

# PHILOLOGY AS THE HANDMAIDEN OF PHILOSOPHY IN R. SAADIA GAON'S INTERPRETATION OF GEN 1:1<sup>1</sup>

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Naphtali Kinberg ל"ת was a fellow of the Hebrew University's Institute for Advanced Studies in 1994–95, in a group investigating the history of Hebrew linguistics, headed by David Tene ל"ת. It was there that I came to know him. His scholarship, collegiality, and nobility of character made a profound impression on me, as anyone who spoke with me that year can testify. Had there been a vote, I believe that he would have been named the "most valuable player" in our group. He spent countless hours showing all of us how our papers could be improved by taking into account the riches of the Arab grammatical and exegetical tradition. He provided parallels that were always right on target, and he frequently corrected mistakes in our papers. Although I have already dedicated a long article to Naphtali,<sup>2</sup> it is a privilege for me to honor his memory a second time, this time in concert with his other friends and admirers.

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All students of R. Saadia Gaon's exegesis are thankful for his decision to write a commentary explaining the translations in his *Tafsīr*. Many of his departures from the literal meaning of Scripture are motivated by philosophical considerations that are not transparent to the modern reader. In the *Tafsīr* to Gen 1:1, not only the motivation of the Arabic rendering but also its meaning is unclear, due to the fact that the section of the commentary dealing with this verse is lost. In this brief note, I shall attempt to relate Saadia's Arabic rendering of Gen 1:1 to his view of

<sup>1</sup> In preparing this article, I received stimulating comments and invaluable guidance from Haggai Ben-Shammai, Joshua Blau, Joel Kraemer, S. Z. Leiman, Michael Linetsky, Carl Posy, B. Septimus, and my brother, Mark J. Steiner.

<sup>2</sup> "Saadia vs. Rashi: On the Shift from Meaning-Maximalism to Meaning-Minimalism in Medieval Biblical Lexicology," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 88 (1998) 213–258. This is one of two articles that I prepared at the Institute to which Naphtali made major contributions.

creation, in keeping with the title of this volume, "Compilation and Creation in Arabic *Adab* and Language."

Saadia's *Tafsīr* to Gen 1:1 reads: אול מא כילק אללה אלסמאואת/אלסמא. <sup>3</sup> ואלארץ. The meaning of this rendering is controversial. Some authorities take it as continuing the tradition of the Septuagint and Onqelos: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth."<sup>4</sup> Thus, Derenbourg writes: הגאון משתמש בלשון אול מא במקום אולא = בראשונה.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Qafih writes בראשית, בראשונה.<sup>6</sup>

Others reject Derenbourg's interpretation of the *Tafsīr*. Wilensky writes that Ibn Janah's discussion of Gen 1:1 makes it unnecessary to follow Derenbourg in interpreting אול מא contrary to its primary sense.<sup>7</sup> Rivlin's translation of the *Tafsīr* to Gen 1:1 reads: ראשית מה שברא אלקים השמים והארץ.<sup>8</sup> Gad translates: הדבר הראשון שברא א־להים. תחילת בריאתו.<sup>9</sup> According to these scholars, the *Tafsīr* to Gen 1:1 reflects an interpretation unique to Saadia: "The first of what God created was heaven and earth," that is, "the first things that God created were the heavens and the earth." This interpretation would require the vocalization *'awwalu mā* in Classical Arabic; Derenbourg's would require *'awwala mā*.

Derenbourg's interpretation cannot be dismissed out of hand, for Blau has shown that אול מא acquired a new meaning in Middle Arabic:

In Middle Arabic, *'awwal(a) mā* is used in the sense 'at first', as in Judaeo-Arabic, Maimonides, *Responsa*, III, p. 294, l. -10, *wa-bi-l-jumlati 'awwala mā tujarrīb* 'in general, at first try'; *Tāj*, Deut xiii:10, *wa-yaduka 'awwala mā taqa'u 'alayhi* [yet Derenbourg: *wa-yaduka tabtīshu fīhi 'awwalan*] 'your hand shall hit him at first'.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The reading אלסמא is found in Oxford 28, while אלסמאואת is found in J. Derenbourg, ed., *Œuvres complètes de R. Saadia ben Iosef al-Fayyūmī* (Paris 1893) vol. 1, 5, as well as JTS ENA 3123.7 (last word omitted), JTS L647, JTS L651 (last *aleph* omitted), Berlin Or. fol. 1320 (Cat. no. 151), Oxford 236, London 106 (Or. 2367), and the Yemenite *Tāj*. There are no other variants of any significance. (I am indebted to J. Rovner and B. Richler for providing the variant readings of these manuscripts, which I subsequently examined on my own.)

