān*. The reason for Saadiah’s choice of this word for *hesed* is, therefore, difficult to judge. There are, however, several instances in which Saadiah includes the phrase *faḍl wa-‘ihsān* as a translation for the Hebrew phrase *hesed we’emet* (kindness and truth). By his reliance upon these two words, whether by substituting them interchangeably for the word *hesed* or by placing them in close proximity, Saadiah interprets the meaning of the covenant relationship to include not only God’s bounty (*faḍl*), which closely approaches the meaning of *hesed*, but also God’s unprovoked benevolent intention (*ihsān*), a concept which is not manifest in the Hebrew original text.

This examination has shown that Saadiah translates the language of the covenant in his *Tafsīr* by means of words whose origins and connotations stem from the Qur’ān and early Islamic religious perspective. Though Saadiah translates the *berit* as the ‘*ahd*, a very close semantic cognate, he also translates it as *shahādah* and *īmān*, two religiously charged concepts. People who called

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92 See Q 28:77; 32:7; 64:3.
themselves *muslim"ūn* would have also called themselves *mu’min"ūn* and *shuhūd*. Saadiah thereby takes advantage of the deeply rooted emotion of these words to describe the Jewish relationship with God. By translating *torah* as both *sharī‘ah* and *tawrāt*, Saadiah comments on its dual nature, as both a scripture, from which laws are derived, and a revelation. For Muslims as well, the Qur’ān is, of course, both of these things. Though this examination could not fully explain Saadiah’s translation of *ḥesed* as both *fadl* and *iḥsān*, it has shown that Saadiah did not hesitate to translate sense for sense. That is, he translated with the target language in mind, by using strongly religious language in order to make the Pentateuch sacred.

1.11  *Conclusions*

Saadiah’s *Tafs"ir* of the Pentateuch has turned out to be a crucial source in the study of Muslim-Jewish encounters in the Middle Ages. Being taken from the original Hebrew, it is an essential source in understanding the development of Judeo-Arabic literature and culture. Though scholars have uncovered several attestations of earlier Arabic Bible translations, it seems to be the first of its kind. This examination has shown that the demand for such a work was strong among the Jews of Saadiah’s time, and it has argued that Saadiah originally composed the *Tafs"ir* in Hebrew characters, for this very reason. With a scholarly audience in mind, Saadiah presented this text in accordance with the norms of rationality and interpretation that had already been established by Muslim scholars before him.
The analysis of the text of the *Tafsīr* presented here demonstrated that Saadiah derived his translations of religious concepts in the Pentateuch, particularly those describing the covenant, from words whose semantic value possessed strong connotations of Islamic piety. In doing so, Saadiah’s *Tafsīr* became a highly regarded work, which reinvigorated the close study of the biblical text in geonic Babylonia. In his treatment of words like *berit*, *torah*, and *hesed*, Saadiah effectively offers Arabic translations that closely approach the semantic value of their Hebrew counterparts, yet he invokes words such as *shahādah*, *īmān*, and *sharī‘ah* in order to provide the Jewish community with a holy book that expresses sacred matters in understandable and relatable terms. Scholars have discussed various topics on this matter, yet there remains work to be done in order to fully elaborate on the present thesis.
CHAPTER 2

ARABIC IN SAADIAH’S LITURGIES: HIS TRANSLATION OF THE

BAQQASHOT PIYYUṭIM

2.1 Introduction to Saadiah’s Baqqashot

The baqqashot of Saadiah Gaon, two liturgical piyyuṭim that he incorporated into his Siddur, embody a unique portion of medieval Jewish liturgical composition. Written in Saadiah’s particular form of biblically inspired Hebrew, he intended the first baqqashah, known as atta hu’ YYY levadkha, to serve as a meditation for Sabbaths and festivals and the second, which begins YYY šefatay tiftah, to serve as one for fast days. Various rites have incorporated both of these piyyuṭim into their rituals, and their early popularity lead Saadiah himself to produce Judeo-Arabic translations of both of them. The translation of the second baqqashah is preserved in his Siddur, while that of the first has surfaced in a Cairo Genizah fragment published by Yosef Tobi. These compositions

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95 See H. Malter, Saadia Gaon, p. 153.


reflect Saadiah’s style of translation, which is also evident in his *Ta‘ṣīr* of the Pentateuch and other biblical books, in which he evokes Islamic religious terminology in order to elucidate the Hebrew text in an interpretive manner. His style stands in contrast to later Rabbanite styles of *sharḥ* translations, which aimed to translate in a highly literal fashion, often flouting conventions of Arabic prose.98 The present study will demonstrate that Saadiah employed Islamic religious terminology in order to produce the liturgical vocabulary of the Judeo-Arabic translations of his *baqqashot*.

The significance of these translations is two-fold. Saadiah’s *piyyuṭ* translations can inform scholars of his knowledge of Islamic religious sources as well as the extent to which he sought them for inspiration. As of now, a full linguistic analysis of his *baqqashot* translations has not been done. The other significant aspect of these *baqqashot* translations is the light that they shed on the matter of individual expressions of Jewish piety in the Arabic language. The place of Judeo-Arabic in the liturgy remains unclear, as the only evidence of it is a handful of translations and original prayers that have surfaced from various Arabic-speaking Jewish communities.99 We can, therefore, argue whether these documents represent the actual practice of Judeo-Arabic prayer, whether individual or communal, or if they merely represent commentaries. Regardless of


this question, it is clear that Judeo-Arabic expressions of piety did emerge. The goal of the present examination will be to determine the Islamic influence on those expressions of Saadiah himself.

2.2 Saadiah’s Poetry and Islamic Influence

Before commencing this examination, a brief survey of Saadiah’s career as a poet is necessary. His effect on the field of piyyut and its flourishing in later generations is greater than any scholar of his time, yet his attitude toward it seems to be of an ambivalent nature. Saadiah generally disliked the notion of liturgical poetry in the same way that the leaders of the Babylonian communities nearly two centuries earlier.\(^{100}\) Piyyu\textit{t}im make up a very small portion of the Siddur, even though liturgical pay\textit{tan}u\textit{n} had gained popularity throughout Babylonia. According to Tobi, Saadiah’s “criticism was evident in that he prefaced almost every piyyu\textit{t} included in his prayer book with an almost apologetic explanation for the very deed, noting that he had only included the piyyu\textit{t}im because the congregation was accustomed to reciting them.”\(^{101}\) Though Saadiah was known for composing piyyu\textit{t}im and for his Sefer Ha-Agron, a dictionary intended to guide poets produce rhymes and acrostics, Louis Ginzberg, who never saw

\(^{100}\) For example, Yehudai Gaon (d. second half of 8th c.), who opposed any addition to the synagogue service, including even the Kedushah. See I. Elbogen, \textit{Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History}, trans. Raymond Scheindlin. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1993, p. 235.

Saadiah’s Siddur, held that Saadiah generally rejected non-talmudic liturgies. It has become clear, however, that Saadiah “knew the principles forbidding non-talmudic benedictions, but applied them inconsistently.”

Saadiah geared his rejection of piyyut toward compositions that lacked elegance, and he was not opposed to replacing them with his own works.

