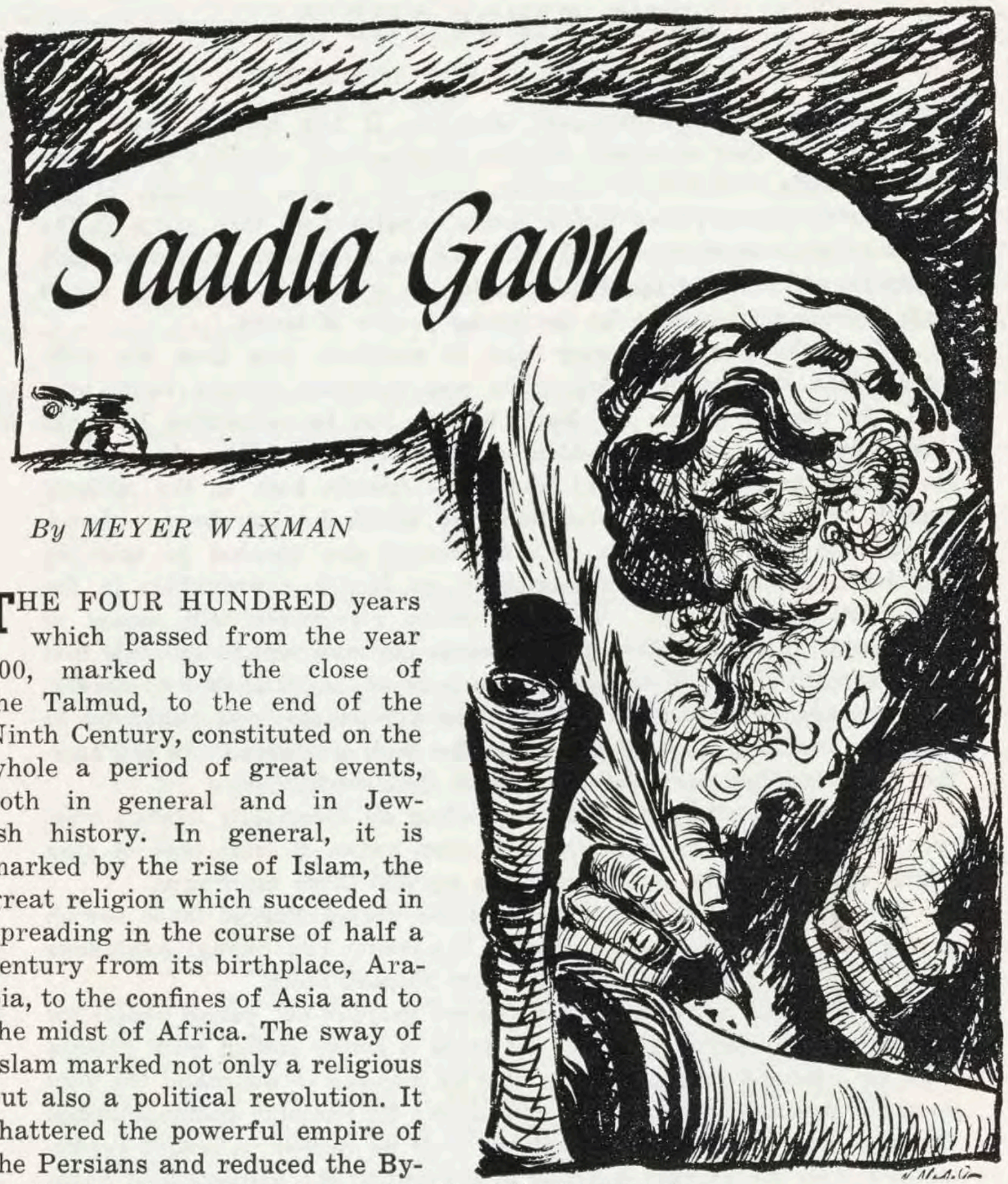
Saadia Gaon



By MEYER WAXMAN

THE FOUR HUNDRED years which passed from the year 500, marked by the close of the Talmud, to the end of the Ninth Century, constituted on the whole a period of great events, both in general and in Jewish history. In general, it is marked by the rise of Islam, the great religion which succeeded in spreading in the course of half a century from its birthplace, Arabia, to the confines of Asia and to the midst of Africa. The sway of Islam marked not only a religious but also a political revolution. It shattered the powerful empire of the Persians and reduced the Byzantine empire to less than a fourth of its former size.