<sup>4</sup> LXX: 'Ev ἀρχῆς ἐποίησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν. Onqelos: ברא ירי ית שמיא. וית ארעא.

<sup>5</sup> Derenbourg, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, p. 5, fn. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Y. Qafih, *פירושי רבנו סעדיה גאון על התורה* (Jerusalem 1966), 11.

<sup>7</sup> M. Wilensky, ed., *ספר הרקמה לר' יונה אבן גינאח* (Berlin 1929), 86, fn. 3.

<sup>8</sup> J. J. Rivlin, "פירוש רס"ג לתורה מתוך תרגומו", *FS J. N. Epstein* (Jerusalem 1950), 134. I am indebted to Michael Linetsky for this reference and the one that follows in the next footnote.

<sup>9</sup> J. Gad, *פירוש רבינו סעדיה גאון ז"ל על התורה ועל ג"ך* (London 1959), part II, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Joshua Blau, *An Adverbial Construction in Hebrew and Arabic: Sentence Adverbials*

It appears, therefore, that there is little to be gained from examining Saadia's usage of **אול מא כילק אללה**. Even a study of how Saadia uses the longer phrase **אול מא כילק אללה** is not likely to be conclusive, but at least it can establish a presumption in favor of one of the readings.

In fact, the phrase **אול מא כילק אללה** does occur elsewhere in the writings of R. Saadia Gaon, in contexts which exclude the interpretation of Derenbourg and Qafih. Thus, in his *Tafsīr* to Job 40:19, he renders **הוא דרכי א-ל** as **ראשית דרכי א-ל מן אלבהאים** "it is the first of what God created among the beasts."<sup>11</sup> Both Derenbourg's Hebrew rendering of this Arabic translation (**הוא הראשון ממה שברא הא-ל מן הבהמות**)<sup>12</sup> and Qafih's (**הוא ראשית מה שברא ה' מן הבהמות**)<sup>13</sup> contrast with their explanation of the same Arabic words in the *Tafsīr* to Gen 1:1.

Similarly in his commentary to Genesis, Saadia writes:

ועלי אנה לם ישרח פי אלתורה אן אול מא כילק אללה מן אלבהאים שכי'צא עטי'מא מהולא יכון פי אלג'באל אלעאליה' כמת'ל מא שרח אן אול מא כילק אללה מן אלסמן אלתנאנין כ"ק ויברא א-להים את התנינים וקד קאל לאיוב... אן אול כילק אללה מן אלבהאים אלבהימה' אלעטי'מה' כקו' הוא ראשית דרכי א-ל.<sup>14</sup>

And even though it is not explained in the Torah that **the first of what God created** among the beasts was a mighty and terrible creature found in the high mountains, the way it is explained that **the first of what God created** among the fish was the sea monsters, as it says, "and God created the sea monsters," (nevertheless) He said to Job...that **the first of what God created** among the beasts was the mighty behemoth, as it says, "he is the first of God's works."

Here too it is clear that this phrase cannot mean "in the beginning, God created." Zucker's translation, **ראשית מה שברא א-להים**,<sup>15</sup> is obviously correct.

The phrase **אול מא כילק אללה** appears in *Emunot we-de'ot* 1.3 together with a paraphrase:

*in Frontal Position Separated from the Rest of the Sentence* (Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, VI 1; Jerusalem, 1977) 14; see also Blau, דקדוק הערבית-היהודית של ימי הביניים (2nd ed., Jerusalem 1980) 339.

<sup>11</sup> Derenbourg, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 5, p. 118.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, fn. 19.