Saadiah’s effect on Hebrew poetry is marked by a strong influence by Arabic poetic features. Tobi notes that Saadiah lived during a schism in the world of Muslim scholarship between the ‘arabiyyah and the shu‘biyyah, the former stemming from Arabian society and the latter being those Muslims of Christian, Persian, and North African (Berber) descent. Tobi describe Saadiah’s attitude toward Arab Muslim scholarship as if Saadiah were a representative of the Jewish shu‘biyyah “whose intention was to fully prove the superiority of the Rabbanite Jewish tradition in the various spiritual and creative spheres over the schismatic Jewish sects – all the more over other religions and beliefs.”

In this way, one could understand Saadiah’s piyyut compositions to be attentive to the norms of the popular literature. Saadiah was also “the first to write comprehensive Hebrew poetic works clearly evincing the influence of the Arabic philosophical poems (zuhadiyyāt) of the school of al-‘Athahiyā and Abu Nuwas of the first half of the

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103 See Saadiah Gaon, Siddur, p. 225.

This influence on style may have had an effect on the manner of his translation of his *baqqashot*.

2.3 *The Significance of the Baqqashot*

Saadiah’s *baqqashot* are an expression of a significant development amongst the Jewish communities of his time. In accordance with the long history and development of *piyyuṭim*, they are rich in biblical allusions. Hoffman states that the composition of the *baqqashot* were part of his response to an “intellectual development [that] had resulted in a new class of Jews who demanded enlightened justification of their faith, as with every other aspect of their religion.” He composed them as meditations on “the nature of God, the process of creation, divine retribution, redemption, and the like.” It is clear that his goal was to produce poems that could appropriately complement the blessings of any occasion, especially since he intended the first for Sabbaths and festivals and the second for fast days. Saadiah explicitly states the function of the two *baqqashot*. He claims that they are, to “be recited by the individual at night in the privacy of his home,” although the later recension of the Italian rite includes them in the first person plural, indicating that communities incorporated them into

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communal worship. Another indication of its communal use is a famous responsum in which Maimonides was once asked if it was necessary to stand during the recitation of Saadiah’s *baqqashot*.110

The *Sitz in der Literatur* for Saadiah’s *baqqashot* is his Siddur, which is significant in the discussion of the importance of their Arabic translation. The very fact that Saadiah included their translations indicates that the translations may have served a liturgical purpose, as they are the only portion of the Siddur for which Saadiah supplies a translation. This comes in spite of the fact that Saadiah’s main interest in producing the Siddur was “to fix the ritual in conformity with halakhic regulations.”111 In the introduction to his Siddur, Saadiah claims that “it is necessary, therefore, that the prayers and hymns which belong to the order for our age, i.e. the period of the Exile, be collected and fixed.”112 Whether or not Saadiah intended for the Arabic text of his *baqqashot* to be taken as fixed liturgy is shrouded in mystery. Tobi, however, argues that Saadiah did not intend that the *baqqashot* be recited in Arabic. He notes that Saadiah translated both *Sefer Ha-Galuy* and *Sefer Ha-Egron* well after their original Hebrew compositions. It is likely also that Saadiah translated his

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112 Saadiah Gaon, *Siddur*, p. 10. This translation is according to Professor D. Frank in an unpublished translation of Saadiah’s introduction.
baqqashot well after their original composition as well, and thus his original intention was for them to be recited only in Hebrew.\textsuperscript{113}

Though the Arabic translation of the baqqashot is the only portion of translation in Saadiah’s Siddur, Saadiah composed all of the halakhic and rubric materials of the work in Judeo-Arabic. He interpolated these sections between nearly every blessing for the sake of explanation. The vocabulary of this material is worthy of discussion. Saadiah uses numerous terms to describe Jewish ideas that are substitutions based on Islamic theology and not on semantic value. For example, Saadiah regularly uses the word sunnah\textsuperscript{114} – customary practice\textsuperscript{115} – with respect to the concept of tradition. This word possesses, as it did in Saadiah’s time as well, the notion of established, legally binding precedents based upon the sayings of Muḥammad.\textsuperscript{116} Another example is Saadiah’s translation of the word torah as sharī'ah which is discussed above.\textsuperscript{117} This specific example also pays tribute to the notion of Islamic law. Saadiah uses the word qiblah\textsuperscript{118} for the direction facing Jerusalem in which worshipers should pray, even though the Islamic qiblah is in the direction of Mecca. In another case of terminology


\textsuperscript{114} Saadiah Gaon, \textit{Siddur}, p. 11, line 2, for an example.

\textsuperscript{115} This is the best secular definition of sunnah offered by H. Wehr, \textit{A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic}, p. 505.

\textsuperscript{116} Buḫārī’s (d. 870) Ṣaḥīḥ, for example, would have been known to Saadiah.

\textsuperscript{117} Saadiah Gaon, \textit{Siddur}, p. 2, line 1.

\textsuperscript{118} Saadiah Gaon, \textit{Siddur}, p. 20, lines 10-11.
directly relating to prayer and liturgy, Saadiah uses the word īmām for shalīḥ sibbur,119 a word which would have been widely used amongst Muslims to denote the occupation of a prayer leader in a mosque. It is thereby clear that Saadiah did not outwardly avoid Islamic terminology in his explanations of Jewish prayer.

The following examination of Saadiah’s translations of his baqqashot will consist of two main discussions. The first will discuss how Saadiah translated verbs concerning the act of prayer. There are many instances of words that consist of the roots h-l-l, p-l-l, and the like. This examination will demonstrate that Saadiah’s efforts to translate these ideas led him to employ roots which connote Islamic forms of worship. The second discussion will concern Saadiah’s translations of epithets for God. It will be shown that Saadiah’s translation of these exhibits clear Islamic influence and an adherence to Classical Arabic norms. Al-Farāhīdī’s entrees will again shed light on both religious and secular definitions of words as they were used in the centuries leading up to Saadiah’s career. The following examination will treat both of Saadiah’s translations even though he only included the second in his Siddur. The translation of the first baqqashah that appears in the Siddur was composed by a man named Ṣemaḥ ben Joshua, of whom nothing is known other than his name. The appearance of his translation is significant, nonetheless, as it indicates that communities were translating Saadiah’s poetry. However, it will not be treated it here. Instead, the

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119 Saadiah Gaon, Siddur, p. 41, lines 10 and 15.
following linguistic analysis will focus on Saadiah’s rendering of his own material and will aim to discuss his influences.

