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Towards a critical edition of the translation of the Torah by Rav Saadia Gaon

By *Eliezer Schlossberg**

Rav Saadia Gaon was born in 882 CE in the village of Dilāz, in the district of Fayyūm, Upper Egypt. For reasons unknown he left his birthplace and set out for Babylonia, the centre of Jewish creativity at that time. Between 915 and 920, Rav Saadia Gaon lived in Tiberias, where he studied Torah with Eli ben Judah the Nazirite (or by his Arabic name, Abū Kathīr Yihya ben Zakaria), who was a grammarian, philosopher and one of the first to translate the Scriptures into Arabic. In the Land of Israel Rav Saadia Gaon dealt with Scripture, the Masoretic text, grammar and religious poetry (*piyyut*), acquiring a broad knowledge in these fields. In 921 Rav Saadia Gaon lived briefly in Aleppo, Syria, and in 922 arrived in Baghdad, where he was appointed *Rosh Kalla*, one of the heads of the Pumbaditha Academy (*yeshiva*). In 928 the Exilarch, David ben Zakkai, appointed him *Gaon*,¹ Head of the Academy of Sura. He gathered around himself students of the academy who had moved to the competing academy, Pumbaditha, and restored Sura's previous standing.

Rav Saadia Gaon's education and areas of interest were extremely wide, and they played a crucial role in the writing of his commentaries on Scriptures and in the formulation of their character. Even though he had been born and brought up in Egypt, which was not at the centre of the world of Jewish culture, his travels to Babylonia took him through all the Jewish and Arabic centres of Torah and learning of his day. That was why, not having been educated in Babylonia, he was not a typical student of the Babylonian academy, which was somewhat cut off from the cultural and

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1 The meaning of the title *Gaon* in Babylonia was "Head of one of the two academies (*yeshivot*), Sura and Pumbaditha", and it is likely that it was an abbreviation of *Rosh Yeshivat Ge'on Yaakov* ("Head of the Academy, Splendour of Jacob"). On the duties and role of the *Geonim*, see for example, SIMCHA ASSAF, תקופת הגאונים וספרותה, Jerusalem 1977; YERACHMIEL BRODIE, צוהר לספרות הגאונים, Israel 1998; ZVI BERGER, הגאונים, in: IRAD MALCHIN & ZEEV TZACHOR (eds), קובץ מאמרים – מנהיג והנהיגה, Jerusalem 1992, pp. 143-163.

spiritual realities of the period. This in turn stunted growth and originality in rabbinical literature.²

Rav Saadia Gaon's talents and broad culture were expressed immediately upon his arrival in Babylonia. When he was an *Alif* at the Academy of Pumbeditha, his main task was to teach Scriptures to the young students. It can be assumed that this was accompanied by related subjects, such as the *Masora*, the textual tradition, Hebrew grammar and poetics. These studies had been neglected in Babylonia, and Rav Saadia Gaon, who had studied them in Tiberias, was thus perfectly suited to teach them, and later also to author important works in these fields.

In 932, following a sharp dispute between him and the Exilarch, Rav Saadia Gaon was obliged to abandon his position as *Gaon* and to find shelter for four years. In 937 the two were reconciled and Rav Saadia Gaon returned to his post. His later years passed peacefully and without controversy until he died in 942.³

Rav Saadia Gaon wrote numerous works in many fields, including commentaries on the Scriptures. His commentaries are divided by their form and content into two sorts:

1. A short explanation [known by its Arabic name *Tafsīr*], which is in fact a translation of the verses into Arabic. As a result, through adding or omitting words, the structure of the verses is changed.

Rav Saadia Gaon was not the first to translate the Bible into Arabic. We know of translations carried out prior to his time, and parts of them have even been published in recent years in various academic publications.⁴ These translations appear to show the development of the oral

2 For a wide-ranging analysis of what conditioned the character and education of Rav Saadia Gaon, and which prepared him for a central role in the development of rabbinical literature in the Middle Ages, and contacts between Jewish and Arabic literature, see RINA DRORY, *ראשית המגעים של הספרות היהודית עם*, Tel-Aviv 1988, pp. 158-160; RINA DRORY, *Models and Contacts – Arabic Literature and Its Impact on Medieval Jewish Culture*, Leiden / Boston / Köln 2000; YERACHMIEL BRODIE, *רב סעדיה גאון*, Jerusalem 1967, pp. 39-42.

3 For a summary of the life of Rav Saadia Gaon, see the article on him in: *האנציקלופדיה העברית*, 32 vols, Jerusalem 1948-1980, vol. XXVI, pp. 196-198; AHARON DOTAN, *ספר צחות לשון העברים לרב סעדיה* – *אור ראשון בחכמת הלשון* – *גאון*, Jerusalem 1987, pt. 1, pp. 17-20; BRODIE, *רב סעדיה גאון* (n. 2), pp. 35-39.

4 For excerpts from the pre-Saadia translations that have so far been published, see: YOSEF TOBI, *תרגום ערבי-עברי עממי נוסף לתורה*, in: MOSHE BAR-ASHER (ed.), *מחקרים בלשון העברית ובלשונות היהודים מוגשים לשלמה מורג*, Jerusalem 1996, pp. 481-501; YOSEF TOBI, *כתיב פונטי לחומש שמות וקטעים נוספים*

tradition of commentary, with local variations, which later were absorbed into the Gaon's commentaries, or were rejected in favour of his own translations and thus forgotten to history. These notes are characterised by being extremely verbose, the use of many alternative translations, and by the absence of clear-cut, exegetical decisions.