<sup>13</sup> Y. Qafih, ed., **איוב עם תרגום ופירושו רבנו סעדיה בן יוסף פיומי זצ"ל**, (Jerusalem 1973), 200, fn. 19; Y. Qafih, ed., **ספר הנבחר באמונות וברעות לרבנו סעדיה בן יוסף פיומי זצ"ל**, (Jerusalem 1970), 47, fn. 94.

<sup>14</sup> M. Zucker, **פירושי רב סעדיה גאון לבראשית**, (New York 1980), 47-48. An annotated English translation of the commentary is being prepared by Michael Linetsky.

<sup>15</sup> Zucker, **פירושי רב סעדיה**, p. 248.

ואלת'אני אן לפט'יה' ראשית דרכו תקתצ'י מעני אול כ'לק <ה> לאן מת'להא קיל פי אלעט'ים מן אלבהאים הוא ראשית דרכי א-ל, פכמא אן מענאה הנאך הו אן ד'לך שכיץ אול מא כ'לק מן אלבהאים, יכון איצ'א מענאה האהנא אן הד'א אלמד'כור אול שי כ'לק מן אלאשיא.<sup>16</sup>

And the second is that the expression ראשית דרכו necessitates the meaning “the beginning of <his> creation,” because similarly it says about the mightiest of beasts הוא ראשית דרכי א-ל; and just as its meaning there is that that creature is the **first of what God created** among the beasts, so too its meaning here is that the aforementioned is **the first thing that He created** among things.

The parallel structure here shows that אול מא כ'לק means more or less the same as אול שי כ'לק “the first thing that He created.”

Finally, the phrase in question also appears in a passage from Qirqisānī's commentary to Genesis:

מסלה, אד'א כאן אול מא כ'לק אלסמא ואלארץ' פאיהמא תקדם כ'לקה?  
אלג'ואב, ...<sup>17</sup>

Question: If the **first of what He created** was heaven and earth, which of them was created first? The answer: ...

Whether or not one accepts Zucker's claim that the entire passage is taken from Saadia's commentary,<sup>18</sup> it is clear that the words אול מא כ'לק אלסמא ואלארץ' are identical to the rendering of Gen 1:1 preserved in Saadia's *Tafsīr*. In the context of the question, the most natural interpretation of our phrase is the one given by Zucker:

שאלה, אם השמים והארץ הם ראשית הבריאה, איזה מהם נברא קודם?  
התשובה...<sup>19</sup>

The evidence presented above establishes a presumption in favor of the interpretation of Wilensky, Rivlin and Gad: “the first of what God created was heaven and earth” — a presumption which is corroborated by the evidence presented below. But how did Saadia derive this meaning from the words of Gen 1:1? How did he construe the verse?

As noted above, the section of Saadia's commentary to Genesis dealing with this verse is lost. However, some of it can be reconstructed using the commentary of his Karaite opponent, Yefet ben Eli — a source that the scholars cited above did not utilize. Here is Yefet's first allusion to Saadia's translation:

<sup>16</sup> Qafih, ספר הנבחר באמונות ובדעות, p. 47.

<sup>17</sup> Zucker, פירושי רב סעדיה, p. 209, fn. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>19</sup> Loc. cit.

ומנהם מן עברהא אול מא כ'לק אללה אלסמא ואלארץ' וג'על חרף אלבא זאיד  
 וג'אב לה נט'יר כקולה בט'רם אלד'י הו נט'יר ט'רם.<sup>20</sup>  
 And among them are those who interpret it as “the first of what God  
 created was heaven and earth” and who make the particle בַּ-  
 pleonastic, citing as a parallel the expression בט'רם which is like ט'רם.

The translation cited by Yefet is identical to the one preserved in Saadia's *Tafsīr*. It is true that Yefet does not identify the translator, but Jacob b. Reuben, an epigone of Yefet, does so: ופתר פיתומי בראשית ביי"ת טפל ולא כן: הרוא.<sup>21</sup>

The preposition בַּ- is not the only pleonastic element assumed by Saadia's translation of Gen 1:1. If את השמים ואת הארץ is the predicate, then the two occurrences of את are also pleonastic. According to Ibn Janah, there is also an elliptical element, אשר.<sup>22</sup> It appears from Yefet and Jacob b. Reuben that Saadia was primarily interested in the pleonastic בַּ-. If so, we need to explain that fact, but first we must deal with a more

<sup>20</sup> Haggai Ben-Shammai, *The Doctrines of Religious Thought of Abū Yūsuf Ya'qūb al-Qirīsānī and Yefet ben 'Eli* (Jerusalem 1977), vol. 2, 65, ll. 65–67.