As a result of these changes in the general world, there took place also many changes in the Jewish world. The new, dominating religion which borrowed much from Judaism and whose language was Arabic, of Semitic stock and akin to Hebrew, was in the early period of its rise less antagonistic to Judaism than Christianity and Zoroastrianism, which previously held sway in the leading Jewish centers, the Babylonian and Palestinian. Jewish activity in these two countries rose therefore to a higher level. However,

due to a number of causes, though we are aware of the great heritage left to us by the literary activity of the Eretz Israel scholars during the Seventh and Eighth Centuries, the light of history does not properly illumine the path of influence of that Jewry.

THE CASE was different with the Babylonian center. The large number of Jews living there, its age-long social and religious organization with the Prince of the Exile (Rosh Galuta) at its head — an office which was continued under Islamic rule — and its two academies which continued to expound the Talmud — all these made its influence paramount in world Jewry. This Jewry was continually expanding at the time, and new centers of settlement were gradually arising. In all these places the Jewish settlements began to flourish under Islamic rule and the leaders set out to organize their religious life. But being young and possessing little learning, they were confused and were in search of a way to a complete Jewish life. They all turned for guidance to Babylonia where the Geonim, the heads of the two great academies, ruled and taught. The Geonim responded and there ensued an extensive correspondence between them and leaders of scattered Jewries, whereby the Geonim gave guidance and codified teaching in the practice of Judaism.

BUT THERE was also a reverse side of the medal. The contact of the Islamic conquerors with ancient cultures brought about the rise of a great culture in Babylonia and the surrounding countries. This culture in turn, with its diverse tendencies brought, on the one hand, much division in Islam and on the other hand, criticism voiced by thinkers of the doctrines of the Koran. A philosophy arose then which strove to reconcile religion with reason, and here and there heretical opinions made their appearance. This intellectual and spiritual conflict found also an echo among the Jews who by that time were influenced by the environment and had adopted Arabic as their speech.

In imitation of the Arabs, there arose also in Jewry, from time to time, sects under the guidance of false Messiahs, who deviated from the path of Judaism of the ages. The largest and most powerful sect was that of the Karaites, founded by Anan ben David in 760. This sect rejected the Talmud and clung to the Bible and claimed that they represented the true Judaism. They spread and began to attack the rest of the Jews whom they called Rabbanites. They devoted themselves to the study of the Hebrew language, but often misused this study in interpreting the Bible to prove their views. In addition, there were also occasional outbursts of heresy, such as that of Hivi al-Balkhi, who hailed from the city of Balkh in Persia.

Were such state of intellectual confusion to continue, who can calculate how devastating would have been its deteriorating effects upon Babylonian Jewry? But as Saadia says: "G-d does not leave His nation at any period

without a scholar whom He inspires and enlightens so that he in turn may so instruct and teach her, that thereby her condition shall be bettered." Such a man arose in the time of need, and he helped to stabilize Judaism and guide those who erred in the right path. That man was no other than Saadia himself.

I: His Career

SAADIA ben Joseph Al-Fayyumi was born in the year 892 in Egypt in the village of Dilaz in the district of Fayyum, and hence he was called Al-Fayyumi. It seems that his father was not a scholar and was engaged in some kind of trade. This fact, however, did not prevent him from acquiring a thorough, comprehensive education in all branches of Jewish knowledge as well as a mastery of the Arabic language and its literature. We do not know the names of his teachers, but the extent and breadth of knowledge he possessed even in his early youth proves that Egypt was at the time a seat of Jewish learning. In his very first work, the *Agron*, a Hebrew dictionary in two parts, Saadia already displayed great learning as well as mastery of scientific method, especially in the field of Hebrew philology. The work was soon followed by another larger one on Hebrew grammar, called *Sepher Haloshon* (The Book of Language) in twelve parts, which constitutes the first systematic Hebrew grammar.

A year or two later, though still very young, in 915, at the age of twenty-three, he was confident enough of his own powers to become the champion of traditional, or Rabbanite, Judaism and published the first of his series of works against Karaism, his *Kitab Al-Radad Ala Anan* (Refutation of Anan).