As against the wordiness of previous translations, Rav Saadia Gaon took a great deal of liberty with changing the structure of the Hebrew verses, adapting them to the rules of Arabic grammar and composition. Thus, for example, the Gaon changed short verses into a continuum on one subject, by adding connecting letters or words. When several identical nouns appear in the same verse, the Gaon converted them into personal or possessive pronouns, as in the following verse: "And I have given the Levites they are given to Aaron and to his sons from among *the children of Israel*, to do the service of *the children of Israel* in the tent of meeting, and to make atonement for *the children of Israel*, that there be no plague among *the children of Israel*, through *the children of Israel* coming nigh unto the sanctuary." (Numbers 8:19) – the term "the children of Israel" is mentioned five times in the verse, whereas Rav Saadia Gaon translates it just once, and in the other cases refers to it using pronouns: וג'עלתהם להרון ולבניה מן בין בני אסראיל ליכדמו כ'דמתהם פי כ'בא אלמחצ'ר ויסתגפרו ענהם ולא יחל בהם ובא אד'א הם תקדמו אלי אלקדס [And I gave them to Aaron and his sons from among *the children of Israel* to perform their work in the tent of meeting and to make atonement for them and that there be no plague among them through them coming nigh unto the sanctuary].

In other cases the Gaon adds words into his translation to clarify a verse. Thus, for example, he prefaces what Abraham says to Sarah, "And it will come to pass, when the Egyptians shall see thee, that they will say: This is his wife; and they will kill me, but thee they will keep alive" (Genesis 12:12), with the verb אכ'אף אן ראוך etc, meaning, "I am afraid, when the Egyptians shall see thee...", since in the final analysis Abraham was not killed, as he himself had determined with certainty.

Occasionally he changes the order of words in a verse, to avoid interpretative problems. Of the stones on the breastplate it is written, "And the stones shall be according to the names of the children of Israel" (Exodus

בין עבר לערב: המגעים בין הספרות הערבית לבין, in: idem (ed), לתרגומים עממיים הספרות היהודית בימי הביניים ובזמן החדש, Tel-Aviv, 1995, pp. 53-74; JOSHUA BLAU, "On a Fragment of the Oldest Judaeo-Arabic Bible Translation Extant", in: JOSHUA BLAU & STEFAN C. REIF (eds), *Genizah Research After Ninety Years – The Case of Judaeo-Arabic*, Cambridge 1992, pp. 31-39.

28:21), something that was clearly impossible. Rav Saadia Gaon changes the word order in his translation, ותכון עלי אלהג'ארה אסמא בני ישראל, meaning the names of the children of Israel will be on the stones, thereby resolving the difficulty.

2. Comprehensive “interpretative” notes, with which the *Gaon* explains sets of verses according to a literary breakdown that he invented, explains difficult words, discusses linguistic, halachic (Jewish law), philosophical and theological issues that arise from the verses in question. He also argues at length with his opponents, Jews and non-Jews alike.

These explanations of Rav Saadia Gaon, as well as his other works in language and philosophy, earned him from some of the scholars of the Middle Ages the title ראש המדברים בכל מקום [“The Highest Authority Anywhere”].⁵ This title was originally accorded the early Rabbinic Sage Rabbi Yehuda beRabbi Ilai,⁶ and the fact that Rav Saadia Gaon was given it too indicates his important status among medieval scholars and the respect in which they held him.

Rav Saadia Gaon’s translation of the Bible, which is the focus of this article, was one of the most important commentaries on the Bible in the Middle Ages, and had a great deal of influence on biblical commentators who came after him. In recent years I have been working on a critical edition of the translation, together with alternate versions, a translation into Hebrew and explanatory notes. In this article I would like to describe the task of editing, its scope and the guidelines employed.⁷

Rav Saadia Gaon’s translation was first published in the *Polyglot Bible* in Constantinople in 1546, based on manuscripts written in Hebrew characters.⁸ It was published a second time in the *Paris Polyglot Bible* in 1645 together with a translation into Latin, however, on this occasion in Arabic characters. The third occasion was in the *London Polyglot Bible* in 1657, here

5 This title was given to Rav Saadia Gaon by Rav ABRAHAM IBN EZRA (מאזני לשון הקדש, Offenbach 1751, p. 1b) and by the Spanish-Italian grammarian, Rav SHLOMO IBN FARCHON (מחברת הערוך), ed. ZALMAN BEN GOTTLIEB BEN KOCHAV TOV, Pressburg 1844 [facsimile Jerusalem 1970], p. 12 s. v. פ"ה).

6 bBer 63b; bShab 33b; and bMen 103b.

7 This large-scale research could not have been carried out without a generous grant I received from the National Sciences Foundation, for which I am extremely grateful. I would also like to express my appreciation to the assistants I have been able to employ thanks to this grant, most of them from among my students in the Department of Arabic at Bar Ilan University, who have been scrupulously checking the source material.

8 *Pentateuchus Hebraeo-Chaldaeo-Persico-Arabicus*, Constantinople 1546.

too in Arabic characters. The conversion of the Hebrew to Arabic characters led to many errors and a considerable number of corruptions of the text of the *Tafsīr*. From that date until the end of the 19th century only individual passages were printed of Rav Saadia Gaon's commentary on the Pentateuch, mainly from the long commentary.⁹

The first Yemenite *Taj* was printed in Jerusalem between 1894 and 1899. The *Taj* combines the translation of Rav Saadia Gaon with biblical verses and the Aramaic translation of Onkelos. This translation is based solely on Yemenite manuscripts. Since then the translation of Rav Saadia Gaon has been printed in the Yemenite *Taj* books, usually together with other commentaries. The last *Taj* known to me that includes Rav Saadia Gaon's translation was published a few years ago by the sons of Rabbi Shimon Sāleh.¹⁰ This edition perpetuates even more than previous ones the connection between the *Tafsīr* of Rav Saadia Gaon and his sources of Yemenite tradition as handed down from generation to generation, since Rav Saadia Gaon's translation is vocalized using the Yemenite pronunciation.

