Saadia Gaon's Solution to Anthropomorphisms in His Tafsîr

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Saadia Gaon was born in 882 CE near the Upper-Egyptian city of Fayyúm as *Se^{3}adyah ben Yosef*, or, in Arabic, *Sa^{3}îd ibn Yūsuf*. Already from an early age, Saadia was a prolific writer and the author of important works such as several dictionaries, a polemic work against the Jewish sect of the Qara'ites, a work on the Jewish calendar, and one of the first Jewish prayer books, to name a few.

At the age of 36, Saadia was noticed by the leaders of the great Jewish community of Babylonia (present-day Iraq) and was invited to assume the title of Gaon and, as that title implies, to head one of the world's two most prestigious Talmud academies, which was then located in Baghdad. Incidentally, Saadia was the first person from outside Babylonia ever to be appointed as Gaon. Saadia Gaon would

remain in Baghdad until his death in 942.

In this article, I want to discuss his influential Arabic Bible translation, which he named the *Tafsîr*[1], and specifically how he deals with the problem of divine anthropomorphisms. At the same time, we cannot avoid looking at his certainly most famous work, *Kitāb al-'Amānāt wa'l-I³tiqādāt*, better known under its Hebrew name *Sēfer 'Èmūnōt we-Dē³ōt*, or in English *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*. The reason for discussing certain aspects of *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* is that it sheds important light on Saadia's philosophy underlying his Bible translation; the *Tafsîr* which, by the way, does not include the entire Hebrew Bible but merely the *Five Books of Moses*, and the books of *Isaiah*, the *Psalms*, *Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther,* and *Daniel.*

Let us now discuss those elements of Saadia Gaon's philosophical outlook that impacted the wording of his *Tafsîr,* and how his perceptions are rooted in the intellectual trends of his time and environment.

In Saadia's days, the Muslim world was rife with philosophical activity, and the city of Baghdad was its buzzling epicenter. With the Muslim conquest of the Middle East, North Africa, and Spain, these vast territories had been brought under one cultural umbrella and with Arabic as the common lingua franca, communication and exchange of ideas had become a reality. Once a growing corpus of ancient Greek

philosophic and scientific texts became available in Arabic translation, a considerable section of the intellectual elite developed an appetite for all things classic, philosophy being among the top tier topics.

This embrace of philosophy took place across the religious spectrum of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. People from all over the Arabic world and from all three religions came together to discuss matters of philosophy in interdenominational groups, often even including Zoroastrians, Hindus, and Buddhists.

One of the new insights that had taken root was that Divine revelation was not the *only* path to knowledge and truth. The God-given human faculty of *Reason* was another way to acquire truthful insights. And as both strategies are tools bestowed by the same Almighty God to achieve knowledge, if applied correctly, both *Reason* and *Revelation* should lead to the one, same truth. In other words, accurate reasoning should lead one to the same insights as presented by Holy Scripture while a correct understanding of Scripture cannot not contradict *Reason*.

The idea that true *Revelation* cannot contradict *Reason*, must necessarily have an impact on the way religious traditions are understood. Sometimes *Reason* may yield to *Revelation*, for instance when scientific insights are rejected based on a traditional understanding of holy texts, and at other times Scripture is reinterpreted to match contemporary rational, scientific, or

philosophical insights.

In the process of reaching conclusions on issues of truth, such as the existence of God, eternity, justice, free will, reward and punishment, etc., in many cases *Reason* or *Revelation* – or both – must be redefined for the two to harmoniously meet. Naturally, regarding the precedence that either *Reason* or *Revelation* receives in this process, there is a continuum of approaches. When faced with an apparent conflict between text and logic, on one end of the spectrum some thinkers may have no scruples to reconsider established textual interpretations, while for people on the opposite end, this would be an outrageous notion.