In that same year Saadia left the land of his birth and even separated himself from his family. He spent a few years in Palestine where he met Abu Kathir, a Hebrew philologist, who gave him additional instruction in the mysteries of the Hebrew language. From there he went to Babylonia where he lived for a few years, and then left for a short time to reside in Aleppo, but in June or July of the year 922 he returned to Babylonia. It was during the early part of that year that Saadia participated in a controversy between the Geonim of Babylonia and Ben Meir, the head of the Palestinian school, about an important point in the Jewish calendar which revolved about the question whether Rosh Hashonah of the year 4684 A.M. (923-24) should be celebrated on the day of the *Molad* (birth of the moon) or postponed for two days later. This possible postponement is mentioned in the Talmud and depends on the exact time of the appearance of the moon. Ben Meir, offering a certain explanation of the passage in the Talmud, was for the earlier date; the Babylonian Geonim insisted on the postponement. That postponement of the New Year of 4684 would have required changes in the holidays of preceding years, especially Pesach 4682. Saadia's championship of the Geonic view brought victory to the Babylonian leaders, and his fame grew. It seems that as a reward he was granted by the Academy

thus opened the portals of the Hebrew language to all who sought to avail themselves of the treasures. The second edition of the work contained translations of the words into Arabic, thus widening and enlarging the circle who benefited by its use.

The second book, *Sepher Haloshon,* is practically the first systematic grammar, and it contains the first tables of verb conjugations in all forms except the Piel, and also covers rules of punctuation and paradigms of the declensions of nouns, and even includes a discussion of syntax. Many discussions of grammatical subjects are scattered in his commentaries to the Scriptures and to *Sepher Hayetzirah,* a leading work in mysticism. It is on these broad and solid foundations that the structure of Hebrew grammar and lexicography was built during the following three centuries.

THE PROPER understanding of the Bible became especially important, as pointed out, in the time of Saadia, for through the proper interpretation of the text of the Bible, the division in Jewry between the Karaites and the Rabbanites as well as all other types of confusion could be weakened and tradition stabilized. Saadia, whose aspiration to teach his people dominated his soul, devoted himself to that task. And in order to reach the whole people, the broad masses as well as the learned, he undertook to translate the entire Bible into Arabic, the language spoken by all Jews in Islamic countries, and to add to it cominentaries in the same language.

There were fundamental traits which characterized the higher culture of the Mediaeval period in Jewry and to a degree also in the larger world. There was, on the one hand, a tendency to follow reason, and on the other hand, an elemental belief in tradition and an endeavor to inculcate loyalty to it in the hearts of the people. These traits formed in Saadia's works a remarkable amalgam from which there followed two principles. First, that the religious revelation is authentic and so is the tradition stemming from it. It is therefore the duty of every Jew not only to believe in its teachings, but to observe its commandments. Second, that it is impossible that this Revelation or Torah should contain anything which is contrary to reason, for it is given by G-d who is the very foundation of wisdom. And if such contradiction seems on the surface apparent, it is our duty to find a way to remove it and thus prove that reason and tradition supplement each other. This view, which he later elaborated in his philosophic work more extensively, Saadia wanted to make, through his translation of the Bible and commentaries on it, the heritage of the entire nation.

THIS great work of Saadia accomplished its purpose, revealing not only to the Jews but to the world at large the light of the Torah and Judaism and proving their perfection and their rational basis. It explained the anthropomorphic expressions and removed all contradictions whether to reason or to historical and natural facts. Above all, it showed the close connection

between the oral tradition (Torah She-b'al Peh) and the written law, and thus undermined all arguments of the Karaites who based themselves on the Biblical texts. In addition to all these there went into the work such a mastery of all branches of knowledge: philological, historical, and philosophical, which made the text of the Biblical books in its most difficult parts lucid and intelligible.