<sup>21</sup> Samuel A. Poznanski, “The Karaite Literary Opponents of Sa'adiah Gaon,” in Philip Birnbaum, ed., *Karaite Studies* (New York 1971), 197. I am indebted to Michael Linetsky for this reference. The gentile פיתומי is, of course, a reference to Saadia's birth in the Fayyūm. There is now evidence, albeit fragmentary and uncertain, that Saadia was not the first translator to equate the biblical Pithom (Exod 1:11) with Fayyūm; see Yosef Tobi, תרגום ערבי-יהודי עממי נוטף לתורה, in M. Bar-Asher, ed., *Studies in Hebrew and Jewish Languages Presented to Shelomo Morag* (Jerusalem 1996), 498, l. 24. This equation, based on the similarity of the names, has no historical basis: Arabic *Fayyūm* is derived from Egyptian *p3-ym* “the sea,” while *Pithom* is derived from Egyptian *pr-itm* “house of Atum” and is believed to have been located in the Delta region. See further Henry Malter, *Saadiah Gaon: His Life and Works* (Philadelphia 1921), 26.

<sup>22</sup> See A. Neubauer, ed., *The Book of Hebrew Roots by Abu 'l-Walid Marwān Ibn Janāh, otherwise called Rabbī Yōnāh* (Oxford 1875), s.v. ראש, 659, ll. 5–6. The idea that בראשית is elliptical is based on the translation given by Ibn Janah, אול מא כ'לק אללה, and the fact that Arabic מא is often equivalent to Hebrew אשר. Ibn Janah's translation is assumed to derive from Saadia's *Tafsīr* by Wilensky, ספר הרקמה, p. 86, fn. 3. However, the fuller rendering of Gen 1:1 given by Ibn Janah in *Kitāb al-Lumā'* (J. Derenbourg, ed., *Le livre des parterres fleuris: Grammaire hébraïque en arabe d'Abou'l Walid Merwan Ibn Djanah de Cordoue* [Paris, 1886], 69, ll. 4–5) casts doubt on this assumption. The two manuscripts that preserve this passage (Petersburg Yevr. - Arab. II 675, dated 1161/62 CE, and Oxford Bodl. 1459) have כ'ן כד'א וכד'א כ'אן כד'א אלסמא ואלארץ' (I am indebted to Binyamin Richler for confirming this for me.) This looks more like the interpretation that Yefet renders as כ'ת צורה' אלארץ' כ'אנת אלסמא ואלארץ'. (I am indebted to Ben-Shammai, *The Doctrines*, vol. 2, p. 66, ll. 83–84. This difference does not make it less likely that Saadia viewed בראשית כ'אן כ'ת אללה as elliptical; if anything, Saadia's interpretation makes this analysis even more likely. For Saadia, the ellipsis of אשר is unremarkable. In the introduction to his commentary, the first example of ellipsis is an ellipsis of אשר; see Zucker, פירושי רב סעדיה גאון, p. 19.)

pressing issue. What is driving Saadia's translation of Gen 1:1? What led him to propose such an idiosyncratic interpretation, based on the assumption of two pleonastic elements plus an ellipsis? Rivlin writes:

כוונתו היא להוציא את המלה "בראשית" ממוכן הזמן, היינו שהעולם נברא בראשית הזמן, וכאילו הוא קדמון. הוא מבאר שהמדובר הוא רק ביחס לכריאה, שהבריאה הראשונה היתה זו.<sup>23</sup>

Rivlin's basic assumption seems plausible: Saadia's translation is designed to forestall an interpretation implying that the universe is primordial. But what was that interpretation? Rivlin's answer is that if בראשית is understood temporally, it implies that the universe was created at the beginning of time and, hence, that it is primordial.