At this point, the exercise of defining the relationship between *Revelation* and *Reason*, is called *Kalām*, an Arabic translation of the Greek word *Logos* (logic, reason, and speech). This choice of terminology is interesting in more than one way. When according to the Bible and the Qur'an God creates the world through speech (Gen. 1:3 *"Wayyōmer 'Elohîm yehî 'ōr, wàyhi 'ōr"* – "God spoke: 'Let there be light!', and there was light"; Sura 36:82 *"Innamā 'amruhū 'idhā 'ar āda 'an yaqūla lahū kun, fa-yakūn"* – "All it takes when He wants something, is to say to it: 'Be!', and it is."), the implication for Kalāmists would be that He also creates it with logic, wisdom, and according to reason.

Let us now turn to the most relevant motive within *Kalām* thought that impacted Saadia Gaon's *Tafsîr*, i.e. the notion that God is One. For *Kalāmists*, this notion meant much more than simply the belief that there is only One God. The word *One* can be a quantitative numeral in the sense of 'only one god' (and no more): not four gods, not three, not two, but only One God. However, those involved in *Kalām* took the notion of God's Oneness to a much deeper level as to mean that God's essence is One, and that there is no oneness like God's Oneness. Nothing is as one as God is One. For instance, if – let's say – you hold an apple in your hand, that is *one* apple. However, the apple is not inherently one… it consists of parts: its core, its flesh, its peel, etc. God, on the other hand, being *essentially* One, cannot be subdivided into parts. Naturally, this presented some contention between Jewish and Muslims *Kalāmists* on the one hand, and Christians on the other, concerning the dogma of the Trinity.

Furthermore, anything in the physical world, including all objects and bodies, firstly consists of parts and secondly has certain limitations and confinements. Physical bodies have a top and a bottom, arms, legs, a head, a torso, etc. Therefore, most *Kalāmist* thinkers concluded that God cannot be or have a body. Furthermore, while God is Unlimited and Omnipresent, an apple is only *one* in its state of being separate from other apples, which is only possible because of its limited character. Certainly, an apple can be in your hand, on the table, in the fridge, hanging in a tree, and floating in a river. All these positions are possible, but they cannot be possible at the same time. These locations are possible due to a change in location, *change*

being the key term here. God, on the other hand *can* be everywhere at the same time *without change.*

How does not changing relate to the notion of Oneness? According to many *Kalāmist* thinkers, something that changes is by definition not consistent, and is therefore not *one*. According to this line of thinking, an apple that starts out green and hard, then turns red and juicy, and later becomes brown and putrid, shows different configurations and is therefore not inherently one.

As anything in the created, physical world goes through some kind of change, it follows that only God is truly *One*. When we let this train of thought sink in, we will soon discover that this philosophical notion of *Oneness* must cause a plethora of problems when it comes to reading, interpreting, and translating the Bible. In Scripture, God is frequently described both with physical features *and* as going through changes. Let's start with some examples of physical features scripturally ascribed to God.

In Genesis, God is described as walking through the Garden of Eden. We are informed that God led out His people with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, His eyes traverse the entire world, His ears may hear our prayers, we are told about the words of His mouth, and that the earth is His footstool. Such human-like descriptions of God are called *"anthropomorphisms"*.

An often-utilized solution to solve such discrepancies between the literal reading of Holy Scripture on the one hand, and rational insights on the other, is the application of metaphor. According to this approach, Scripture is given to imperfect people, some of whom are unable to conceive of God in more abstract ways. For this reason, God revealed His word "in the language of men", meaning in the way that most people are used to speaking and understanding. Such anthropomorphic descriptions should however be understood as metaphorical references to underlying, less physical truths.

As alluded to before, different approaches emerged within the wider *Kalām* movement. At one end of the spectrum, there were thinkers that showed an inclination to give precedence to logical insights and reinterpret their Holy Scriptures and traditions accordingly. Within the Muslim community, this approach was represented by a school called the *Mu³tazila*. *Mu³tazilites* rejected any notion of divine physicality and took every anthropomorphic reference to God in Scripture as a metaphor. On the opposite end of the spectrum were the traditionalists who postulated that everything in Scripture must be taken at face value. An intermediate position was taught by the school of the so-called *Ash³arites* who asserted that God is not physical while all scriptural descriptions of God are nonetheless true in a literal sense. However, one should not try to solve this contradiction through philosophizing, but instead accept the Quranic statements as a divine mystery. If we want to place Saadia Gaon in one of these three categories, we clearly find him in the camp of the *Mu³tazilites*. In his *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, he clearly and avidly

rejects the notion of divine anthropomorphisms.