2.4 Verbs and Nouns Describing the Act of Prayer

There are several words that Saadiah uses to describe prayer. A common one, *tishbahot*, is rendered with a cognate root as *tasābīh*. In fact, the Arabic name of the Siddur is *Kitāb Jāmiʿ Al-Ṣalawāt Wa-al-tasābīh*. A common noun that connotes prayer appearing in the *baqqashot*, which Saadiah does not treat with a cognate, is *tehillah*. Without exception, Saadiah translates words of this word with the Arabic root *m-d-h*, particularly the noun *madḥ* (plural *madāʾīḥ*). In Arabic literature, a *madḥ* is a form of panegyric poetry, similar to the *gašīdah* that was popular among Muslims during Saadiah’s lifetime. Though this word does not possess an explicitly religious significance, it is likely that Saadiah aimed to liken Jewish prayer to this poetic genre because it connotes declarations of subservience to an authority. Furthermore, Saadiah may have had the name of the Book of Psalms, *tehillim*, in mind. Saadiah may have understood the chapters of

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120 The first *baqqasha* appears in Y. Tobi, “Rav Saadiah Gaon’s Translation to the Morning Prayer ‘You Are the Lord Alone Are You,’” pp. 7-27. The second appears in Saadiah Gaon, *Siddur*, pp. 64-81. Henceforth, references will be given in the following manner: page#/line#. For example, the reference “64/4” indicates page 64, line 4 in the second *baqqasha*. Any page numbers between 7-27 indicate a reference in the first *baqqasha*.

121 See 10/20; 23/3; 24/1; 24/3; 64/4; 66/8; 66/9; 73/13; 74/13; 74/14; 74/15; 80/7; 81/1

the Psalms as being similar to poems of this genre, though he calls the Book of Psalms *Kitāb al-Tasābih*.\(^{123}\)

A less common word to describe the act of prayer, evident in the name of his Siddur, is *tefillah*, which Saadia renders as *ṣalāh* each time it occurs.\(^{124}\) This word also appears throughout the rubric portions of the Siddur. According to al-Farāhīdī, Saadia may have been following a previously established paradigm, as he defines the phrase *ṣalawāt al-yahūd*\(^ {125}\) – places of worship of the Jews – as *kanāʾisuhum* – their synagogues.\(^ {126}\) Al-Farāhīdī already notes that the activity of a synagogue ought to be associated with this word. Unlike the word *madḥ*, this word is directly related to Islamic worship. The word *šelothaʾ* in Jewish Aramaic may have also influenced Saadia’s choice for this word. In any case, Saadia chooses this word for its emotional value. It is the Arabic which is most closely associated with fulfilling a commandment, as *ṣalāh* is one of the five pillars of Islam according to the *ḥadīth*.

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\(^{123}\) See U. Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms*, p. 15.

\(^{124}\) 24/10; 72/17; 81/15.

\(^{125}\) The word *ṣalawāt* connotes both the sense of “prayers” and “places of worship.”

\(^{126}\) *Al-ʿAyn*, vol. 7, p. 154.
Saadiah’s translation of the first bagqāsha contains a line in which there is a string of words, all participles, which describe the act of prayer:127

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original Hebrew</th>
<th>Transliteration</th>
<th>Arabic Translation</th>
<th>English according to the Hebrew</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>宽容</td>
<td>we-lefanekha</td>
<td>wa–bayna</td>
<td>Before you we</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>弯曲</td>
<td>kor’im</td>
<td>yadayka naḥnu</td>
<td>bend the knee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>弯曲</td>
<td>u-mishtahawim</td>
<td>rākiʿān wa–</td>
<td>prostrate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>弯曲</td>
<td>u-mitpallelim</td>
<td>sājidūn wa–</td>
<td>pray</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>弯曲</td>
<td>u-mithannenim</td>
<td>muṣallūn wa–</td>
<td>supplicate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>弯曲</td>
<td>u-mehallelim</td>
<td>mutaḍariʿān wa–</td>
<td>and praise your</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>弯曲</td>
<td>le-shem</td>
<td>mādiḥūn</td>
<td>glorious name.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>弯曲</td>
<td>tifʿartekha</td>
<td>wa–bayna</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This translation offers us Saadiah’s interpretation of five different expressions of worship, the third and fifth of which has already been discussed above. The first participle korʿim represents the standard procedure of bowing during prayer as prescribed in the Talmud.128 Saadiah renders this word with the Arabic word rākiʿān. By using the Arabic root r-k-ʿ in place of the Hebrew root k-r-ʿ, Saadiah seems to be making a convenient play on words. The Arabic verb rakaʿa connotes bending the body specifically within the context of Muslim prayer. The noun of the same root rakʿah is the “bending of the torso from an upright position, followed by two prostrations in the Muslim prayer ritual.”129 Al-Farāhīdī notes that a rākiʿ (active participle) is “one who falls prostrate and whose knee touches

127 10/19-21.
128 BT Berachot 12a.
129 H. Wehr, A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic, p. 415.
the ground.” The act that Wehr and Al-Farāḥīdī describe probably does not accurately describe the act of prostration followed by the Jews of Babylonia. With this translation, Saadiah uses a word whose religious value is very high in Islam even though it is not precisely congruent with Jewish practice. In this manner, this specific translation demonstrates Saadiah’s method.

The second and fourth participles further demonstrate Saadiah’s usage of religious terms whose semantic value is analogous to Jewish practices. The second Hebrew word in this list of actions is mishtahawim, which Saadiah translates as sājidūn. The significance of both the Hebrew word mishtahawim as well as the Arabic root s-j-d is twofold. They each mean “to bow down” and “to worship.” Though the act of sajdah in Muslim prayer is equivalent to rak‘ah, Saadiah captures the precise meaning of hishtahaweh, both prayer and prostration, by using a strongly religious Muslim term. The fourth Hebrew word in the list of participles is mithannenim, which Saadiah translates as mutadrarrā‘ūn. The former means “to bend oneself” or “to supplicate,” whereas the latter means “to humble oneself” or “to abase oneself.” In this translation, Saadiah connects the notion of lowliness with that of supplication.

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131 For the Arabic s-j-d, see H. Wehr, A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic, p. 463. For the Hebrew hishtahaweh, see M. Jastrow, Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi and Midrashic Literature. New York: Judaica Treasury, 2004, p. 1547. Jastrow notes that the verb hishtahaweh often appears in the sense of prostration before idols and people.

132 For mutadrarrā‘ūn, see H. Wehr, A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic, p. 632. For mithannenim, see Jastrow, Dictionary, p. 484.
These examples have demonstrated how Saadiah expressed matters of Jewish worship by adopting Islamic expressions. The following discussion will demonstrate how Saadiah translated certain epithets for God by using Islamic forms.

2.5 Epithets for God

In prayer, epithets for God are one of the most important aspects of Jewish liturgy. They are the subjects of the *hatimot* that accompany every blessing, and they play a large role in *piyyutim* as well. Saadiah uses them frequently in his Hebrew compositions. In order to translate them, Saadiah resorts to following Islamic norms in a number of instances.

Saadiah’s translation of the common Hebrew epithet for God *hay weqayyam* – “living and enduring” – is an example of his tendency to translate according to Islamic conventions. In his translation of the first *baqqasha*, Saadiah renders this phrase as *al-*hay al-qayyūm.133 The Arabic that Saadiah uses is cognate in meaning but not in form. Had Saadiah attempted to translate with regard to form, he would have rendered this phrase as *hay waqayyūm*. However, Saadiah instead uses the definite article on both adjectives. It is likely that Saadiah was familiar with this phrase as it appears in the Qur’ān.134 An similar example is Saadiah’s rendering of the phrase *elohe ‘olam* – “eternal God”

133 See 11/9; 12/11; 13/6; 14/2.
134 The phrase *al-*hay al-qayyūm appears twice in the Quran: 2:255 and 3:2. In both cases, the text reads “There is no god save the God, *the living, the enduring.*”
– as *rabb al-ʿālamīn*, a phrase which appears in the widely recited *fātiḥah*, the first Sura, of the Qurʿān.\(^{135}\) Another epithet for God from the *fātiḥah* which Saadiah employs is the phrase *rahmān raḥīm* as a substitution for the Hebrew phrase *ḥannun we-raḥum*.\(^{136}\) Islamic influence is more clear in this case because he does not translate root-for-root. By the examination of these examples it is clear that Saadiah intentionally mimicked qurʿānic language.