The most important development in connection with the *Tafsīr* of Rav Saadia Gaon occurred apparently in 1893 when Naphtali (known as Joseph) Derenbourg published his edition of the *Tafsīr* with short explanatory notes, together for the first time with the Gaon's introduction to his translation, which was only to be found in very few manuscripts.¹¹

In his Introduction, Derenbourg states that in preparing his edition he made use of three sources: the Constantinople edition of 1546, the London *Polyglot* of 1657 and a manuscript he describes as follows: "Very accurate, sent to me from Jerusalem... This manuscript is from Rav David Hacoheh, who came from the Land of Yemen to Jerusalem, to live there." Today, with the plethora of texts we have from non-Yemenite sources, and particularly because we understand that the Yemenite explanatory tradition was not the only one that preserved the previous text of the *Tafsīr*, we cannot consider the Derenbourg edition to be critical in the fullest sense of the term.

9 HENRY MALTER, *Saadia Gaon – His Life and Works*, Philadelphia 1921 [repr. 1942], pp. 308-309; on other printings of the *Tafsīr*, see *ibid.* p. 309 et seq.

10 התאג' השלם חזון שמעון, 5 vols., Bnei Brak 1996-2002.

11 For emendations and notes to this edition, see JOSEF MIESES, "Textkritische Bemerkungen zu R. Saadja Gaons arabischer Pentateuchuebersetzung, ed. Derenbourg, Paris 1893", in: *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 63 (1919), pp. 269-290. On the Introduction, see also HAGGAI BEN-SHAMMAI, חדשים וגם ישנים: ההקדמה הגדולה וההקדמה הקטנה לתרגום רס"ג לתורה, in: *Tarbiz* 69 (2000), pp. 199-210.

It accordingly appears unavoidable to prepare a new, critical edition, which will be based on as many sources as possible and on reliable texts, to the extent that the world's libraries permit.

Several reasons have conspired that up until today we do not have a satisfactory edition of the *Tafsīr*, but here is not the place to dwell at length on the subject. However, it would appear that one of the reasons is the enormous number of manuscripts to be found around the world in both libraries and private collections. In the opinion of Prof. Yehudah Ratzhabi, the number today reaches over ten thousand.

However, a study of these manuscripts shows that the overwhelming majority are from the 17th century onwards and almost all are Yemenite, and they therefore illustrate just one aspect of the *Tafsīr* tradition. In other words, even if we ignore the technical difficulty in locating and checking all the manuscripts, there is in fact no need, since most of these manuscripts contain nothing that would contribute to the study of versions of the translation. However, later manuscripts might also preserve older, good versions, yet sampling of the later Yemenite manuscripts shows that the differences between them and older manuscripts from Yemen lie mainly in minor issues of language and spelling, and they have no real contribution to the study of earlier texts.

Accordingly, the first decision prior to the preparation of this edition was in respect of the sources that could and should be used in order to cover the many versions of the *Tafsīr*. The guiding principle was to choose a relatively limited number of manuscripts and printed editions, in order to be able to handle them efficiently and within a reasonable timeframe.

These manuscripts represent multiple channels of tradition of the *Tafsīr*, and do not concentrate on the Yemenite tradition only. It is important to be aware that even though the Jews of Yemen were almost the only ones to continue to pore over the *Tafsīr* of Rav Saadia Gaon during the last few hundred years and in fact have been almost the only ones to do so until today, though their texts are by no means free of corruptions and errors. What is more, the scribes in Yemen allowed themselves occasionally to change the text before them, to adapt them to the languages and expressions with which they were familiar, or because they wished to suit the text of the translation they were working on to the biblical text.

That, for example, is the situation with what is written in Genesis 2:6, “but there went up a mist from the earth, and watered the whole face of the ground”. There are two versions of Rav Saadia Gaon's translation for the first part of the verse:

1. ואלבכ'אר כאן יצעד מנהא פיסקי גמיע וגההא [“and steam arose from it and watered all its waste”].¹² This version is found in the earliest Yemenite *Taj*, Manuscript Oxford – Bod. MS Opp. Add. Q4. 98 (nr 16327), that was written in San’a in the 14th century; in the Lutzki manuscript, Jewish Theological Seminary 647 (nr 23891), which was apparently written in Egypt in the 14th century; in a Yemenite manuscript written in Rada` in 1697 (Cam. Add 1008 ii), in the *Parasha-Taj*, a manuscript from 1812 (edition of Aharon Chassid, Jerusalem 1971) and in the *Nadaf-Iraqi* edition, printed in Jerusalem in 1894 [facsimile edition published in Jerusalem, 1968].