This answer can hardly be correct as it stands. Like many of his contemporaries, Saadia believed that time came into existence with the creation of heaven and earth.<sup>24</sup> He therefore had no problem with the notion that heaven and earth were created at the beginning of time. In at least two places in his commentary, he himself writes that the heavens were created "in the first part of time."<sup>25</sup> This assertion does not imply that the world is primordial; indeed, it implies just the opposite.

Another possibility that can be eliminated is that Saadia's translation is intended to forestall the interpretation of Gen 1:1 adopted later by Ibn Janah, Rashbam, and Ibn Ezra: "At the beginning of God's creating heaven and earth, the earth was ..."<sup>26</sup> This interpretation was already known to Yefet:

וקאל בעציהם פי עבארה' בראשית פי אול מא כ'לק אללה אלסמא ואלארץ' כאנת אלארץ' תהו ובהו וחשך על פני התהום וגו'.<sup>27</sup>  
 And one of them said in interpreting בראשית, "at the beginning of God's creating heaven and earth, the earth was על פני התהום וגו'."

One of the reasons that Yefet gives for rejecting this interpretation is that it fails to preclude primordially:

<sup>23</sup> Rivlin, "פירוש רס"ג", p. 134.

<sup>24</sup> Qafih, ספר הנבחר באמונות וברעות, pp. 73–75.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. [היה] אלסמאואת אלתי כ'לקהנא פין אול ג'ז מן אלזמאן אפלאך לא כראכב פיהא [בתה'] (Zucker, פירוש רב סעדיה גאון, p. 27) and קד כ'לק מע אלסמא ואלארץ' פי (Zucker, פירוש רב סעדיה גאון, p. 28). See fn. 42, below.

<sup>26</sup> In this interpretation, v. 2 is the main clause. Contrast Rashi's interpretation, according to which v. 2 is parenthetical ("the earth being ..., when the earth was ...") and v. 3 is the main clause. Both interpretations take v. 1 as a prepositional phrase, with ראשית in construct to ארץ and בראשית as the whole genitive phrase governed by בראשית.

<sup>27</sup> Ben-Shammai, *The Doctrines*, vol. 2, p. 66, ll. 80–81.

ואלוג'ה אלת'אלת' הו אן עבארה' הד'א אלמפסר לא תדל עלי אן אלסמא ואלארץ' כ'לקא קבל גירהמה מן אלמכ'לוקאת לאנה אד'א קאל פי אול מא כ'לק אללה אלסמא ואלארץ' כאנת אלארץ' צורה' כית וכית פאנמא את'בת צפה' אלארץ' פי אול חאל וג'ודהא ולם ימנע אן יכון קד סבקהא כ'לק אכ'ר פיג'ח קול אצחאב אלהיולי ואלטינה'.<sup>28</sup>

And the third aspect is that the interpretation of this exegete does not indicate that heaven and earth were created before the other created things, for if it says "at the beginning of God's creating heaven and earth, the earth had such and such a form," it only establishes the description of the earth in its initial state of existence and does not preclude there being another created thing that preceded it. Moreover, it makes possible the assertion of the adherents of (the doctrine of) primordial matter and material.

There can be little doubt that Saadia held the same view. Indeed, much light is shed on Yefet's objection by Saadia's discussion of primordially in *Emunot we-de'ot* 1.3:

ואנמא ט'ן באלמא ואלהוא אלקדמה' לאנה תוהם אן מעני והארץ היתה תהו ובהו אנהא כאנת כד'א קבל אלכ'ליקה'. והד'א ממן תאולה ג'הל מחץ', לאן אלתוריה' אנמא קאלת והארץ היתה בעד מא קדמת בראשית ברא...<sup>29</sup>

The only reason that they posited primordially for water and air is that they imagined that the meaning of היתה תהו ובהו is that it (=the earth) was such before creation. And this is absolute foolishness on the part of him who interpreted it, because the Torah says בראשית ברא only after having first stated והארץ היתה...

