

REASON AND REVELATION IN THE THOUGHT OF SAADIAH GAON

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Saadya bin Joseph (882-942), also known as Saadiah Gaon, was born in Fayyum, Upper Egypt. He was the first philosopher of Judaism to write systematic works.¹ He was also a pioneering exegete, grammarian, lexicographer, liturgist and chronologist.² His early years were spent in Egypt, and apparently it was there he began corresponding with Isaac Israeli of Kairouan (c.855-c.955), the physician philosopher who, due partly to the influence of al-Kindi, initiated the tradition of Neoplatonic philosophy among Arab speaking Jews. It was also during his youth that he became involved in a series of disputations with the Karaites, a sect that prided themselves on their rejection of the Talmud and their acceptance of the Bible as the only legitimate source of revelation. The controversy that emerged from the disagreement between Saadya and the Karaites were symptomatic of later events in his life, where his erudition and learning, as well as his critical intellect, would lead him into further persecution, enmity, and eventually, exile.³

For some seven years, he lived the life of an exile, wandering between Palestine, Iraq and Syria. It was during this period that he apparently studied with Abu Kathir Yahya al-Kathib of Tiberias, and came upon the writings of David al-Muqammis (the Jewish philosopher). He also absorbed the teachings and techniques of the masorettes of Tiberias, scholars who had redefined the approach to traditional Jewish scriptural studies to a much higher level of sophistication. But Saadya's aggressive approach towards what he considers to be slights as well as valid criticisms against the Rabbinic tradition earned him the enmity of many authoritative figures amongst the Jewish community. Despite his wanderings and the various

controversies surrounding him, Saadya was eventually made Gaon ('Illustrious' rabbi or master) of the great academy at Sura.

Saadya's major work on philosophy, the *Kitab al-Amanat wal-Itikadat* (the Book of Beliefs and Opinions) was written in 933. It was divided into ten main treatises, which deal respectively with:

1. The Creation of the world
2. God's unity and other divine attributes
3. The commandments of God and the means of their revelation
4. Man's freedom to obey or disobey God
5. Virtue and vice
6. Man's soul and its immortality
7. The doctrine of resurrection
8. The age of the messiah and Israel's redemption
9. Reward and punishment in the hereafter
10. The golden mean

The structure of the *Kitab al-Amanat* mirrors the organisation of the Mutazilite treatises of the time.⁴ The Mutazilites, as strict rationalists, held that reason could demonstrate the existence of God and the universal ethical responsibility that falls upon human beings in society.⁵ Revelation, they contended provides us with the knowledge of a separate realm of divine existence where the potencies of human reason cannot access. Their position was also an explicit rejection of the Mujbirites (Determinists) whose belief in God's predetermination had rendered the idea of human responsibility and God's judgment redundant. The Mutazilites were the first sect in Islam who attempted to expound a structured and rational interpretation of religious belief. The dominance of philosophical discourse provided the background from which the thoughts of Saadya emerged. Baghdad provided the common backdrop for intellectual, philosophical and theological disputes, not only among Muslims, but also those of other religious confessions. As Abu Umar recalls, "At the first meeting I attended, there were present not only members of all the orthodox and unorthodox Muslim sects, but unbelievers-Magians, materialists,

atheists, Jews, Christians- unbelievers of every sort. Each sect had its own chief, to defend the views he professed. Soon the hall was filled to overflowing, and when everyone seemed to have arrived, one of the unbelievers rose to speak: 'We have gathered to reason together,' he said, 'and you all know the rules. You Muslims may not oppose us with arguments in your Book or the authority of your prophet. For we do not believe in either. Each of us must therefore limit himself to arguments based on human reason'. All applauded these words" (Nasr and Leaman : 710).