2. ולא בכאר כאן יצעד מנהא פיסקי גמיע וגההא [“and mist did not rise etc.”]. This version is to be found for example in the oldest manuscript of Rav Saadia Gaon’s translation of the Pentateuch, in the Russian National Library, St. Petersburg, II C. EBO (nr. 69089); manuscript Oxford Bod. MS Poc. 395 (nr. 33041), written in the northern Syrian town of Hamat in 1449, in many of the extracts of the *Tafsīr* that survived in the *Genizah*, and it is also the version of Rav Amram Qorah in his commentary *Neveh Shalom* on the translation of Rav Saadia Gaon.¹³

From a study of the commentaries of the rabbis of the Middle Ages it emerges that they were only acquainted with the second version, and in it mist did not rise from the earth. For example, Rav Abraham Ibn Ezra writes in his commentary ad loc., “And the Gaon said that its explanation was that ‘mist did not rise from the ground’.” An explanation for this comment can be found, for example, in the words of Rav David Kimchi (known as *RaDa”Q*) in his commentary on the Pentateuch.

And the Gaon Rav Saadia explained ‘and mist did not rise from the ground’. [The word] ‘not’ that is mentioned previously¹⁴ or [the word] ‘no’ are instead of twice. And thus he explained, at the beginning of the world there was no man to sow and plant and there was no mist that rose up and watered... And where it says ‘and mist did not rise’ after it had already said, ‘and it did not water’, he was certain of this, ‘that mist went up’ is the

12 For a different translation (even though on the second version below, but inference can also be made to the first version), see JOSHUA BLAU, עיינום בתרגום רב סעדיה גאון לבראשית א-יב, in: ZOHAR ‘AMAR & HANAN’EL SERI (eds.), ספר זיכרון לרב יוסף בן דוד קאפח זצ”ל, Ramat-Gan 2001, pp. 309-318, esp. p. 312, and see also: Rav YOSEF QAFIH, פירושי רבינו סעדיה גאון על התורה, Jerusalem 1994.

13 In his explanation of Rav Saadia Gaon’s translation, Rav Qorah brings old, accurate versions, see further below.

14 That is to say, the negative “no” which is added to “it did not water” from the previous verse, as is the same with the word “no” later on.

explanation of 'it did not water', to let us know that God is the one who waters by way of the mist, since that is the start of the written story.¹⁵

In other words the negative "no" (or "not") that appears in verse 5 also serves the start of verse 6, and therefore it must be joined, according to Rav Saadia Gaon, to the words "and the mist went up", in that way voiding the possibility that mist did rise from the earth and watered the ground.

It would appear that this approach, even though it is bolder and more daring, is the one that was chosen by Rav Saadia Gaon, and therefore was known among the rabbis of the Middle Ages who used the Gaon's commentary when they themselves came to explain Scripture. Later scribes did not appreciate Rav Saadia Gaon's "deviation" from the verse's literal meaning ["mist did *not* go up"], and changed what he wrote and adjusted it to the biblical text, according to their own mistaken understanding.

In order not to be dependent on a single exegetical tradition, I decided to make use for the purpose of alternative versions, of manuscripts as early as possible, written in different places throughout the East. In the list of manuscripts can therefore be found one written in Egypt in the 14th century, one apparently written in Spain in the 13th – 14th century, and a manuscript from northern Syria from the 15th century, alongside a Yemenite one from the 14th century that is apparently one of the earliest – if not the earliest - Yemenite manuscripts of the *Tafsīr* that we have.

In addition to these manuscripts, most of them complete and covering the entire Torah, hundreds of fragments including the Gaon's translation from the *Genizah*, where the name of the writer and their date are unknown, will be checked. Some of the fragments are extremely short and fragmentary, with translation of only a few verses, and some with translation of several chapters. These fragments, of which only a few have ever been studied, are one of the most important contributions of the new edition in the investigation of the text of the *Tafsīr*.

The apparatus of alternative versions from printed sources will include the Constantinople *Polyglot* of 1546, which like every first edition enjoys the status of a manuscript, as well as the Derenbourg edition that anyone interested will want to find the text of this well-known edition. It will also

15 פירושי רבי דוד קמחי על התורה, ed. MOSHE KAMELHAR, Jerusalem 1970, and also in his *ספר השורשים*. This explanation is quoted in various versions, including that of Rav ABRAHAM BEN HA-RAMBAM, in the Yemenite *מדרש החפץ*, ed. MEIR HAVAZELET, 2 vols., Jerusalem 1990-1992, in the commentary of Rav YITZHAK ABARBANEL, and in Rav SHLOMO BEN MELECH, *מכלול יופי*, see: ELIEZER SCHLOSSBERG, *מאסף לפרשנות המקרא - מלך - שלמה בן מלך - מאסף לפרשנות המקרא*, in: *Megadim* 5 (1988), pp. 45-57.

include the text of the *Taj* that was printed in Jerusalem during the years 1894-1899, where alongside embarrassing mistaken versions can also be found unique and interesting readings. This *Taj* was printed in accordance with a relatively late Yemenite manuscript,¹⁶ and it therefore represents to a considerable degree the later texts of the *Tafsīr* in Yemen. Another consideration for including this source in the list of texts was that this *Taj* is found in many homes, certainly among Yemenite scholars, and it is thus right to take it into account.

The range of sources and where they were written creates a problem to all aspects of the transcription. A comparison of pre-Saadian commentaries published in recent years¹⁷ shows that it was Rav Saadia Gaon who determined and largely formulated the method of transcription and writing in Judeo-Arabic that was current in the Middle Ages. In the sources available to us there are several transcription methods, which differ from each other by the transcription of the letters *ض/ظ*, *ج/غ*, of the shortened Arabic letter *alif* (as in the words *ilā*, *alā*) and even the letter *alif* in words such as *kamā* and *lammā*, not to mention the partial or complete removal of the diacritic points. In order not to impair the uniqueness of the various sources, and on the assumption that those interested in textual variants have a good command of Arabic, both Jewish and non-Jewish, no attempt has been made to unify the various transcription techniques, and each of the sources will be brought as is.