Saadia's argument against the interpretation of Gen 1:2 as a description of the universe **before** creation<sup>30</sup> depends on the assumption that 1:1 is a complete sentence asserting that heaven and earth were created first. Only that assumption justifies his presumption that the order of the verses reflects the order of events. If 1:1 is a temporal phrase modifying והארץ היתה תהו ובהו, his argument falls away.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, there are good reasons to doubt that his translation of Gen 1:1 was designed to forestall the latter interpretation. First, there is

<sup>28</sup> Ben-Shammai, *The Doctrines*, vol. 2, p. 66, ll. 93–97.

<sup>29</sup> Qafih, *ספר הנבחר באמונות וברעות*, pp. 59–60.

<sup>30</sup> This interpretation, apparently advocated by Hiwi al-Balkhi, is mentioned and rejected in a number of works, including Yefet's commentary (to Gen 1:2), an anonymous commentary to Genesis published by Mann, and *Kitāb ma'ānī al-nafs*; see Ben-Shammai, *The Doctrines*, vol. 2, p. 71, ll. 1–3 and Zucker, *פירושי רב סעדיה*, pp. 211–12, fn. 13\*.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Rashi's assumption that the temporal relationship between v. 1 and v. 2 depends, in part, on their syntactic relationship. That assumption appears to indicate that the possibility of היתה in v. 2 meaning "had been" was not taken into account.

the ambiguity of Saadia's rendering, אלסמא/אלסמאואת/אלסמא, אול מא כ'לק אללה אלסמאואת/אלסמא, ואלארץ. In addition to the two readings discussed above, there is a third: "at the beginning of God's creating heaven and earth."<sup>31a</sup> The very same words that Saadia uses in translating Gen 1:1 are used in that third sense by Yefet (אול מא כ'לק אללה אלסמא ואלארץ, כאנת אלארץ, צורה, כית כית) and Ibn Janah (אול מא כ'לק אללה אלסמא ואלארץ, כאן כד'א וכד'א).<sup>32</sup> This ambiguity makes Saadia's translation a singularly ineffective weapon for combatting the interpretation of Gen 1:1 as a prepositional phrase. The real way to preclude that interpretation is to put the Arabic coordinating conjunction *wa-* at the beginning of 1:2 (and 1:3), and Saadia has done that.<sup>33</sup>

Even from a philosophical point of view, Saadia's translation seems ineffectual and even counterproductive when viewed as a response to the aforementioned interpretation. The assertion that the first things that God created were the heavens and the earth leaves the door wide open for the claim that there were earlier, antemundane things that God did not create, e.g., primordial elements.

What then is behind Saadia's translation? Fortunately, Saadia's own answer has been preserved by Yefet:

ואלדי חמלה עלי ד'לך הו אנה קאל אד'א עברת בראשית פי אלאבתדא יג'ב  
אן יכון ת'ס שי מוג'וד קבל כ'לק אלסמא ואלארץ, וד'אך גיר ג'איו...<sup>34</sup>  
And what led him to that is his assertion, "If I interpret 'in the beginning,' it is necessary that there was some thing in existence before He created heaven and earth, and that is not possible..."

ואמא קולה אנני אד'א עברתהא פי אלאבתדא לזמני אן אקול אן ת'ס שי  
מוג'וד קבל אלסמא ואלארץ, פנחן נורי תסויג הד'יה אלעבארה, פנת'בת  
אלבא פי מוצ'עהא ולא ילזמנא שי ממא חד'ר אן ילזמה...<sup>35</sup>  
And as for his assertion, "If I interpret 'in the beginning,' I will be forced to say that that there was some thing in existence before the heavens and the earth" — we shall demonstrate the permissibility of

<sup>31a</sup> Blau, *Adverbial Construction*, 14.

<sup>32</sup> See fn. 22, above.

<sup>33</sup> All of the witnesses cited in fn. 3, above, attest to the *wa-* at the beginning of 1:2. Most of them (Derenbourg, JTS L 649, Oxford 28, Oxford 236, London 106) also have it at the beginning of 1:3, but some (*Tāj*, JTS L 651, Berlin Ms. or. fol. 1320) have *fa-*, which can follow a temporal clause. By contrast, Saadia has omitted *wa-* at the beginning of 1:4b, according to those same witnesses (except Oxford 236; London 106 has *fa-*), since he has turned 1:4a into a temporal clause: בין אלנור: (אללה) בין אלנור: (1/ו)למא עם אללה אן אלנור ג'ייד פצל (אללה) בין אלנור: (ובין) אלט'לאם

<sup>34</sup> Ben-Shammai, *The Doctrines*, vol. 2, p. 65, ll. 67–69.