Saadia not only translated — and every translation is a commentary — and commented on the Bible, but wrote introductions to a number of books which gave summaries of the thoughts contained within them and brought out their spiritual and intellectual treasures. Of special importance are his introductions to the Books of Proverbs and Job. In the first, which deals with human conduct, he discusses the elements which make conduct right and just and comes to the conclusion that reason must be the dominant element in conduct. In the introduction to Job he grapples with the problem, why the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper, or the problem of Divine justice, and succeeded in lessening to a large degree its difficulty. This work is a landmark in the millennial endeavor to understand the Bible in all phases of its teachings, and had served as a guidepost to numerous commentators who followed him. Though much of the original work in Arabic was lost, and only a number of the books translated and commented remained — these were later published with translations in Hebrew or European languages — its influence persisted through the ages. So numerous are the quotations in the works of the later leading commentators, such as Ibn Ezra, Kimhi, and others that there is hardly a chapter of the Bible on the content of which his voice is not heard.

III: Emunoth Ve-Deoth

THE *Emunoth Ve-Deoth,* written in the year 937, during the time of Saadia's exile from the Gaonite, is like his translation of and commentary on the Bible, one of his outstanding contributions to the spiritual and intellectual uplifting of his people.

His starting point is that man can attain truth, for G-d gave him reason and the sense data are reliable. Hence the concepts and views that he can draw from these data through the ways of reasoning are true. Error arises only either from lack of mastery of a subject, or from neglect of study and not following the way of reason. Therefore, pitying his brethren "who are drowning in the sea of error," he undertook to help them. He states at first the three sources of knowledge in general: sense data; second, intuitive knowledge, such as all men possess even if at times they do not act accordingly; and "necessary knowledge," namely, such that man must accept, for its denial contradicts logic or reason or sense data. To these three he adds true tradition, which must be accepted as he later proves.

Saadia proceeds then, in nine of the ten sections of the book, to prove the truth of Judaism and its principal beliefs and dogmas, and their accordance with reason.

In the first section, which he calls *Chidush* (Creation, or Creation from Nothing) he offers four proofs from reason for the existence of G-d. The proofs can be called indirect, for they demonstrate that the world was created, and since he also demonstrates by several proofs that a thing cannot create itself, it follows that there is a Creator. He uses Aristotelian principles in his proofs, but in a way which concludes against Aristotle's teaching that the world is eternal.

In the next section he elucidates the proper conception of the Deity. G-d must be conceived by man in some way, for otherwise He has no relation to man. Such a conception can be conveyed by means of attributes or qualities which are ascribed to Him. Saadia posits the following essential attributes: One, not only one in number, but possessing absolute unity and simplicity of substance, Living, Wise, Potent, and Incompatibility with His creatures.

BUT HERE begins the difficulty, for attributes mean additions to the essence of a being and several attributes mean multiplicity in the Deity, which is contrary to unity. He removes this by saying that all the attributes are included in one concept — Creator — and creation is an activity. It is because of the limitation of the human language that we express them in several words. In reality, Creator implies living, wise, and potent, for only One who possesses these qualities could create the world, and consequently there is in the G-dhead absolute unity and simplicity. Besides, He is above all nature of bodies, for He is the creator of all, and thus is above all changes and composition. As for such attributes mentioned in the Bible as merciful, gracious, loving, and others, all of which denote being subject to affection from other beings, these are not really attributes, but only expressions to designate ways of approval of human action according to human standards, and man transfers them to G-d figuratively. Saadia also offers numerous explanations of many anthropomorphic expressions in the Bible and proves that they are only employed in a metaphorical manner, so that all men, no matter of what degree of intellectuality, should be impressed with the greatness, holiness, and majesty of G-d. In accordance with such exalted conception of G-d, he asserts that the revelations at Sinai, as well as all visions spoken of by the prophets, were special creations by G-d — creations which could be seen or heard in order that men should be properly impressed and Divine teaching inculcated in their hearts.

THE DISCUSSION of the Torah is taken up in the third section. In regard to the Torah, there are a number of questions which are to be answered. The first is, G-d being so exalted, why then should He enter into relation with lowly man, reveal Himself to him, and give him a Torah? The answer is, peculiarly enough, given by means of another question, namely, what need had G-d for a world? Why should He have created the world altogether? Saadia, representing the optimistic view of Judaism that

existence and life is good in itself, says that G-d, who is essentially good, created the world out of His goodness. If this is the case, He also had to give man a Torah to guide him in his path of life.