In Saadia's days, many *Kalāmist* thinkers believed that the time had come, at least for an evolved group of people to understand these deeper meanings behind such physical descriptions. Saadia tried to facilitate this higher understanding in his *Tafsîr*. Let's look at some examples.

God's hand. Ex. 9:3 "Behold, the hand of the Lord will bring a terrible plague on your livestock." In line with his philosophy, Saadia translates this into Arabic as *fa-'inna 'āfat Allāh kā'ina fî mawḍāshîka* [2] ("Behold, the plague of God is present in your livestock"). Saadia is however not always consistent in avoiding the use of the Arabic word 'hand' (*yad*). Deut. 26:8 for instance is translated very literally as "God *(Allah)* brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand *(bi-yad shadîd)* and an outstretched arm *(dhirā^3 mamdūda)*..." It is worth noting though that the Arabic word *yad* can also mean *'power'*, *'authority'*, *'control'*, or even *'favor'*.

God's mouth. Ex. 17:1 The Israelites traveled from place to place "according to the mouth of the Lord", is translated by Saadia as ^{3}*alā qawl Allāh* ("...according to the word/speech of God").

God's ears. <u>Num. 11:18</u> "For you have wept in the ears of the Lord" is translated in the *Tafsîr* as ("For you have wept before the Lord").

God's eyes. <u>Deut. 11:12</u>   "The eyes of the Lord are always upon it (upon the Land)" is rendered in Arabic as *wa-dā'iman [3]inâyatuhu bihā.* Even though the Arabic word *[3]inâya* is directly related to the word for eye (*[3]ayn*), it is not to be understood as eyes. The meaning is rather a bit less physical, instead meaning 'seeing', 'inspecting', 'surveying'.

God's face. <u>Deut. 34:10</u> "There has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face." First, a comment on *'the Lord knew'*. Many who are familiar with Biblical Hebrew will know that the verb *yādà[3]* 'to know' means more than merely being acquainted with someone. Instead, it denotes a very intimate kind of knowing, one that is usually reserved for spousal interactions. Concerning the phrase *'face to face'*, Saadia could have chosen a literal translation of the word "face", which would not necessarily constitute an anthropomorphism. Just like the Hebrew word *panîm* can mean several things besides 'face', so too the Arabic word *wajh*. Saadia could have chosen the phrase *wajhan bi-wajh* which means both 'face to face' as well as 'in private', or 'directly'. Nonetheless, Saadia Gaon chose something else instead, but the different manuscripts are not in agreement on what that something else was. A 1893 Paris publication of the *Tafsîr* by Joseph Derenbourg has Saadia's version as *li-'anna Allāh [3]arrafahu mushāfihan*, which

means "For God orally (verbally) made known to him; informed him."

Two observations are in order here: By using the expression *mushā fihan* ('orally' or 'verbally', i.e. not via dreams or visions), Saadia avoids any anthropomorphic perception that could be caused by the expression *face-to-face*. Secondly, he renders the word 'to know' into Arabic as a causative verb (³*arrafa/informed* instead of ³*arafa/knew*), meaning, instead of *'He knew him'*, he translates *'He made him know'* , *'He informed him'*. We will see Saadia resorting to a causative understanding of verbs in other examples as well. However, in the 2015 printed and vocalized edition of Rabbi Yantob Chaim haCohen[3], which no doubt is based on a different manuscript as Derenbourg's, the *Tafsîr* reads *"Li-'anna Allāh nājāhu shifāhan"* (*For God verbally entrusted in him; confided in him*).

Num. 6: 25 "May the Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you."
In this case, Saadia applies a literal translation of the word "face" *(wajh)*, which as we already mentioned does not need to be an anthropomorphism. In addition to face, *wajh* also can mean 'intention', 'direction', or 'reputation'.