### 2.6 Conclusions

As this examination has indicated, the Jews who lived during and after Saadiah’s lifetime considered his *baqqashot* to be particularly important. The fact that they appear in his Siddur with an Arabic translation, let alone the fact that they were included in the Siddur at all, is a testament to their significance. Scholars will continue to debate whether or not Jews recited these poems in Arabic, whether aloud or to themselves as a silent mediation. That Saadiah translated them at all indicates, however, that he wanted Jews to see that the rhetorical value of Islamic religious vocabulary could also be efficacious for Jewish supplications.

This examination has demonstrated this in several ways. The present study has shown that Saadiah describes the halakhic dicta of ritual matters in


\(^{136}\) See 75/11. The exact phrase in the *fātiḥah* is *al-raḥmān al-raḥīm* with the definite article on both adjectives. Saadiah leaves them as indefinite.
terms of Islamic concepts. Even if this might have seemed strange in pre-
Saadianic times, it became a standard practice in later Judeo-Arabic literature.
The same is true for the manner in which he translated his poetry. His obvious
qur’ānic references may have originally jarred his fellow scholars, yet his legacy
in this regard is well documented. The Arabic portion of Saadiah’s Siddur,
therefore, is one of the most important examples of the influence of Islam on
Jewish liturgy and literature in the Middle Ages.
CHAPTER 3

ARABIC AS AN INTERPRETIVE TOOL IN SAADIAH’S BIBLICAL EXEGESIS: AN ANALYSIS OF HIS LONG COMMENTARY ON PSALM 1

3.1  Introduction to Saadiah’s Bible Commentaries

Saadiah’s biblical exegesis affords one of the best means of appreciating his translation methods and his use of Arabic terms. Although most of his commentaries survive today only in fragmentary form, they circulated widely throughout the Islamic world for centuries after his death, and proved to be extremely influential. In many instances in the commentaries, Saadiah explains his translation choices in rendering Hebrew into Arabic. Apart from grammatical notes, Saadiah’s comments address theological issues such as biblical anthropomorphisms and eschatology, as well as legal matters.

Scholars have identified two distinct commentaries on the first four psalms. The first of these is an appendix to his introduction to the Book of Psalms, in which he expresses his opinion that the Psalms were revealed to King David

137 A Fihrist written by Saadiah’s son Dosa as an epistle to Ḥasdai ibn Shaprut includes a list of biblical books for which Saadiah wrote interpretations. They include the first half of Genesis, all of Exodus and Leviticus, Isaiah, Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel. The text of the Fihrist is published in J. Mann, “A Fihrist of Saadya’s Works,” The Jewish Quarterly Review, vol. 11, no. 4, April 1921: 423-28.
and that it serves as a sort of second Pentateuch.\footnote{This opening treatise has been translated and discussed in M. Sokolow, “Saadiah Gaon’s Prolegomenon to Psalms,” in Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research, vol. 51, 1984: 131-174.} Saadiah’s exegesis of the first four psalms in his general introduction is much more expansive than his treatment in the main commentary. Quite possible, this section belonged originally to a long commentary that circulated beside the short commentary which has survived in its entirety.\footnote{For a discussion of the long and short commentaries, see U. Simon. Four Approaches to the Psalms, p. 2 n. 4.} Both longer and shorter versions contain a \textit{tafsîr} of the biblical text which precedes the commentary. Due to its expansiveness, it offers insight not only into the way that Saadiah dealt with the text but also into understanding the portions of the text that he found most problematic and most worthy of discussion.

3.2 \textit{The Plurality of Meanings in Saadiah’s Commentaries}

Saadiah’s translations are marked by his tendency to translate using regular equivalents. However, he often translates a Hebrew word using several different Arabic words. This is an important innovation, because it falls outside of the midrashic principle that the occurrence of a word in one place in scripture can be used to precisely explain its occurrence in another part of scripture. By translating contextually, however, Saadiah emphasizes the plain meaning of the text. Saadiah’s commentary on the opening psalms serves as an important example of his exegetical approach. In his long commentary on the first psalm, Saadiah includes an extended discussion of his strategy in three cases.
The first word upon which Saadiah comments is the word *torah*. The problem occurs for Saadiah in the second verse of the first psalm in which the word *torah* occurs twice: *The Teaching (torah) of the Lord is his delight, and he studies that teaching (torah) day and night.* Saadiah’s translates the first occurrence as *sharā‘i‘* (commandments) and the second as *tawrāt* (Torah). In his commentary, we read:

I have translated the first occurrence of the word *Torah* as “commandments” and the second as “Torah,” because the commandments are not subject to interpretation (*madrūsa*). Furthermore, they cannot be done at day and at night together.\(^{140}\)

Throughout his translations, Saadiah regularly interprets the word *Torah* as *sharā‘i‘*, yet in this interpretation, he makes a significant observation. Saadiah’s first comment, that the commandments are not *madrūsa* (*laysat bimadrūsa*), is conditional upon his translation of the Hebrew word *yehegeh* (meditate) as *yadrus* in Arabic. According to Saadiah, one can study the Torah, yet one cannot study the laws (*sharā‘i‘*) in the same way. The distinction is that the commandments are meant to be the intention of the worshiper yet the Torah should be that which is interpreted continually. Furthermore, the Torah is subject to interpretation, yet the laws are not, since they are already fixed in the rabbinic tradition. This explanation by Saadiah may be a polemical statement against those who believe that the commandments are, in fact, subject to interpretation, namely the Karaites.

With this interpretation, Saadiah allows for the word *Torah* to have a plurality of meanings even within the same verse. This differs significantly from

the Talmudic interpretation of the verse, which appears in a Baraita in Avodah Zarah which reads, “Raba also said the following: One should always study the Torah first and meditate in it afterwards, as it is said, ‘. . . the Law of the Lord’, and then, ‘and in his [own] law he meditates.’” In this case, the significance of the second occurrence of Torah implies two different actions, first study (yilmad) and then meditation (yehegeh). Saadiah strays from this path by making a logical argument. His first step is to translate the phrase the teaching of the Lord is his delight to mean his intention (murādihi) is in the commandments of God (fi sharā‘i‘ illāh). Saadiah then asserts that the second occurrence cannot mean “commandments” both because the commandments cannot be subject to the verb yehegeh and also because the commandments cannot be performed both day and night at the same time. Therefore, Saadiah’s innovation in his commentary on this verse is to offer a less homiletical and more logical interpretation.