It should be noted that there are a number of manuscripts, some from before the 13th century, written in Arabic script,¹⁸ whose value is questionable. However, Paul Kahle and his students argued that it was these manuscripts, written in Arabic script, that most faithfully reflect the original text of the *Tafsīr*. Nevertheless, today scholars agree that manuscripts in Hebrew script are the ones that retained the ancient text.¹⁹ In order that the new edition should accurately represent all the traditions, it will also include a comparison with the Florence manuscript, written in Arabic script in 1245, and thus considered one of the very earliest sources of the translation.²⁰

16 However, on the frontispiece the editors write that the translation of Rav Saadia Gaon “was transcribed from accurate, ancient books from Yemen that were several hundred years old”, but having checked text and language, I have doubts whether the manuscripts used by the editors are more than 300 years old.

17 See supra n. 4.

18 See MALTER, *Saadia Gaon* (n. 9), pp. 310-311.

19 See MALTER, *Saadia Gaon* (n. 9), p. 111.

20 Cod. Palat. Orient. 112 (XXI) or Flor. Pal. Med. Or. 21. On the first page of the manuscript is written [= التوراة المقدسة محررة من نقل سعيد الفيومي من العبراني الى العربي

However, the most important manuscript of all is naturally the one that will serve as the internal text, or in other words, the manuscript on which the entire edition is based, and against which the other sources will be compared. For this purpose an eastern (non-Yemenite) manuscript has been selected, that is in the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg, reference number EBP II C (nr. 69089 and 69895 in the Institute of Hebrew Manuscript Photocopies in Jerusalem).

He who wishes to edit the manuscript has to face the familiar dilemma: whether to use the diplomatic edition approach, which means being based on a single confirmed source, namely one manuscript, and to make comparison to other sources; or to use the eclectic edition approach, which gathers separate sources but creates a new entity whose like will not be found among existing manuscripts, but which, in the editor's opinion, ought to be closer to the original as penned by the author.

In our case there was not much room for indecision. The quality of the St. Petersburg MS and its preference over all other manuscripts, led me (as well as other scholars) to the obvious conclusion, that it was the right one on which to base a future edition of the *Tafsīr*. However, the many missing parts in the MS require acknowledgement that the edition will also be eclectic, since the many missing passages must be filled in from at least one other manuscript.

This MS, which was first described by Prof. Joshua Blau,²¹ is an eastern manuscript from the beginning of the 11th century, approximately only seventy years after the Gaon's death. The verses are written in large characters, each verse being followed by the Arabic translation of Rav Saadia Gaon on separate lines and in smaller Hebrew letters. The MS underwent proofreading at some stage, and in the margin are corrections, both of the Hebrew text of the verses and of the text of the *Tafsīr*. Thus we sometimes find in the margins or between the lines words that were erased in error, or even other verses of the *Tafsīr*. Sometimes it is difficult to know whether or not the copyist of the MS himself wrote these additions.

In the Arabic words of the *Tafsīr* there are extremely fragmentary diacritic markings, which are also not consistent. On several occasions the same word appears in a verse more than once, with the diacritic markings

The Holy Torah written from the translation of Saadia from Fayyūm from Hebrew to Arabic]. For further details, see MALTER, *Saadia Gaon* (n. 9), p. 310.

21 עיונים בכתב מזרחי מתחילת המאה הי"א של תרגום רס"ג לתורה, in: *Leshonenu* 61 (1998), pp. 111-130. On issues of Masora in the MS, see: YOSEF OFER, הערות מסורה בענייני דקדוק בכתב-יד לניגוד עם תרגום רס"ג (ל), in: *Mechqarim ba-Lashon* 8 (2001) pp. 49-75.

in the various occurrences not being identical. This for example in the translation of Genesis 31:30 **ואלאן מצית מצ'יא** the letter **ض** appears the first time without a diacritic point while the second time it has one. There is a similar situation in the translation of Exodus 16:15 **וקאל בעצהם לבעץ'**, here the first word of two similar ones is missing the diacritic point, while in the second it has it.

The lack of consistency in the early manuscript can be seen not just in the diacritic markings but also in writing proper names, such as **יצחק** /**אסחק**, or **סרי/שרי**. In the next example, three types of writing can be discerned in the translation of the word **הלוויים**: **בני מן בכר מן בני**: **הלוויים** **אסראייל ובהאים אללואניין** **בדל בהאימהם פיצירון לי אליואניין** **אנא אללה שרפתהם** (Numbers 3:45).

Much less frequently, there are words in the text that have partial Arabic vocalization marks, apparently to make it easier for the reader. Thus for example in the translation of Deuteronomy 6:15 it is written, **לאן אללה רבך**, **טאיק מ'עאקב פימא בינכם לי'לא ישתד גצבה עליך וינפדך ען וגה אלארץ'**, where over the letter *mem* of the word **מעאקב** and over the letter *kaf* of the word **בינכם** is the Arabic vowel *dammah*, and above the letter *yud* in **לילא** is an Arabic *hamzah*. In the translation of Exodus 19:3 it states, **ומוסי צעד אלי אללה פנאדאה**, **אללה מן אלגבל קאילא כדא ק'ל לאל יעקוב ואכבר אל אסראייל**, and over the letter *qaf* in the word **קל** can clearly be seen the *dammah*. In the translation of Deuteronomy 6:16, **ולא תג'רבו אללה ר'בכם כמא ג'ר'בתמוה פי דאת אלמחנה**, there are clear *fatha* vowel marks and the Arabic stress mark *shaddah*.