Saadya was recognised as a true rationalist. He propounded a view that reason was not, in any way, contra-distinct from revealed knowledge. Like the Mutazilites before him, Saadya saw God as a unicity, and that all of His attributes are merely metaphorical aspects of the Divine Being. Anthropomorphism for Saadya, was to be rejected, for it undermines the unity of God, through its associationist implications; for example, the expression 'God's arms' denotes power, not the extremity of the limb.⁶ As Heschel puts it, "Saadya's quest for certainty was . . . for a reconciliation between reason and revelation. Over and above such agreement between the details of their teachings, there is an intrinsic similarity in their very nature. This, though, was a solution that bred new problems. The recognition of religion as a flow of knowledge opened the vista of a serious dilemma. The streams of reason and revelation either run parallel, or in different directions. If they run in different directions, then only one of them leads towards the truth, whilst the other towards error. If they run in parallel, why do we need river and sea at the same time?"(391).

Saadya responds to the question in two ways; first, he argues that not all men, by their individual disposition, are capable of pursuing the truth through reason and even those who are predisposed to it may require an inordinate amount of time and effort to arrive at the truth unaided. And secondly, it would mean that man would have no recourse to proper guidance whilst he is going through the long and arduous process of seeking that truth. As Saadya writes, "We say then, the All Wise knew that the conclusions reached by the art of

speculation could be attained only in the course of a certain measure of time. If therefore, He had referred us for our acquaintance with His religion to that art alone, we would have remained without religious guidance whatever for a while, until the process of reasoning was completed by us so that we could make use of its conclusions. But many a one of us might never complete the process because of some flaw in our reasoning. Again he might not succeed in making use of its conclusions because he is overcome by worry or overwhelmed by uncertainties that confuse and befuddle him. That is why God, exalted and magnified be He, afforded us a quick relief from all these burdens by sending us His messengers through whom He transmitted messages to us, and by letting us see with our own eyes the signs and the proofs supporting them about which no doubt could prevail and which we could not possibly reject. Thus He said: Ye yourselves have seen that I have talked with you from heaven (Exod.20:19) (31).

It is a commonly held view that Saadya's doctrine of the "Created Glory" and "Created Word" was borrowed from the Mutazilite doctrine of the "Created Kalam of God".⁷ These two conceptions form the fundamental basis of Saadya's theory of revelation and its intimate relationship with reason. Saadya begins with a formal classification of his epistemology, by deducing three basic types of human knowledge; first, sense perception; second, reason, or the "primary premise"; and finally, scientific knowledge, which entails "the conclusion of demonstration" (Wolfson : 233-JQR 34). As Saadya asserts, "The first consists of (knowledge) gained by direct observation. The second is composed of the intuition of the intellect. The third comprises that knowledge which is inferred by logical necessity" (16). He elaborates the point further, "By the knowledge of sense perception we understand that which a man perceives by one of his five senses. By the knowledge of reason we understand that which is derived purely from the mind, such as the approval of truth and the disapproval of falsehood. By inferential knowledge we understand a proposition which man cannot deny without being compelled to deny at the same time some proposition obtained from reason or sense perception. Where there is no way of denying these propositions, the previous propositions must by necessity

be accepted” (36). As examples of this he adds, are the existence of our souls, though we are unable to perceive it through our sense perception, we are compelled to admit to its existence, primarily through recognising its functions.

Saadya’s reasons for rejecting the infallibility of normal human knowledge stems from his distrust of our faculties of sense perception and our ability to reason correctly. Though he admits that sense perception, as long as it is working properly, can lead us towards certain knowledge, in practice, perception is not always accurate, and can in some cases mislead us from the truth. The example that he gives of this includes the experience of illusions and those suffering from physical abnormality. He goes on further to describe that the types of information we are able to glean from our sense perception only fulfills part of the criterion of true knowledge and that there are other forms of knowledge that lie beyond the realm of our sense perception. Accordingly, sense perception requires the supplement of reason for us to be able to arrange our cognitive facilities coherently. As Saadya says, “If someone saw a person and we ask him: have you seen this person? He answers in the affirmative. But this answer was not given by the sense of sight, for it cannot speak, while the faculty of speech that gave the answer has not seen him. Hence there must be a cognitive faculty which preserves the perception of the sight and whose manifestation is the faculty of speech” (96). This faculty, which Heschel identifies as identical with the ‘senses communis’ in Aristotelian psychology, is also credited with memory, which is the notion that the mind retains the ideas derived from the act of perception or cognition after the acts themselves have ceased. For Saadya, this ‘common sense’ is simply the result of the workings of the mind rather than what the mind is in itself.