The second word for which Saadiah supplies a multiplicity of meanings is the word qumah, upon which he comments in the fifth verse of the first psalm which reads, the wicked will not survive (yaqumu) judgment, which he translates as lā thabāt li-l-ṭāliḥin fī mawqīf il-ḥukm (literally, the wicked will have no constancy in the position of judgment). In his comment, Saadiah writes:

I have translated the phrase the wicked will not survive judgment, as if to say “they have no status, (lā qawām lahum),” which is similar to the phrase you shall not be able to stand your ground (tequmah) before your enemies (Lev. 26:37). For there are different ways in our language to render the word qumah. One of them is standing upon one’s feet (qawām ‘alā al-qadam), as in the

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141 BT Avodah Zarah 19a.
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verse which reads: *all the people would rise and stand (yaqimu)*, *each at the entrance of his tent* (Exod. 33:8). Another one them is the intention of an action (*qaṣḍ fiʾl*), as it is in the verse which reads: *this people will rise up (we-qām) and go astray* (Deut. 31:16). Another one is embarrassment (*ḥīrah*), as it is in the verse which reads: *when they rise (qamū), they shall be put to shame, but your servant shall rejoice* (Ps. 109:28). Another one is disgrace (*ʿār*), as it is in the verse which reads: *my gauntness rises up against me, it testifies against me* (Job 16:8). Another one is permanence (*thabāt*), as it is in the verse which reads: *a scepter shall rise out of Israel* (Num. 24:16). When translating, each are translated either as *qawm* (standing) or *muqāwamah* (standing in opposition) as we have done here.143

In this comment, Saadiah first includes a passage which contains a similar usage of a word with the root *q-w-m*. By choosing a phrase from among the threats and adjurations in Leviticus 26:37, Saadiah emphasizes that here the word *yaqumu* pertains to the inability to stand up against divine judgment. For Saadiah, this is a figurative meaning, which differs from the second definition he gives, that being “to stand upon one’s feet.” The third definition, “the intention to act,” is one that is analogous to Arabic grammar, as the Arabic root *q-w-m* can also be used in such a manner. With his fourth and fifth definitions, embarrassment (*ḥīrah*) and causing disgrace (*ʿār*), Saadiah again notes that the verb appears with a connotation of powerlessness before God. The last definition directly applies to his initial comment, as he demonstrates that the verb appears to confirm not only the powerlessness of the wicked but also the constancy of Israel.

Saadiah’s final statement here, that he translates the verbs with the root *q-w-m* uniformly as either *qawm* or *muqāwamah*, demonstrates his tendency to rely upon the plain meaning of the biblical text, even though he admits that the verb

has a plurality of significant meanings. This is an important innovation in the history of Jewish biblical exegesis. Though the targumim often supply different translations of the same word, Saadia’s commentaries are the first to discuss the issue in detail. Similar to this comment on words with the root \( q-w-m \), Saadia also discusses the plurality of meanings of the word \( yedi'ah \), knowledge in his commentary on the first Psalm.

The verse upon which Saadia comments at length on the word \( yedi'ah \) is the last of Psalm 1: *For the Lord knows (yodea’) the way of the righteous; but the way of the wicked shall perish. Here Saadia offers twelve definitions of \( yedi'ah \) (knowledge):

I translated the phrase *for the Lord knows the way of the righteous* as “God determines” (yuthbit) because the word \( yedi'ah \) (knowledge) also has several meanings. (1) One of them is cognition (al-‘ilm), as scripture says: *And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew (vayyeda’) that Samuel was established to be a prophet of the Lord* (1 Sam. 3:20). (2) One of them is knowledge in the sense of wisdom (ma’rifah ‘alā sabīl al-ḥikmah), as scriptures states: *Know (teda’) therefore and understand!* (Dan. 9:25). (3) Another meaning is knowledge in the sense of kinship (ma’rifah ‘alā sabīl al-qarābah), as scriptures states: *And Naomi had (moda’) a kinsman of her husband’s* (Ruth 2:1). (4) Another is knowledge of the truth (ma’rifah ‘alā sabīl al-ṣadāqah), as scripture says: *they have made princes, and I knew (yada’ti) it not* (Hos. 8:4). (5) One of them is in the sense of recognition and confirmation (al-‘i’tirāf wa-l-‘iqrār), as scripture says: *Every morning He brings His right to light, it does not fail; but the wrongdoer knows (yodea’) no shame* (Zeph. 3:5). (6) One of them is in the sense of seeing with one’s own eyes (al-mushāhadah), as scripture says: *Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who knew not (lo yada’) Joseph* (Exod. 1:8). (7) There is the type that is of custom (al-‘ādah), as we read: *For I know not to give flattering titles* (Job 32:22). (8) There is the type that is of punishment (al-‘idhāb), as we read: *And he knew (yada’) their castles, and laid waste their cities* (Ezek. 19:7); and we also read: *And he took the elders of the city, and thorns of the wilderness and briers, and with*
them he taught (yoda’) the men of Succoth (Judg. 8:16).  (9) Another one is intercourse (al-mubāda’ah), as scripture says: And the man knew (we-yada’) Eve his wife (Gen. 4:1).  (10) Another one concerns implementation and transmission (tanfīdh wa-ayṣāl), as we read: the young men have I appointed (yoda’t) to such and such a place (1 Sam 21:3).  (11) Another is feeling and emotion (shu’ūr wa-‘iḥsās), as we read: Whoever keeps the commandment shall know (yada’) no evil thing (Eccl. 8:5).  (12) Another one is determination (thibāt), as we read: The Lord knows (yodea’) the days of them that are wholehearted (Ps. 37:18); and also: For the Lord knows (yodea’) the way of the righteous.  These are the twelve in which the word yedi’ah can be described.144

In this extensive, encyclopedic explanation of the word yedi’ah, Saadiah begins with the literal meaning of ‘ilm. This point is particularly significant because of Saadiah’s theory of knowledge as he expresses it in Beliefs and Opinions. According to his theory, there are four sources of knowledge. They include that which is obtained by seeing with one’s own eyes (‘ilm al-shāhid), that which is obtained by the intuition of the intellect (‘ilm al-‘aqīl), that which is obtained by logical necessity (‘ilm mā dafa’at al-ẓarūrah ilayhi), and that which is obtained through reliable tradition (muqaddamāt).145 For the first definition of the twelve here, Saadiah offers an example of a biblical statement in the Bible in which the people have knowledge of the first type. Similarly, with the fourth and sixth definitions, those of knowledge of the truth (ma’rifah ‘alā sabīl al-ṣādāqah) and seeing with one’s own eyes (mushāhadah), Saadiah includes passages from the bible in which the word yedi’ah appears concerning the acknowledgment of


princes and Joseph. Saadiah includes in the fifth definition an example of knowledge of the second type, that obtained by intuition of the intellect, in which he cites a text that exhibits recognition and confirmation (al-ʿiṭirāf wa-l-ʿiqrār).

In the passage, the wicked fail to recognize the truth. This fifth definition fits his explanation of this type of knowledge in Beliefs and Opinions, in which Saadiah states that this type is that which “springs up solely in the mind of a human being, such as approbation of truthfulness (ʾistiḥsān al-ṣidq).” Saadiah does not include a passage that exemplifies the third type of knowledge, yet the third through the sixth serve as comments not only upon the biblical text, but also upon his theory of knowledge.