What is special about the St. Petersburg MS is first and foremost its age. It was written in Egypt by the scribe Shmuel ben Yaakov, and based on the time that scribe was active the date of this manuscript can be estimated at about 1010, which is only approximately 70 years after the death of the Gaon in 942.

This early manuscript also differs from other ones we know in its style and its insistence on Arabic rules of grammar and composition. Prof. Blau has already pointed out the expertise of both Rav Saadia Gaon and Rav Shmuel ben Chofni in the finer points of Arabic style.²² However, according to him, there is a gap between this expertise and the level of the language employed for writing, which apparently indicates that they had intended to write in post-classical style, even if theoretically they had aimed for the truly classical language.

22 JOSHUA BLAU, **דקויות בניתוח הסגנון הערבי בכתבי רב סעדיה גאון ושמואל בן חפני**, in: *Pe'amim* 23 (1985) pp. 38-41.

This MS is superior both stylistically and linguistically to the other manuscripts. It is scrupulous about classical, grammatical structure, for example the consistent retention of nominal cases (such as distinguishing between מצריין/מצריון as compared to מצריין in almost all other manuscripts); the conjugation of verbs, for example 'עבדון as against 'עבדו, תאכ'ד'ונה as compared to תאכ'ד'וה; use of the dual form both in verbs (יכונאן) and the objective pronoun (אעטיתהמא); and agreeing connecting words with the antecedent nouns.

In these circumstances Prof. Blau proposes two routes for development in the process of editing:

1. The ancient MS reflects the original version of the translation, whereas other sources represent the changes introduced into the *Tafsīr* over time.
2. The later sources represent the original text of the translation, and the copyist of the ancient manuscript established a new text, which imitates classical Arabic.

Prof. Blau rejects the second possibility, since "it is quite clear that the transcribers of the Arabic texts have in general a tendency to be particular about their own language and to let the popular basis creep into the text they are copying". He therefore concludes, "We are obliged to come to the conclusion that the MS generally (but by no means always) retained the earlier language of the translation".²³

The early MS of the Gaon's translation, which reflects better than all other sources the original text from the author's pen, was thus written in post-classical Arabic virtually without any morphological errors from classical Arabic.

In the light of the reliability of its versions and the exactness of its fluent Arabic language, it is fitting to base a critical edition of the Gaon's translation of the Torah on it. However, as has been stated above, large parts of it are missing. In fact, just two thirds of the translation of the Torah has survived in manuscript. Thus, for example, in Genesis the entire section *Toledot* (25:19-28:9) is missing; in the manuscript Leviticus starts in the middle, in the section *Acharei mot* (chapter 16). In the other parts too there are many gaps, in the form of missing words, missing verses and even complete chapters.

The second important question facing the editor is, therefore, how to make good the sections missing from the translation?

Prof. Blau suggests completing the edition using the Constantinople printed version.

23 BLAU, עייונים בכתב מזרחי (n. 21), p. 115.

“I recommend basing the edition on two texts, on the right-hand side the MS... as it has been retained, with all its lacunae. On the left I recommend printing the Constantinople edition of 1546 in full... though of course without the vocalization marks. The two versions will complement each other and will provide the reader, without undue effort, with an authentic version of the translation”.²⁴

Since the exegetical tradition reflected by the early manuscripts does not fully match that of other versions, even those from Yemen, and since the reliability of the Constantinople edition still requires confirmation, I think that this proposal would prove insufficient. Only an edition that takes into consideration various, separate traditions would ensure our ability to get as close as possible to a recreation of the original as penned by Rav Saadia Gaon.

Accordingly, the missing parts of the early MS will be completed from the manuscript closest to it in terms of both language and exegetical tradition it reflects. To this end we have selected Oxford Bod. MS. Poc. 395 (nr. 33041), written in the town of Hamāt in northern Syria in 1449. The translation into Arabic of the few verses also missing in this manuscript will be taken from the Oxford manuscript (MS Opp. Add. Q4. 98 nr. 16237), which was written in Sana’a in the 14th century.

In order to offer a comprehensive study of the sources of the Gaon’s translation of the Torah, we will need to check, however, other sources in addition to those mentioned.

An important source is those *Genizah* texts in which the long commentary of Rav Saadia Gaon, the *Sharh*, is found, texts that also contain translations of biblical verses. The translation of verses in this edition is not necessarily identical with that found in the “short” version.

For example, in his commentary on Genesis 3:22, Rav Saadia Gaon translates the phrase “tree of life” with the words שג'רה אלחיוה. This translation appears in every version of the *Tafsīr* that we have examined. Yet in the translation to be found in a fragment of the Commentary from the *Genizah*, there is a different version, שג'רה אלעאפיה.²⁵ Yet in Rav Saadia Gaon’s long commentary he dwells at length on why he chose to translate “tree of life” using the words שג'רה אלמעאפה.

It should be noted that many anonymous fragments are still being found in the *Genizah*, which need to be examined together with their rela-

24 BLAU, עיונים בכתב מזרחי (n. 21), p. 130.

25 MOSHE ZUCKER, *Saadya’s Commentary on Genesis*, New York 1984, p. 78, and in one place there, שג'ר אלעאפיה.

tionship to Rav Saadia Gaon. It cannot be excluded that some indeed can be attributed to the Gaon, and that some might even reveal versions previously unknown.