He then expounds what he considers as “the knowledge of reason”.⁸ To him apriori knowledge consists of what can be known through self evident propositions, such as “the view that truth is good and falsehood blamable, the idea of the existence of God, the law of contradiction that opposites cannot belong to same thing at the same

time as well as the principles of formal logic” (Heschel : 278). Saadya asserts that, “All general ideas that are manifest to our reason (in the act of cognition) are true, provided we know how to think, complete the act of cognition, and are on guard against illusions and dreams” (Heschel : 278). Saadya’s conviction in the possibility of reason as a safeguard towards truth can be found in Aristotle, who thinks that all proof-claims eventually lead to a first cause, which on account of their immediate certainty, no longer need or admit proof. He believes that the intuitive certainty we can derive from this is a product of pure reason, a function that resides within the human soul. And because the nature of our rational knowledge differs considerably from the knowledge we acquire through our physical sensibilities (he uses the example of the blind man’s dream), we must therefore, possess an inner source of knowledge in the soul. For Saadya, it appears that this type of knowledge is identical to (or at least, parallel with) the knowledge of reason.

The articulation he gives for the primacy of reason is problematic. One on hand, he affirms that anything which contradicts the tenets of reason would inevitably be false. Yet on the other, he seems to be arguing that there are other types of knowledge, which are separate from that which is derived from our rational and sensible cognition. And for him, these forms of knowledge are also true, despite failing to fulfill his criterion for accepting it as such. Though he alludes to the similarity between such “intuitive” forms of knowledge with reason, he does not state clearly why and how this is so. However, Saadya’s conviction of the reducibility of knowledge to a form of intuitive sentiment can clearly be found in the Amanat, where he writes, “It has become clear to me that the soul is wise through its own essence, because of various reasons. (1) It cannot acquire knowledge from the body for the latter has no wisdom. (2) It has been verified that the blind person dreams that he sees; so that if he had no visual experience through his body, he must have obtained it through his soul. Hence he who believed the soul to be a juncture and combination and contact of senses was mistaken, because since it is the soul which gives the organ of power sensation, how could they give it substance?” (Efros :

148). There is a problematic aspect to Saadya's use of the example of the blind man. Earlier he pointed out that memory is alluded to when the mind stores the information extracted from our senses, and acts as a guide for our later actions. What the blind man sees in his dreams is a representation of something else that he had seen previously. Though it is correct to assume of the intrinsic source of the image, nevertheless, that image had already been there through the man's previous experiences. Now, if one was to argue that the man was born blind, and yet was able to see an image of some sort. And then claimed that the image corresponded to some real object, (or at least, for us to interpret his description in order to make it intelligible for us),

Reason for Saadya, if understood properly can never contradict the truthfulness of revelation. He thinks that the dichotomy between reason and revelation is a false one. The reason for this is implicit in the idea of monotheism itself; revelation, by its very nature provides a different ontological starting point than reason. Whereas reason begins by initiating the notion of doubt, revelation begins from the standpoint of complete and absolute knowledge, i.e. Divine Knowledge. If there were disagreements between revelation and the verities of reason, it would mean by implication, that there exists a reality or truth beyond the omnipotence of God. This, by extension, would presuppose a plurality of deities, logically denying the possibility of God's unicity. Heschel writes, "Saadya thus combines the problem of the trustworthiness of revelation with that of the rationality of its contents. They are no longer separate problems. The authority of revelation has its foundation in the rationality of its content as well as in miracles" (404). This particularistic approach by Saadya, brought with it a number of problems: first, by enunciating reason as complimentary to revelation, he opens the door for religion to be reduced to a series of propositional claims. And second, by asserting that revelation was sent down (at least in part) as a manifestation of God's "ultra-rationality", sits uncomfortably with the claim that revelation is, in any sense, truly unique, or at least separate from reason. It begs the question, "if revelation is nothing more than a super-extension of reasoning at its highest level, than what, in essence, distinguishes reason from revelation?"