Just as Saadiah expounds upon his theory of knowledge, Saadiah explains the second definition, which is knowledge in the sense of wisdom (maʿrifah ʿalā sabīl al-ḥikmah), as a comment upon his theory of wisdom (ḥikmah). Saadiah includes in this definition a passage from the words of the angel Gabriel to Daniel, in which Gabriel says: Know (tedaʿ) therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the word to restore and to build Jerusalem unto one anointed, a prince, shall be seven weeks. This passage is fitting for Saadiah’s theory of wisdom. According to Saadiah in Beliefs and Opinions, wisdom is any knowledge of divine origin. Saadiah bases this assumption on a prooftext from Psalm 94:10 that God is He that teaches man knowledge. Here as well, Saadiah includes “wisdom” (Arab. ḥikmah) as a type of “knowledge” (Heb. daʿat). According to Saadiah, it is “by means of this wisdom that he is able to retain all the events of

146 Ibid., p. 16.

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the past and foresee many of the eventualities of the future.” 147 The example of Gabriel’s speech to Daniel precisely matches Saadiah’s point in Beliefs and Opinions in that Gabriel speaks for God and gives man knowledge in order to understand future events.

The final six definitions are not exemplary of a specific type of knowledge for which Saadiah has created a category. In this way, they are similar to the definitions given for qumah. However, there is an important distinction that separates the last definition – determination (thibāt) – from the rest of the figurative definitions. Whereas the seventh through eleventh definitions are expressions of human knowledge, the definition of determination, which Saadiah uses to translate the word yodea‘ in the Psalms passage, pertains to an expression of God’s knowledge.

According to Saadiah’s theory of knowledge, God does not require a cause for the acquisition of his knowledge. Rather, God is omniscient, knowing past and future by virtue of his essence. 148 God’s omniscience is proven by the contrast between the human body and God’s lack of a material existence. Human knowledge is limited to that which can be perceived by the senses. Since God possesses knowledge, yet he does not have senses and is not subject to accidents, then God’s knowledge must come by virtue of his essence. As God is both omniscient and omnipotent, it is no wonder that Saadiah translates the phrase the

147 Ibid., p. 182.
148 Ibid., p. 132. According to the Mu’tazilites, God is eternal. Therefore, any attribute of God, such as knowing, must be eternal. See "Mu’tazila." Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition. Brill Online, 2012, sec. I.
Lord knows the way of the righteous as “God determines the way of the righteous,” for God’s knowledge of the reward of the righteous is nothing more than his establishment of it through his revelation. Saadiah implements the same logic in his secondary example from Psalm 37 – the Lord knows (yodea‘) the days of them that are wholehearted, for their inheritance shall be forever – for God’s knowledge of the time is the same as his establishing for them an inheritance.

After examining Saadiah’s extended discussions of qumah and yedi‘ah, it is important to note that they both serve as explanations for his use of words of the Arabic root th-b-t in his translation. In the first case, Saadiah writes that “the wicked will have no constancy (lā thabāt) in judgment,” and in the second, he interprets that God “determines (yuthbit) the way of the righteous.” The difference in the English translations of “status” and “determination” is necessitated by the fact that the word thabāt is a form I maṣdar and that yuthbit is a form IV verb. The basic meaning of the form I verb is “to be firm,” and thus it also means “to have constancy.” The causal form IV verb means “to make firm,” and thus it also means “to determine” or “to establish.” Saadiah need not explain this lexicographic difference in order to emphasize his point. With these two long grammatical comments, Saadiah draws attention to the theme of the Psalm, which in his mind is reward and punishment.

3.3 Comments on the Psalm 1 Relating to Reward and Punishment

After Saadiah gives the three above-mentioned comments, he commences his interpretation by stating that “this first chapter concerns the righteous, to incite
them and encourage them to do good deeds.” Saadiah makes every effort in his commentary to suggest that the Psalm teaches that the righteous are rewarded and the wicked are punished both in this world and in the world to come. Saadiah translates the phrase *Happy is the man* as “good (*jawbā*) is the man” and comments that the first verse is “not an introduction to His explanation of their goodness.” In other words, the first statement of the Psalm is not a statement about the acts of the righteous. It is rather, according to Saadiah, God’s way of “giving thanks” (*shukr allāh*). Saadiah continues by explaining that happiness is a form of reward in the form of God’s thanks in other cases:

When God thanks any worshiper and speaks of their goodness – meaning that which is good according to their deeds, how good they are, or the like – it is one of the types of complete reward. This is like [God’s] utterance to our ancestor: *they did well to speak* (Deut. 5:25). This thanks of them comes from the fact that they said: *All the things that the Lord has commanded we will do* (Ex. 24:3). The reward itself is *that it might be well with them and with their children* (Deut. 5:26). Likewise, [God] said to David: *whereas it was in your heart to build a house for My name, you did well (heṭivota) that it was in your heart* (1 Kgs. 8:18). This is the same as his reward. In this same way, scripture says: *Happy is he whose transgression is forgiven* (Ps. 32:1), *happy is the man that does this* (Isa. 56:2), and *happy is the man that finds wisdom* (Prov. 3:13). . . . Thanks (*al-shukr*) is one of the types of rewards for the soul that rests in Him and that refrains from that which is the opposite, such as cursing and ridicule. In the tradition, the expectation of the Creator is that we give him praise and thanks, and we are warned against cursing and slandering him. In utmost praise of the righteous is God’s thanks to them, and it is good (*jawbā*) for he to whom the Lord gives thanks.150

After he translates the Hebrew *ashre* (happy) into the Arabic *tawbā* (good), Saadiah’s exegetical strategy is to cite verses from scripture which

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contain words that are etymologically related to the Arabic word ََََاَاَ wābā and to declare that these are rewards from God. Saadiah cites Exodus 24:3: *All the things that the Lord has commanded we will do.* The reward for this action comes about later in the book of Deuteronomy when God says to Moses concerning this statement: *they have well said (heṭivu) all that they have spoken, Oh that they had such a heart as this alway, to fear Me, and keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them (yiṭav), and with their children for ever!* The words heṭivu and yiṭav serve to demonstrate that God’s reward to the righteous is for him to call them “good.” Similarly, God’s statement to David – *you did well (heṭivot) that it was in your heart* – is also a reward to David in the absence of building the temple. To further clarify, Saadiah cites several passages in which the word ashre appears. He concludes this comment by God’s thanks is a reward for refraining from cursing and slandering God and by claiming that God gives thanks to humanity for this through scripture.

Saadiah offers an interpretation of the third and fourth verses of the first Psalm that also deals with reward and punishment. The verses read: *He is like a tree planted beside streams of water, which yields its fruit in season, whose foliage never fades, and whatever it produces thrives; Not so the wicked, rather, they are like chaff that wind blows away.* Saadiah writes:

The reward of the righteous is in the trees that bear fruit during the time of the harvest, and the punishment of the wicked is in the wind which blows the wheat from its chaff. The main point of these two examples is that obedience to Him is represented by water, as the prophet says *my doctrine shall drop as the rain* (Deut. 32:2). Another says [that the applicable verse is] *every one that is thirsty, come for water* (Isa. 55:1), because in water is the life of
everything, animal and non-animal, as scripture says: *Who sends forth springs into the valleys, etc.* (Ps. 104:10-14). Thus is the obedience to God, in which there is the life of everything, as scripture says: *You shall therefore keep My statutes, and My ordinances, which if a man does them, he shall live by them: I am the Lord* (Lev. 18:5).