Remarkably however, in the next verse: Num. 6: 26, the Gaon does not render *panîm* as *wajh*. "May the Lord lift up His face (countenance) over you and give you peace" is rendered as *"wa-yaqbal bi-qaṣdihi wa-yuṣayyir laka salām".* This phrase makes for a somewhat puzzling Arabic, but I believe it can be best translated as

"May He kindly direct His good intentions towards you and give you peace."

God smelling. In <u>Gen. 8:21</u> Saadia transforms two anthropomorphisms in one verse (i.e. God smelling and God having a heart) by rendering the text "The Lord smelled the pleasing aroma and said in His heart, never again will I curse the earth because of humans" as "God accepted the pleasing offering and said out of His own accord, 'I shall not again…"

God sitting. <u>Ps. 29:10</u> "The Lord sat enthroned at the flood; yea He sits enthroned as King forever." When read physically, sitting involves a bodily posture, which then implies a body and a certain part of the body, instrumental for sitting. The *Tafsîr* has *"Inna Allāh, kamā naṣaba al-³ālam li-ṭ-ṭūfān waqtan, ka-dhālika naṣaba mulk 'ummatihi 'abadan";* (Just like God once upheld the world during the flood, so too does He uphold the dominion of his nation forever.)

God rising. <u>Num. 10:35</u> "Rise up, O Lord, and let Your enemies be scattered." Naturally, if God is to rise up in a literal way, it would seem like a change, a transition from either sitting to standing, or less physically, from inaction to action. Saadia Gaon's solution is quite interesting. He has: *"Qum yā Rabb, bi-naṣrinā!"* Even though the Arabic imperative *"qum!",* like its Hebrew equivalent, means *'get up',* or *'rise up!',* in combination with the preposition *bi-,* the meaning becomes *'being concerned with something', 'undertaking'* or

'executing something'. By adding the preposition *bi-* and the object *naṣrinā* (our victory), this changes the meaning exactly to what Saadia would consider to be the deeper, underlying message of the verse: *"O Lord, help us!",* and at the same time: *"Accomplish our triumph!"*

God resting. <u>Gen. 2: 2-3</u> God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh day. It is worth noting that Islamic polemicists frequently bring up such Biblical verses as proof that the People of the Book (Jews and Christians) have corrupted their Holy Scriptures. Because – thus goes the argument – it is preposterous to believe that God can become tired and in need of rest. While I personally have encountered this argument many times in my interactions with Muslims, I know of no proof that this line of reasoning was already used in Saadia's days, but I believe it to be likely. Assuming that Saadia knew of this argument, it becomes especially interesting to see how he interprets these texts.

In his *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, in his Treatise on God (II), Chapter XII, he writes (let me paraphrase): *"Concerning anything involving God's action, even though we call the Creator "Maker", the meaning of such a term must not be understood in a corporeal sense. A physical agent cannot produce an effect upon anything before first acting upon himself. He must first himself move. Only then can he generate motion in something else. However, for God, He only needs to entertain the will to have a thing come into being." (…)* Therefore,

when Scripture speaks of the works of God, this must all be understood in this light, namely that when God creates something, He brings it into being without taking it in hand. Scripture may mention a Divine act (as in "And God made" - Gen. 1:7) and sometimes the opposite of acting (as in "And He rested"). However, just as "He made" was accomplished without movement or work, when it is said "He rested", this was not a rejuvenation after labor or exertion. When the Scriptures say that God "rested", it merely means that He discontinued His work of creation and production. In other words, Saadia explains that the Hebrew verb *shāvàt* means the interruption of an activity: for God the interruption of creation; for humans the interruption of their daily work; every seven years, for the land the interruption of agricultural production.

Gen. 2:2 "On the seventh day, God discontinued *(wayyishbōt)* all the work He had done." Saadia translates this as *"wa-[3]aṭṭala fîhi shay'an 'an yukhlaq[4]..."* (*"On it, He made anything discontinue from being created")*. This translation exactly reflects the underlying meaning as explained by Saadia in his *Book of Beliefs and Opinions,* namely not that God took a break from working, but that He made *His creation* take a break on the seventh day. Instead of translating the intransitive verb *wayyishbōt* as [3]*aṭila* ('to take a break'), he rendered the verb as transitive (equivalent to a *pi[33]ēl*), meaning 'to make *something* take a break[5].'