According to Heschel, Saadya admits to the limits of reason's ability to prove that biblical teachings are indeed completely rational; that certain ideas "cannot be explained by the concepts provided by reason".⁹ Yet somehow reason must ultimately lead us to a position that agrees with the teachings of revelation, because, according to Saadya, if we examine revelation, the elements of rationality in it would be evident. Saadya asserts this strongly when he says, "Now any theory that leads to such internal contradiction and mutual exclusion must be false" (143). Thus this seems to suggest that if the dictates of reason shows us to the incoherence of any claim, therefore that claim must, by necessity, be false.

The key here is the emphasis on rationality as the sole claim to the truth or falsity of a theory. The implication of this means that any theory (with or without Divine authority) must fulfil the truth criterion as set out by reason (in Saadya's opinion) in order to be considered valid. Hence, this seems to suggest that revelation must, fundamentally, run parallel to reason (albeit, in a "super-extended" form). Otherwise, the function of revelation as a provider of "truths", in Saadya's system, loses its sense of validity. The reason why we think there is an inherent paradox here lies in the justification Saadya provides for the need to follow specific biblical commandments.¹⁰ He writes, "But even though the chief reason for the fulfillment of these principle precepts and their derivatives and whatever is connected with them is the fact that they represent the command of our lord and enables us to reap a special advantage, yet I find that most of them have their basis partially useful purposes" (143). In other words, Saadya thinks that even though divine commandments should be assiduously followed because it is God's command, nevertheless its intrinsic value does not contradict the claims of reason.

He cites the example of the Sabbath by suggesting that its value is derived from the rest it affords the individual, and the time it allows for members of the community to participate in other religious obligations. Thus revelation is therefore indispensable as a source not only for the traditional precepts whose meaning is not apparent, but

also for rational precepts.¹¹ Reason may grasp principles but not the specific details of their observance. As Saadya suggests, “thus for example reason calls for gratitude to God for His kindness, but does not define how this gratitude is to be expressed or at what time or in what form it is to be shown. There was, therefore, need for messengers who defined it and designated it as a prayer and assigned it to certain set times and gave it a particular formulation and (prescribed) a specific posture and direction” (145).

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Footnotes:

- ¹ Goodman, in Nasr and Leaman (p.696), also cited in Rosenthal, p.4.
- ² According to Goodman, with his training in Scripture and Rabbinic law, he published his earliest version of the Hebrew-Arabic lexicon, the "Ergon", in 913. It was extended in phases, until by 930 it had over a thousand entries analysing biblical and post-biblical Hebrew usage.
- ³ As Goodman writes, "the rigour and appositeness of his approach, and his tenacious style of debate, became sources of hardship for him. (The) Karaite leaders apparently used their influence with the Islamic government to see to it that he was removed from Egypt (696).
- ⁴ Sirat p.22.
- ⁵ Martin and Woodward p.12.
- ⁶ Heschel(2) p.402.
- ⁷ Rosenthal p.5, and Rosenblatt p.xxvi.
- ⁸ Heschel(1) p.277.
- ⁹ Heschel(2) p.395.
- ¹⁰ Saadya writes, "They include such matters as the consecration of certain days among others, like the Sabbath and the festivals, and the consecration of certain human beings from others, such as the prophet and the priest, and refraining from certain foods, and the avoidance of cohabitation with certain persons, and going into isolation immediately upon the occurrence of certain accidents because of defilements" (143).
- ¹¹ Heschel(2) p.397.