He then turns to the nature and character of the commandments. These he divided into two classes, those whose rationality is evident, and those the reason for the fulfillment of which is not evident, but must be obeyed. The commandments of the first class probably could have been enacted by means of man's own reason. As for those of the second class, they also undoubtedly have a rationale for a basis, for G-d who gave them is the source of reason, but the reason is not evident to man. He attempts though to offer some rational explanations for several groups of this class. He is quite aware of the question, that if human reason itself could proclaim the rational commandments, what need was there for including them in the Torah? His answer is, reason can know their value, but could not determine the necessary particulars, such as the proper time to carry them out, the extent of the action required by the commandment, as well as other details. Confusion would then have ensued, for each individual would then have had different views on these matters. The Torah supplies all these particulars and makes them practical.

HOWEVER, the need for revelation and divine inspiration in determining the proper performance through the ages of even the rational precepts is not entirely removed by the Torah, for the written law also needs clarification. Hence it was supplemented by the Oral Law. Saadia believes then that the prophets were the carriers or transmitters of the Oral Torah. This was an important point in Saadia's view of Judaism, for it undermines the contention of the Karaites. This leads him to offer a definition of prophecy and proofs for its authenticity. The prophet, says he, is divinely inspired and the authenticity of his message is proven by his ability to perform miracles. This power is not innate with him, but is given him by G-d at the time he prophesies. It is given to him so that the people should trust his message, and also that he himself should be convinced of the authenticity of his message. In addition, his teaching must possess inner value and must not contradict either reason or moral laws.



Saadia butressed his view about the authenticity of the written and the oral law by

proving the value of tradition in human life. He demonstrated that without tradition neither individual, nor social, nor political life could be carried on.

Saadia knows well that tradition can contain errors either through misunderstanding of facts by those who bear the tradition, or even by falsifying certain aspects for a purpose. This, says he, may happen to tradition of individuals, but not to one carried on by a large group for generations. The *consensus ominum,* i.e., general agreement, is a guarantee against it. Were there any error or falsehood in it, it would crop out in the course of time.

THE FINAL question in regard to the Torah is: Is it eternal and immutable? In other words, was there any other revelation which abrogated at least a part of the Torah as the Christians and the Mohammedans claimed? Saadia offers numerous proofs that such a thing could not have happened as it would be contrary to the rational conception of the nature of the G-dhead. The Torah, says he, adds to many commandments the words that "they are to be kept for all your generations." It is evident then that the eternity and immutability of the Law is emphasized by the Torah itself. Second, the prophets repeatedly stress the eternity of the Jewish people. Jeremiah says: *If these ordinances depart from before me, saith the Lord, then the seed of Israel shall cease from being a nation before me forever*" (Jer. Ch. XXXI, 35, 36). Then, concludes Saadia, since the Jews are a nation only through the Torah, it follows that the eternity of the Jewish people likewise assures the eternity of the Torah. The strength of this argument rests on the fact that both Christianity and Islam assert the veracity of the Bible and consider the words of the prophets divine utterances. Their claim for abrogation of the Torah is thus void.

IN THE fourth section, Saadia takes up the question of obedience to G-d's commandments. He explains at length the right nature of worshipping G-d, but here he is forced to grapple with the difficult problems of G-d's prescience and human freedom in choice of conduct. Saadia says that G-d's knowledge of man's action does not disturb human freedom. He attempts to explain by an example from human life. Suppose a man standing on a high mountain sees at a distance a march of an army. Some soldiers had already passed a certain point, some are passing, and some will pass it. But his sight does not alter the route of the march. However, the problem is not entirely solved and later philosophers still continued to grapple with it, but a beginning of the solution was made.

Human freedom brings us to the question of reward and punishment, and again a problem crops up, namely, that of Job — why do the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper. This problem was already dealt with in the Talmud, and Saadia repeats some of the answers given there, but finally comes to the conclusion that the real reward and punishment is primarily

reserved to the time after death. In this world there is only partial reward and punishment. The wicked may be rewarded for some good deeds and the righteous may be punished for some of his transgressions, but since nobody is completely wicked or completely righteous, the *Tzadik* may suffer and the *Rosha* may prosper at times. The mention of the hereafter leads to a discussion of the soul and its immortality which the philosopher takes up in the sixth section. The soul, according to him, is created by G-d before one is born. It is manifested in life by the appetitive faculty (*Nefesh*), expressed in desires for satisfaction of physical needs, such as food, copulation, etc.; the emotional or the spirit (*Ruach)*, which embraces feelings, such as love, hatred, courage, and the faculty of the intellect and reasoning in its various forms (*Neshomah*). These are the same faculties which are recognized by Plato and Aristotle and accepted by all later religious philosophers. It is the last of these three faculties which distinguishes man from all other creatures, for plants share in the first faculty, and animals also in the second. The soul is immortal, for it is a spiritual substance, and besides, we must assume its immortality, for since the justice of G-d is not carried out in this world, it must be relegated to the Hereafter.