Ex. 20:11 "For in six days, the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but He rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy." Saadia has *wa-'arāḥahā fî l-yawm as-sābi*[3] ("and He gave it rest on the seventh day").Here we see Gaon's resort to a strategy we encountered before, namely assigning a transitive meaning to an intransitive verb.

Ex. 31:17 "...And on the seventh day, He rested and was refreshed *(shāvàt wayyinnāfàsh)*." The Hebrew word *nèfesh* is used for both *soul* and *breath,* and the verb *le-hinnāfēsh* can be translated as *catching your breath* or as *restoring one's soul or spirit*). Here too, Saadia uses Arabic verbs with transitive meanings: *wa-fî l-yawm as-sabt,* [3]*aṭṭalahā wa-'arāḥahā:* "...on the seventh day, He interrupted *IT* (i.e. His work) and gave *IT* (i.e. creation) rest.")

God speaking. Num 1:1 "And the Lord spoke to Moses...": When studying the *Tafsîr,* we see that Saadia treats God's speaking in two different ways, depending on the context. When God speaks to someone, for example Abraham or Moses, he uses the regular expression *kallama*, such as here: *Thumma kallama Allāh Mūsā.* It seems that Saadia Gaon does not consider this an objectionable anthropomorphism. Indeed, when we read what Saadia says about God's speech in his *Book of Beliefs and Opinions,* (paraphrasing Treatise II, Chapter 12): *"When Scripture uses the expression 'The Lord spoke', the meaning of this statement is that God* <u>*created*</u>

speech, which He conveyed through the medium of air to the hearing of the prophet or the people in question. The Arabic language permits God's speech to be characterized in accordance with our interpretation." On a sidenote, according to Saadia explanation, the Arabic does not cover a correct philosophical understanding of the opposite of speech, i.e. of silence. Having said this, it is no surprise that we see throughout his *Tafsîr* the use of the verb *kallama*. However, when the speech of God is mentioned in another context, not to address humans, but instead as the pronouncement of a decree, as in the story of creation: "God said, 'Let there be light', and there was light", a different strategy is applied. There, Saadia writes *"Shā'a Allāh 'an yakūn nur, fa-kāna nūr"* ("God *wanted* that there should be light, and there was light.")

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God being jealous. In his *Beliefs and Opinions*, Saadia Gaon also takes issue with human-like functions, mental states, and emotions, such as: God being jealous, God remembering, God regretting, etc. Some examples:

Ex. 20:5 "For I, the Lord, your God am a jealous God." Saadia has here: *"Aṭ-Ṭā'iq al-Mu³āqib"* ("Powerful and Inflicting punishment").

God remembering. Saadia Gaon explains in the *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* that Scripture's description of God as 'recollecting', 'remembering', alludes to the deliverance of humans from a painful situation. He mentions "God remembered Noah" (Gen. 8:1) and "God

remembered Rachel" (Gen. 30:22). Saadia claims that this both Hebrew *(zākhàr)* and Arabic *(dhakara)* have this same implication. That God's *'remembering'* is not to be understood in the human sense of the word becomes clear when we consider that the opposite word for remembering (forgetting) is never applied to God. When God desists from delivering His creatures, an expression is used as in Lamentations 2:1: *"He remembered not His footstool."*

God regretting. <u>Gen. 6: 5-6</u> "The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that all the impulse of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continuously. And *the Lord regretted* that He had made humankind, and *it grieved Him in His heart*." This last verse has no less than two striking anthropomorphisms, namely God regretting and God grieving. By again using the strategy of making verbs transitive, Saadia comes with a remarkable interpretation: *"Fa-tawa[33]adahum Allāh ba[3]damā ṣana[3]ahum fi l-'arḍ, wa-'awṣala l-mashaqqa 'ilā qulūbihim"* ("Then, after having created them on the earth, God *distressed them* and *deposited hardship in their hearts*.") In other words, God Himself was not distressed by regrets, which would be a characteristic of mortal creatures, but gave the people distress as a punishment for their evil. Likewise, God was not grieved in His heart, but instead placed grief in the hearts of the wicked.