<sup>35</sup> Ben-Shammai, *The Doctrines*, vol. 2, p. 66, ll. 104–107.



this interpretation, and we shall keep the כִּי in its place, and we will not be forced to say any of what he feared he would be forced to say...

To Saadia, then, the translation “In the beginning, God created heaven and earth” implies not that the heavens and earth had no beginning, as Rivlin believes, but rather that something existed before them.

It is difficult for the modern reader to grasp Saadia’s point based on such a brief excerpt. How do the words “in the beginning, God created heaven and earth” imply that something existed before the heavens and the earth?

I do not pretend to understand Saadia’s claim fully. Nevertheless, I believe that some light can be shed on the matter by comparing Saadia’s assertion with similar claims made in the commentaries of Qirqisānī and an anonymous exegete and in Maimonides’ *Guide*. These parallels suggest that Saadia, unlike modern English speakers, made the assumption that the phrase “in the beginning God created” implies that “the beginning” must be an interval of time within which the act of creation took place.

Qirqisānī (commentary to Gen 1:1) writes:

ואנה אבתדאה וכילקה אעני אלעאלם לא מן שי ולא פי זמאן אדו' לו כילקה פי  
זמאן לוג'ב אן יכוּן אלזמאן מתקדם לה...<sup>36</sup>

The beginning of it and the creation of it, i.e., of the world, was not out of any thing and not in time, for had He created it in time, it would be necessary that time preceded it...

The phrase “in time” appears to mean “in a temporal matrix.” Qirqisānī denies that the creation of the world took place within such a matrix, for no such matrix could have existed before creation.

The same idea is found in a fragment of an early commentary published by Mann:

[וא]ל תחשוב בלבך כי בראשית [היא] עת שהתחיל בה הבריאה כי לא היה  
קדם לבריאה עת. כאשר לא [נ]ברא העולם במקום כי לא היה קדם בריאה  
מקום] כן לא [...] ברא בעת כי לא היה עת. ולא היה טרם לבריאה לא מקום  
ולא עת, וכל עת וכל מקום מאחרי [...] מראשית והלאה...<sup>37</sup>

Do [no]t think that בראשית [is] the time in which He began the  
Creation, because there was no time before the Creation. Just as the  
universe [was] not created in space because there was no sp[ace]  
before Creation, so too [...] did not create in time because there was

<sup>36</sup> Ben-Shammai, *The Doctrines*, vol. 2, p. 19, ll. 3–5; cf. vol. 1, p. 175.

<sup>37</sup> J. Mann, “Early Karaite Bible Commentaries,” *JQR* NS 12 (1921–22), p. 443. In two places, I have omitted his restoration, since it does not fit the size of the lacuna.

no time. There was neither time nor space before the Creation; all time and space is from after [...], from the beginning onward...

So too Maimonides in his discussion of Gen 1:1 (*Guide* 2.30):

ואלעאלם לם יכ'לק פי מבדא זמאני, כמא בינא, אד' אלזמאן מן ג'מלה' אלמכ'לוקאת<sup>38</sup>

And the world was not created in a temporal beginning, as we have explained, since time is one of the created things.

The phrase "in a temporal beginning" appears to be the Maimonidean counterpart of Qirqisānī's "in time" and the anonymous exegete's בעת.