Much importance is also attributed to the composition *Neveh Shalom*, a commentary on the translation of Rav Saadia Gaon by Rav `Amram Korach (d. 1952), the last Chief Rabbi of Yemen prior to their mass emigration following the establishment of the State of Israel. This commentary is intended to explain difficult words in the translation and also to select the accurate versions,²⁶ and it is thus possibly to find in it versions not to be found in other sources. Thus the most common translation in all the sources I have examined to Abimelech's question to G-d, "wilt Thou slay even a righteous nation?" (Gen. 20:4) is אַאנְסאַן צאַלח תקתלה, whereas in *Neveh Shalom* the word אַאנְסאַן is swapped for אַרְג'ל.

Another interesting source for the Gaon's versions is the book *Hasagot Rav Mubashshir*.²⁷ Rav Mubashshir, a contemporary of Rav Saadia Gaon wrote a book of criticism of Rav Saadia Gaon and his works, in which he attacked him and his explanations of Biblical verses, as well as his religious faith. Rav Mubashshir starts each of his comments by quoting from Rav Saadia Gaon what he wants to refute thereby preserving for us the words of the Gaon as he had them. Thus, for example, he writes, he says in his commentary to Exodus, "I have translated תפריעו (Ex. 5:4) as תגדבאן etc." This version brought by Rav Mubashshir is different from other manuscript versions, תג'דבון. In another comment Rav Mubashshir writes, "Heaven forefend, but we find he writes in the section *Beshalach*, 'I have translated עם זו קנית (Ex. 15:16) אקתנית etc.'"²⁸ This version differs from the versions we have, which read אלשעב אלד'י מלכתהם.

One can find echoes of various versions of the Rav Saadia Gaon's translation among the commentators and grammarians of the Middle Ages, who were familiar with his longer commentary and translation. These scholars, such as the commentator Rav Abraham Ibn Ezra and the grammarian Rav Jonah Ibn Ġanāḥ, were well acquainted with the Gaon's commentaries, adopted or debated them, and from their quotations one can sometimes reconstruct the versions that they had.

26 For a description of this commentary and its features, see: NACHEM ILAN, נוה, שלום של רב עמרם קורח: פירוש על תפסיר רב סעדיה גאון למקרא, in: *Tema* 8 (2004), pp. 131-148.

27 MOSHE ZUCKER (ed.), *A Critique against the Writings of R. Saadya Gaon by R. Mubashshir Halevi*, with introduction, translation and notes, New York 1956.

28 ZUCKER (ed.), *Critique against the Writings of R. Saadya Gaon* (n. 27), p. 25, and in the translation into Hebrew, p. 78.

Thus, for example, Ibn Ezra brings God's words to Abraham, עתה
הנה כי ירא אלהים אתה ["for now I know that thou art a God-fearing"
(Gen, 22:12)], that raise the issue of the apparent late awareness by God
of Abraham's qualities, that are "like the meaning 'I made people know'."
Thus, this is in line with R. Saadia's translation, אלאן ערפת אלנאס ["now I
have told men", or: "I made men know"]; on Noah's curse on his son ארור
כנען ["Cursed be Canaan"], Ibn Ezra writes, "The Gaon writes that the
word 'father of' is missing, and it should have said 'Cursed is the father of
Canaan'." Whereas in all versions of the *Tafsīr* that we have, the wording is
מלעון אבו כנען²⁹ ["Cursed is the father of Canaan"].

Rav Saadia Gaon's influence on the exegesis in the Middle Ages was
both considerable and wide-ranging. There was direct influence on the
commentators of the early Middle Ages, mainly those active between 10th
and 13th centuries, and indirectly also on later commentators, who perhaps
did not see the Gaon's works themselves, but were aware of them through
the commentaries of their predecessors. The scriptural explanations of the
Gaon spread throughout all the lands of the East, from Babylonia, where
they were written, to the frontiers of Spain. That is how they can occasio-
nally be found by chance in surprising places. We will provide examples of
this from two works, one from Yemen and the other from North Africa.

As we have said above, the Jewish inhabitants of Yemen dealt much
more with the translation of the Gaon than any other Jewish community
in the east. Many translations of Rav Saadia Gaon have been preserved in
the commentary חמדת ימים on the Torah by Rav Shalom ben Yosef Sha-
bazi,³⁰ who was born in 1619, studied Torah in Sana'a, moved to Shabaz
and then to Ta'ez, and died apparently in 1710. He is considered the
greatest poet of Yemen, and for many its greatest sage of all times.³¹

Rav Shalom Shabazi's authorship of חמדת ימים is nonetheless shrouded
in scholarly and rabbinic controversy;³² however, in this article I accept his

29 In other versions אבו כנעאן or אבא כנעאן.

30 Published for the first time in Jerusalem 1883-1888, a second time in 1956,
and a third time in 1977.

31 For a general review of his life and works, see the entry in: MOSHE GAVRA,
האנציקלופדיה לחכמי תימן, 2 pts., Bnei Berak 2001, pt. 1, pp. 598-599, and in the
bibliography at the end of that entry.

32 For a summary of the dispute between the various scholars and rabbis as to the
authorship of Rav Shalom Shabazi's work, see YOSEF TOBI, מדרש לזיהוי מחבר מדרש
חמדת ימים, in: *Tagim* 3-4 (1972), pp. 63-72, and the response of YEHUDA RA-
TZABY, *ibid.*, pp. 73-74; and YOSEF TOBI, מן המחצית הראשונה, in: *Pe'amim* 86-87 (2001), p. 53. Tobi ascribes the author-

authorship unreservedly. The *Midrash*, which was written in the middle of the 17th century³³ in the town of Najd al-Walid, is a commentary on the Pentateuch in the style of *PaRDeS* (“orchard”) which stands for the four *senses* of scripture: *pesbat*, *remez*, *derash*, and *sod* (literal, anagogic, homiletic, and “mystical”), with the section on “secrets” being particularly large.