With this interpretation, Saadiah takes up an allegorical interpretation in order to show that symbol of a tree planted by water symbolizes a human being receiving reward. Saadiah establishes that water represents both life and obedience by citing a passage from Deuteronomy, in which God’s doctrine (*leqa*), and a passage from Isaiah, in which water flows down for the animals to drink and for the grass to grow. According to the syllogism, the law is water, and water gives life; therefore, the law gives life as a reward. When a righteous man is like a tree standing by water, it is as if he obeys the commandments and receives the reward of the life that comes in its season. To conclude his logical argument showing that the first psalm deals with reward and punishment by citing the passage from Leviticus – *You shall therefore keep My statutes . . . which if a man does them, he shall live by them.*

In contrast to the previous comment on reward for the righteous, in which water was the key symbol, Saadiah discusses the wind in relation to the punishment for the disobedient.

Disobedience is represented by wind, as Jeremiah says that *at that time it shall be said of this people and of Jerusalem; a hot wind of the high hills in the wilderness toward the daughter of My people, not to fan, nor to cleanse, A wind too strong for this will come for Me; now will I also utter judgments against them* (Jer. 4:11-12) because it is by [the wind] that everything is uprooted, as scripture

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For though he be fruitful among the reed-plants, an east wind shall come, the wind of the Lord coming up from the wilderness, and his spring will dry up, and his fountain will be dried up; he shall spoil the treasure of all precious vessels (Hos. 13:15). Likewise, disobediences brings the wicked to an end, as scripture says: Behold, a storm of the Lord is gone forth in fury, a sweeping storm; it shall whirl upon the head of the wicked (Jer. 30:23).

In an almost identical fashion, using syllogisms in a logical argument, Saadiah creates an image by which the wind is God’s punishment for disobedience. Based on the above passage from Jeremiah, the wind is a medium of judgment against the disobedient, and based on the passage from Hosea, wind uproots everything and dries up the water. Since water is life, and the wind is a judgment that removes water, then the wind represents a judgment that removes the reward of life. In order to further demonstrate this point, Saadiah includes a second passage from Jeremiah in which the a wind sent by God whirls upon the wicked, a passage which uses the same word as the Psalm (resha’im).

Saadiah concludes his commentary on the first Psalm with a description of rewards and punishments in this world and in the world to come while demonstrating how the first psalm is representative of his theory. Concerning this world, Saadiah writes:

The utmost reward in this world comes by way of the commandments which command that we take up the practices of the righteous and walk in their ways, as scripture says: That you may walk in the way of good men, and keep the paths of the righteous, for the upright shall dwell in the land and the wholehearted shall remain in it (Prov. 2:20-21). It warns us against behaving according to the practices and customs of the wicked, though we allow them to be studied, as scripture says: Enter not into the path of the wicked, and walk not in the way of

152 Ibid., p. 42. My translation.
evil men; Avoid it, pass not by it; turn from it, and pass on (Prov. 4:14). Thus it is by way of the sign in this world that the righteous remain, as scripture says that the ways of the Lord are right, and the just do walk in them; but transgressors do stumble therein (Hos. 14:10).\textsuperscript{153}

In this comment, Saadiah suggests that on one level, the Psalm can be read in its plain sense to be a warning against the dangers of disobedience in this world. Saadiah includes a passage from Proverbs as an injunction to keep the commandments with the promise of an reward in this world. The second passage from Proverbs as well as the third passage from Hosea are warnings against disobedience in earthly settings. Saadiah uses these passages to comment upon the simple meaning of the warnings in the first psalm, that the wicked shall perish will not stand in the congregation of the righteous.

In his discussion of the Psalm’s significance concerning the rewards and punishments in the hereafter, Saadiah writes:

Scripture has said that the wicked have no status with the righteous, (lā qawām lahum ma‘a al-ṣāliḥīn), which means that they will not reach their rank. In fact, the will see it but will be excluded, as scripture says: Lord, Thy hand was lifted up, yet they see it not (Isa. 26:11). Scripture says that the traces of the righteous will never cease, and the traces of the wicked shall perish . . . It will be according to the rewards and the punishments in the hereafter that the righteous will be obedient, even though the hereafter will be for them a world of reward, as scripture says: Surely the righteous will give thanks unto Thy name; the upright will dwell in Your presence (Ps. 140:14). The wicked will not be disobedient either, rather they will have already been cut off from their action, as scripture says: There the wicked cease from troubling (Job 3:17).\textsuperscript{154}

\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., p. 43-44. My translation.

\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., p. 44. My translation.
This comment recalls the previous discussion of the meaning of the word *stand* (yaqumu) having to do with constancy (*thabāt*). In this case, the rank of the righteous is permanent, as the wicked are excluded from the hereafter, and their traces perish, while the traces of the righteous never cease. Likewise, the comment also states that, while the righteous will continue to live a life full of reward in the hereafter, the wicked shall cease from all action based upon an interpretation of Job 3:17. This concluding statement by Saadia on the first Psalm not only relies upon his translation of *the wicked shall not stand* as “the wicked have no constancy” in order to demonstrate that the wicked have no place in the world to come, but it also relies on his translation of *the Lord knows the ways of the righteous* as “God determines the ways of the righteous” in order to demonstrate that the righteous will benefit from the world to come.

The structure of Saadia’s commentary on the first Psalm very effectively allows him to incorporate his translation as an important part of the interpretation. Saadia goes to great lengths in the beginning of the commentary to defend his translation. When he comes to a difficult word or one which he does not translate in a literal fashion, he defends his choice by giving every possible meaning of the word and then deciding upon one based on the themes of the passage which he finds relevant. In the case of the word *Torah*, Saadia translates one occurrence with the word for commandments (*sharā’i‘*) in order to emphasize the notion that the Psalm is about the reward for obedience to them. When Saadia comments upon his translation of the word phrase *Happy is the man* as “good is the man,” it is because he aims to demonstrate that the opening statement epitomizes the
reward for obedience to commandments. Most importantly, the longest discussions of the words which are both translated with the rood *th-b-t* allow Saadiah to make the claim that the Psalm directly addressed the world to come. Without these significant translations, Saadiah’s interpretations would lack the necessary evidence for his arguments.