Maimonides' earlier discussion of this principle (*Guide* 2.13) is even more valuable for understanding Saadia, because it explains what is at stake:

פלד'לך לא יכון איג'אד אלה אלעאלם פי מבדא זמאני, אד' אלזמאן מן ג'מלה' אלמכ'לוקאת. פכן מן הד'א אלמעני עלי תאמל שדיד, לאן לא תלזמך אלרודו אלתי לא מחיץ ענהא למן יג'הל הד'א, לאנה מתי את'בת זמאנא קבל אלעאלם לזמך אעתקאד אלקדם, אד' אלזמאן ערץ' ולא בד לה מן חאמל, פילזם וג'וד שי קבל וג'וד הד'א אלעאלם אלמוג'וד אלאן, ומן הד'א הו אלהרב.<sup>39</sup>

Hence God's bringing the world into existence was not in a temporal beginning, for time is one of the created things. Consider this matter thoroughly. For thus you will not be necessarily attached to objections from which there is no escape for him who does not know it. For if you affirm as true the existence of time prior to the world, you are necessarily bound to believe in primordality. For time is an accident which necessarily must have a substratum. Accordingly it follows necessarily that there existed some thing prior to the existence of this world existing now. But this notion is to be avoided.<sup>40</sup>

The relevance of this passage for explaining the excerpt cited by Yefet from Saadia's commentary should be obvious. Maimonides' ילזם וג'וד שי

<sup>38</sup> Y. Qafih, ed., מורה הנבוכים : מורה בן מימון : רבינו משה בן מימון (Jerusalem 1972), 379. I am indebted to Michael Linetsky for this reference. For a discussion of this passage and the one cited below, see S. Klein-Braslavy, בריאת העולם, פירוש הרמב"ם לסיפור בריאת העולם (Jerusalem 1978), 231-39.

<sup>39</sup> Qafih, מורה הנבוכים, p. 306.

<sup>40</sup> This translation is adapted from Shlomo Pines, transl., *The Guide of the Perplexed* (Chicago 1963), 282.

קבל וג'וד הד'א אלעאלם אלמוג'וד אלן bears a striking resemblance to Saadia's 'לזמני אן אקול אן ת'ם שי מוג'וד קבל אלסמא ואלארץ'.<sup>41</sup>

It seems reasonable to assume that Saadia, like Maimonides, held that time cannot exist without motion, and motion cannot exist without matter. Thus, the creation of the world within a temporal matrix would imply the pre-existence not only of time but also of matter.<sup>42</sup>

R. Saadia Gaon believed that, in biblical exegesis, philology must serve as the handmaiden of philosophy.<sup>43</sup> In the case of Gen 1:1, he considered it necessary to avoid at all costs a syntactic analysis in which the clause "God created heaven and earth" is modified by a prepositional phrase beginning with "in."<sup>44</sup> He accomplished that by making the preposition כ" pleonastic. This, in turn, made other philological maneuvers necessary, but it appears that Saadia viewed them as secondary. It was only pleonastic כ" that manifested clearly and directly the relationship between philosophical ends and philological means that Saadia placed at the center of his exegetical method.

<sup>41</sup> H. Ben-Shammai remarks that the resemblance is not surprising, given Maimonides' statement that the views he presents here are not his own but rather "those of our Torah" (personal communication).

<sup>42</sup> And yet, as noted in fn. 25, above, Saadia writes that the heavens and earth were created ג'ז מן אלומאן "during the first part of time." This would not be a problem if ג'ז מן אלומאן could be used to refer to a point in time with no width, rather than an interval, for then Saadia's statement would not imply that time preceded the creation of heaven and earth. (I owe this observation to M. J. Steiner.) At first glance, such a usage of ג'ז מן אלומאן might seem to be found in Saadia's commentary to Prov 8:30, where כל ברהה' וג'ז מן אלומאן "every instant and part of time" is parallel to כל וקת וקטעה' מן אלומאן "every moment and fragment of time." However, Saadia categorically rejects any atomistic theory and, thus, the ג'ז of which Saadia speaks here cannot be a יתג'זא, an indivisible particle (atom) of time; see H. Ben-Shammai, "Studies in Karaite Atomism," *JSAT* 6 (1985) 243.

<sup>43</sup> For examples from the domain of lexicology, see the article cited in fn. 2, above.

<sup>44</sup> Contrast the solution of the anonymous exegete: בששת ימי בראשית means "in the six days of Creation" and את השמים ואת הארץ means "the entire universe"; Mann, "Bible Commentaries," pp. 442-43.

# ISRAEL ORIENTAL STUDIES

## XIX

COMPILATION AND CREATION  
IN *ADAB* AND *LUGĀ*

*Studies in Memory of Naphtali Kinberg (1948–1997)*

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