In the book *המדת ימים* there are over forty explanations of the Gaon. A further five are brought in his explanation of the *Haftarat*, the passages from the Prophets that accompany the weekly Torah reading. As is well known, Rav Shalom Shabazi continued to work on *המדת ימים*, adding new explanations from time to time, which precedes with a mark ת"ט [*tosefet te`amin*], indicating “additional explanations”. It should be emphasized that the explanations of the Gaon are quoted in both the original edition of the commentary and in the “additional explanations”.

Before bringing the explanation of Rav Saadia Gaon, the author provides the following descriptions and titles: “Rabbi Saadia Gaon”, (p. 28), “R. Saadia Gaon of blessed memory” (p. 10), “Rav Saadia Gaon” (p. 14), “Rabbi S. G.” (p. 31), “R. S. Gaon of blessed memory” (p. 253). Frequently the author adds to the honorific “Rav”, a form of “Rabbeinu [meaning “Our Rabbi”] Saadia Gaon of blessed memory” (p. 186, 201, 202 et al.).

On a number of occasions the texts of Rav Shalom Shabazi differ from those of R. Saadia’s translation we are already familiar with. However, they should be treated with considerable caution. Thus, for example, for the expression *במאה קשיטה* [“a hundred pieces of money” (Gen. 33:19)], Rav Shalom Shabazi employs the Gaon’s translation, *במאה כשבה* [“for a hundred sheep”] (p. 110), meaning that Jacob purchased the field from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem, for one hundred sheep.³⁴ In every manuscript and printed edition of the *Tafsīr* that I have examined, the text is *במאה נעגיה*, which means “sheep”. It would appear that what we have is a standard extrapolation between the version of Rav Shalom Sha-

ship to Rav Shalom Shabazi as given and self-explanatory. In a similar vein is AHARON BEN HAYIM DAVID QAFIH, *גדולי רבני תימן*, Jerusalem 5749 (1988/9), pp. 26-27, and see note 11 op. cit. See also the Introduction of SHIMON GRAIDI to the last edition of *המדת ימים*, printed in 1977 (n. 30 above).

33 This information is drawn from what Rav Shalom Shabazi wrote in the section *Balak*, “Today we reached [the year] *אתתקנ"ז* to [the Minyan of] Shtarot, the year being 5406 since the creation of the world, and we still await the Messiah” (p. 458). Year 5406 since the Creation was 1646.

34 Cf. *Targum Onkelos*: *במאה חורפן*. The assumption is that Rav Shalom Shabazi uses an Arabic word and not an Hebrew one, since *כשבה* is not common in the Hebrew language, being *כבשה* with the letters reversed.

bazi and the standard version, particularly since this has no impact on the understanding on the meaning of the word קשיטה, since both נעג'ה and כסבה have identical meanings.³⁵ Having said which, one cannot necessarily say that Rav Shalom Shabazi had a different version, since he too might have had נעג'ה, which he transmitted to his readers using the standard synonym from spoken Yemeni Arabic. In other words, when we examine the versions of Rav Shalom Shabazi, we must be particularly careful, since it cannot be excluded that what we see is an adaptation of ancient texts to the everyday language spoken at later period in Yemen, and not the original version that had not been retained in other sources.

A much smaller number of translations of Rav Saadia Gaon were retained by Rav Moshe ben Yom Tov Gabbai, who in the middle of the 14th century wrote the commentary *Eved Shlomo* on Rashi's commentary on the Torah. What is stated in Genesis 32:11, מכל החסדים ומכל האמת ["all the mercies, and of all the truth"], Rav Saadia Gaon translates, in the versions which I have seen, using the words גמיע אלפצ'ל ואלאחסאן. Rav Moshe ben Shem-Tov Gabbai quotes Rav Saadia Gaon's translation in a version we do not have from other sources, "And Rabbi Saadia of blessed memory translated it: מן גמיע אל פצ'איל ואל חסאן".³⁶

Summary

The proposed edition of the *Tafsīr* of Rav Saadia Gaon on the Torah will include an Arabic text in Hebrew letters, which will be based upon the very early St. Petersburg MS. The parts missing from the MS will be completed from another manuscript, whose text and language are as close as possible to the earlier MS. The Arabic *Tafsīr* will be followed by a translation into Hebrew of what Rav Saadia Gaon wrote, for those readers not sufficiently fluent in Arabic. Below these two will be an exposition of different versions, including versions from some of those mentioned above.

Thereafter will follow notes and comments on the various sources, such as biblical commentaries from the Middle Ages, the critique of Rav Mubashshir and others, which are important in reconstructing the original text of the *Tafsīr*.

35 On כסבה in Yemeni dialect, see MOSHE PIAMENTA, *Dictionary of Post-Classical Yemeni Arabic*, 2 vols., Leiden / New York / København / Köln 1990-1991, vol. II, p. 430.

36 עבד שלמה: על פירוש רש"י, ed. R. MOSHE PHILIP, Petach Tiqva 5766 (2005/6), p. 169. The word פצ'איל is undoubtedly the result of a different version, while אל חסאן might be a result of a North African pronunciation.