This commentary is not the only literary work of Saadiah’s in which he claims that reward and punishment are necessitated by reason. In *Beliefs and Opinions*, Saadiah discusses several of the themes which he explains in the commentary. Concerning the issue of happiness being a reward from God, Saadiah states in the opening to his treatise on command and prohibition that “God’s making His creatures’ diligent compliance with His commandments the means of attaining permanent bliss” is a the best course by which humans can attain happiness.\(^{155}\) He contrasts this to the happiness that is attained not by the fulfillment of commandments but by God’s ability to grant happiness by virtue of his creation of the world. Saadiah asserts that obtaining happiness by means of fulfilling God’s commandments offers human being much more happiness and that “the Creator preferred to assign to us the ampler portion in order that our reward might yield us a double benefit.”\(^{156}\)

In his prolegomena to the Psalms, the main text for which the commentary that is examined here is an appendix, Saadiah claims that the biblical text urges its readers to follow the laws by means of explaining the varieties of rewards and


\(^{156}\) Ibid., p. 138.
punishments associated with the injunctions. Saadiah states that “there are some for whom command and prohibition are the most effective [form of injunction]; for others, the impending reward or retribution must strengthen or weaken their resolve.”

This aspect of Saadiah’s exegetical method is apparent in his interpretation of the third verse of the first Psalm, in which he demonstrates through the use of imagery that the righteous received life in this world and the world to come by the image of water and that the wicked were left without a trace by the image of the wind. In his discussion of time in the prolegomena, Saadiah further explains that scripture speaks of the future in order either to intimidate by means of revealing the punishments that lay ahead for the disobedient or to invite worshipers by giving details of future rewards.

Saadiah uses this method especially in his commentary on the last verse in which he explains that the righteous will be of a higher status than the wicked. In Beliefs and Opinions, the only time that Saadiah mentions a verse from this Psalm is when he seeks to refute the incorrect interpretation that the Psalm speaks of past events. Saadiah claims that “scripture can decree that the person will be happy only after he has not walked” and that “it cannot do so before he will not walk.” Saadiah makes this point to emphasize the fact that the psalm must refer to the meting out of

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158 Saadiah also includes this discussion in his introduction to his Tafsīr of the Pentateuch. See Saadiah Gaon, Version Arabe du Pentateuque, p. 1-2. In summary, Saadiah asserts that there are three ways in which scripture gives a command. It first states the commandment, then it identifies the reward or the punishment associated with that commandment, and it finally tells a narrative in which biblical figures are either rewarded or punished for their actions.
punishment in the future and not in the past. This notion is crucial to the interpretation.
ADDITIONAL CONCLUSIONS

The impact of the use of the Arabic language in throughout Saadiah’s oeuvre is significant beyond its use as a medium of communication. As the previous examination has shown, there are several occasions in which there is a constant interplay between Hebrew and Arabic expressions that facilitate the commentary. An important feature of Arabic is its vast vocabulary and great amount of synonymous expressions. Saadiah cleverly translates the words *yaqumu* and *yodea‘*, two words that could never be synonymous in Hebrew, with the same Arabic root *th-b-t*. The effect of this is that he is able to make the last two verses of the Psalm fit together as opposing visions of the wicked and the righteous in the world to come. Saadiah also takes advantage of Hebrew and Arabic words that are etymologically related in order to achieve an exegetical goal. The phrase ʾjawbā is used to translate the phrase *happy is the man* in order to demonstrate that happiness is a reward from God since the Bible speaks of reward in terms of granting goodness (*heṭiv; yiṭav*).

Other innovations that occur in Saadiah’s exegesis outside of the use of Arabic can also be observed in this commentary. In a very obvious way, this commentary does not align with the Psalm’s treatment in the Talmud. Featured prominently tractate Avodah Zarah, verses from the Psalm are interpreted very
differently. In a few cases, the verses appear in order to give detail concerning the ideal student. For example, the *tree planted by streams of water* represents a tree that is transplanted, concerning which R. Shizebi in the name of R. Eleazar b. Azariah said, “whoever learns Torah from one master only will never achieve great success.” In other words, a student who is like a transplanted tree, who moves from teacher to teacher, is a righteous student. Fitting well for the tractate, the verses appear in order to demonstrate types of false worship. In a statement concerning Roman entertainments, the talmud teaches thus:

> Our Rabbis taught: Those who visit stadiums or a camp and witness there [the performance] of sorcerers and enchanters, or of bukion and mukion, lulion and mulion, blurin or salgurin — lo, this is ‘the seat of the scornful,’ and against those [who visit them] Scripture says, Happy is the man that hath not walked in the counsel of the wicked . . . nor sat in the seat of the scornful, but his delight is in the law of the Lord.  

From here you can infer that those things cause one to neglect the Torah.

From these examples, it is clear that Saadiah is not drawing upon the talmudic tradition as a form of inspiration for his commentary. Rather, Saadiah seeks inspiration from the logic based textual interpretation in the Islamic world of his generation. Saadiah does not elaborate on midrashic interpretations from the tradition. Instead, he looks at the text in a new way, through the lens of Arabic speculative literature, in order to explain the text rationally.

The legacy of Saadiah’s innovative commentaries like this one on the first Psalm are far reaching. Karaite authors of later generations Salmon ben Jeruḥam and Japheth ben Eli, both composed Psalms commentaries in Judeo-Arabic which

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159 BT *Avodah Zarah* 19a.  
160 BT *Avodah Zarah* 18b.
were also accompanied by Arabic translations. These compositions are a direct reaction to Saadiah, as they oppose Saadiah’s basic premise that the entirety of the Book of Psalms was a revelation to King David as a sort of second Pentateuch, but rather that the book is the scriptural source for mandatory prayers. Though they differ dramatically in content, they are presented in a similar format.

The portions of Saadiah’s commentaries that consist of explanations of the plurality of meanings of words is also a forerunner in a long line of similar types of Judeo-Arabic literature. Hebrew-Arabic lexicographic works of Saadiah’s near contemporary Judah ibn Quraysh and those of the later generations, including those by Jonah ibn Janāḥ and Abū Ibrahīm ibn Barun closely resemble Saadiah’s comments in that they list several passages that contain the word in question in order to give every possible definition. Even the opening chapters to Maimonides’ Guide to the Perplexed is similar. Maimonides aims to prove that certain Hebrew words, especially body parts associated with God, have several allegorical meanings. In order to demonstrate this, Maimonides lists several passages in order to tease out the nonliteral definitions of certain words.

Saadiah’s commentary on the first Psalm from his long commentary is an exemplary illustration of his methods of interpretation and translation. This text offers a unique opportunity to probe Saadiah’s techniques, as it contains comments whose conclusions are the same in the short commentary, but whose explanations are much more extensive. In general, Saadiah’s approach is not midrashic, but it rather shows rationalistic tendencies such as allegorical
interpretation of certain passages. Saadiah also tends to preserve the plain meaning of the text, both in his translation as well as in his interpretation.

The three main features of the text – the Arabic translation, his defense of the translation consisting of numerous definitions for a single word, and his interpretation – are not three isolated texts. Rather, they exist in symbiosis. The translation offers Saadiah the opportunity to choose a nonliteral translation for a word which plays a crucial role in the interpretation, while the list of definitions for that word allows him to use deductive reasoning in order to prove that his definition was the correct choice.

Saadiah’s reliance upon Arabic as a form of communication has consequences which affect his exegetical strategies. Because Saadiah understands that Hebrew and Arabic share cognate words, he utilizes cognates sometimes even if the translation is not semantically similar. Alternatively, Saadiah also chooses translations that are not cognates when a cognate exists. However, it is clear that the translation is not an exercise for its own sake, but rather it is a tool with which Saadiah interprets the text.
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