Seeing God. We have seen how Saadia tackled anthropomorphisms rather successfully by translating physical descriptions with the allegedly underlying deeper meaning behind expressions like God's heart, God's ears, God's eyes, God's mouth, etc., as well as applying transitive translations to verbs that seem to be intransitive. However, this alone could not solve every case of anthropomorphism.

The most difficult passages where people are described as having actually seen God would need a different approach. These are references such as "They saw the God of Israel" (Ex. 24:10).

Saadia Gaon explains in his *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* that what people saw was not God Himself, in His true essence, but rather God's Glory *(*in Hebrew: the *Kavōd* of God). This *Kavōd* is some kind of representation of God, created by God Himself, to allow people to perceive some Divine imagery. This *Kavōd* is also God's messenger, and His exalted angel called *"the Angel of God".* (N.b., *the* Angel of God is different from *an* angel of God.) Some other names for this *Kavōd* are the *Light of God*, the *Throne of Glory*, and the *Divine Presence("Shekhiná")*.

Ex. 24:10 "They saw the God of Israel. Under His feet was something like a pavement of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky." The phrase *"They saw the God of Israel"* is translated by Saadia as "They saw *the Light* of the God of Israel", while he renders *"Under His feet...",* as: *"Below it"* (i.e. below the light).

Ex. 24:17   [*Torah:*] "The appearance of the glory of the Lord was like devouring fire on the top of the mountain." [*Tafsîr:*] *"The sight of God's light was like a devouring fire..."*

Ex. 33:18   [*Torah:*] "Show me, please, Your glory." [*Tafsîr:*] *"Show me Your light."*

Ex. 33: 22-23 [*Torah:*] "When My glory passes by, I will place you in a cleft of the rock. I will cover you with My hand, until I have passed by. The, I will remove My hand so that you will see My back, but My face shall not be seen."
[*Tafsîr:*] *"When My light passes by you, I will have placed you in a cleft of a rock. I will shade you with My clouds until its beginning has passed. Then, I will remove My clouds so that you will see the last end of My light, but its beginnings, you shall not see."*

We have seen how and why Saadia Gaon was determined to render an explanation, a *Tafsîr,* in which anthropomorphisms were addressed in a philosophically sound manner, according to the ideals of *Mu³ tazila Kalām*. Saadia was convinced that believers should strive to understand the deeper meanings behind physical descriptions of God. Saadia rendered such portrayals with what he believed were the underlying deeper truths. Sometimes he solved textual difficulties by interpreting intransitive verbs as transitive. Finally, he presented the idea of a created entity called 'the Glory of God', 'the Light of God', or 'the Angel of the Lord' which would account for all Biblical reports of people who are said to have seen God. Later in the development of Jewish thought, especially within the movement of the medieval "German Pietists" *(Ḥasidē Ashkenaz)* Middle Ages, Saadia's notion of the 'Glory of God' would inspire entirely new forms of spirituality and

mysticism.

[1] Arabic for *exegesis* or *explanation.*

[2] As Saadia Gaon's original does not have vowels, and as it is doubtful that he intended for it to be read with '*I*³*rāb* and *tanwîn* according to the rules of classical Arabic grammar, I have avoided it in my transliteration.

[3] Yantob Ḥayim haCohen, *Torah Saadia Gaon*, Jerusalem 2015

[4] Yantob Ḥayim vocalization reflects the active form *yakhluq (that he would create).* In my opinion, that would only make sense if the word order were different: *'an yakhluq shay'an.* It that case, the verb should be taken as intransitive *(wa-³aṭila),* rendering *"God took a break from creating anything".*

[5] In grammatical terms, an intransitive verb has no object, meaning it happens in/to oneself (e.g. sitting, thinking, resting, etc.) while a transitive verb does have an object (e.g. seeing, creating, freeing *something*).