THE LAST three sections are devoted to the Hereafter or eschatology. Saadia tries to explain Resurrection in a somewhat scientific way, but he is quite aware of the weakness of such effort, and finally declares it a miracle, and since G-d can perform miracles for He is omnipotent, resurrection is no exception. It is moreover a necessary miracle, for, as mentioned, life is too short to carry out complete justice, and it must therefore be carried out in a later time.

The same demand for the fulfillment of the justice of G-d is a guarantee for the coming of the Messiah and the Messianic era. Jews had suffered so much, and the Messianic era is their reward. This era with all its "good time" will be enjoyed both by the Jews who live at the time and by Jews of past generations who will be resurrected and partake of the good. It is evident that Saadia asserts that Resurrection will precede the Messianic era. This view is contrary to the Talmud and Midrosh, which aver that Resurrection will take place after the Messianic era preceding the World to Come (Olam ha-Ba). Resurrection is limited to the members of the Jewish nation as the reward of the righteous, but the penitent wicked ones will rise. Those wicked ones who did not repent will not be resurrected and will not participate in the good of the Messianic era. At the end of the Messianic era, there will come into being a world where life will be of a spiritual nature, and all those who were resurrected will be transported bodily into the new world. Those wicked who did not rise previously will now rise to receive their punishment. Both the reward and punishment are spiritualized by Saadia, though he attempts to combine them in a way with the Gehenna

(Hell) and Gan Eden (Paradise).

The tenth section, dealing with ethics and human conduct, seems to be a separate treatise and an appendix. As usual Saadia offers an extensive analysis of various theories of conduct, and then offers his own theory which can be characterized briefly as of harmony. It asserts that each faculty of the soul — see above — must have its share in conduct, but in a limited way in order not to transgress upon the province of other faculties, and thus harmony in life will be established. He adds one more condition, namely, that the satisfaction of the needs of the two other faculties must be under control of the faculty of reason and in accordance with the precepts of the Torah.

IV: Other Contributions

SAADIA also contributed much to other branches of Jewish knowledge besides those discussed. Of course, the first are his Halochic works which were numerous, including many Responsa, and also an Arabic introduction, no longer extant, to the Talmud. Another work, preserved in Hebrew translation, is the Interpretation of the Thirteen Rules of Rabbi Ishmael, which bore the basis of motivated Halochah or Midrosh. This is of exceptional value, as it explains the application of these rules in a most lucid manner. He also wrote commentaries to the tractates *Pesachim, Sota, Baba Metziah, Baba Bathra,* and the sixth order of the Mishnah, *Taharoth.* All have been lost, and are primarily known by quotations and by some fragments recently discovered in the Cairo Genitzah. Of Saadia's numerous Halochic codes, only the book on the law of inheritance (Sefer ha-Yerushah) is preserved. Saadia composed also numerous religious poems, several of which are incorporated in various *Machzorim,* but the most important liturgical work is his *Siddur* where a complete order of prayers is given, and also includes all the laws of the ritual as well as a large number of *Piyyutim* by earlier Paitanim and some of his own. The *Siddur* was recently published and is an outstanding work in Jewish literature.

Saadia also wrote a number of works on chronology and history. These are: a *Book on Chronology,* covering the period from Creation to his own times; *Seder Tannoim ve-Amoraim* (The Order of Generations of the Tannaim and Amoraim); and a biography of Judah the Prince, the redactor of the Mishnah.

TAKING into consideration these numerous works in all fields of knowledge, which were written during a short period of thirty years, as he began to write at the age of twenty, we are amazed at the genius and exceptional ability of the man. He certainly realized his own dictum quoted above, namely, he himself was the gift of G-d to his people in time of confusion, for he taught and inspired not only his own generation, but many succeeding ones.