

## THE EARLIEST COMMENTARIES ON SEFER YEŞIRAH

### *Sa'adiah Gaon*

The first known commentary on SY was written in Arabic by Sa'adiah Gaon, probably around the year 930 under the title *Tafsir Kitab al-Mabadi* (*Book of Primary Principles*). As observed by Malter,<sup>1</sup> what characterises Sa'adiah's attitude to SY is his critique and rejection of what he presents as the work's notion of the Creation. As in his *Kitāb al-amānāt wa'l'I'tikādāt* (*Book of Philosophic Doctrines and Religious Beliefs*), written a few years later, Sa'adiah devotes most of his commentary to demonstrating the validity of the biblical idea of *creatio ex-nihilo*, which he evaluates in the light of other cosmogonic conceptions.

In the introductory section of his commentary, Sa'adiah lists nine theories concerning the origin of the universe, starting with what he considers to be the most questionable and continuing all the way through to the most plausible.

The first is the theory which affirms that the universe had neither beginning nor end.<sup>2</sup> According to the second theory, following the views of Leucippus, Democritus and Epicurus, the world was created out of eternal, uncreated atoms. The third is the theory of the philosophers who accept the idea of a creation of all extant things but “do not extend their investigation to what was before this beginning.”<sup>3</sup> The following three theories can be seen as pre-Socratic, regarding the elements of water, air and

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<sup>1</sup> Malter, *Sa'adiah Gaon*, 178.

<sup>2</sup> It is not clear to which philosophical theory Sa'adiah is referring. According to Malter, *Sa'adiah Gaon*, 180, 203–204, Sa'adiah probably means the pre-Islamic atheistic *dahriyya*, while according to Qafiḥ (*Sefer Yeşirah im perush rabbenu*, 19 n. 26), the passages refer to Aristotelian doctrine. See also Jospe, “Early Philosophical Commentaries,” 377–378.

<sup>3</sup> *Sefer Yeşirah im perush rabbenu*, Qafiḥ, ed., 24. This view is based on *mHagigah* II, 1 which says: “Whosoever speculates upon four things, a pity for him! He is as though he had not come into the world, [to wit], what is above, what is beneath, what before, what after.” Sa'adiah does not deny the legitimacy of the Mishnaic passage but criticises

fire as the origin of the world.<sup>4</sup> The seventh theory is that of Pythagoras (ca. 571/70–497/96) according to whom everything originated in numbers. The eighth is the theory of SY, which according to Sa'adiah's interpretation of the term *sefirot* as mathematical units, presents the world as having emerged out of "ten cardinal numbers and twenty-two letters." Sa'adiah does not accept this cosmogonic theory which, in his view, implies gradual creation, an idea which is incompatible with the ninth theory, the biblical notion of *creatio ex-nihilo*.

Sa'adiah's main exegetical endeavour consisted in the reinterpretation of the creative processes described in SY so as to harmonise them with the biblical assumption that everything came into existence through the will of the Creator and all at once. SY's *sefirot* (numbers) and *otiyot* (letters) do not, according to Sa'adiah, represent entities endowed with independent existence, predating the Creation of the world. Rather, they are "underlying principles of order and symmetry in all nature" which came into being at the same time as the Creation of the universe.<sup>5</sup>

The *sefirot* are the ten fundamental numbers which, together with the letters, define the nature of all existing things. In relation to man, the numbers are infinite and their possible combinations and permutations are endless. This is the reason why, according to Sa'adiah, SY claims that "their measure is ten but they have neither beginning nor end."<sup>6</sup> The *sefirot* are infinite in relation to everything that can be created and to the intellectual capacities of human beings, but in relation to God, who knows the beginning and the end of everything, "they have an end."<sup>7</sup>

The *sefirot*, as the principles which underlie reality, are also the ten categories<sup>8</sup> which define the existence of everything in the created world, except for God whose nature is beyond human comprehension: "... they

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those who interpret it wrongly and prohibit investigation into the Creation. See Malter, *Saadiah Gaon*, 181.

<sup>4</sup> These were the theories of Thales (ca. first half of the 7th century BCE), Anaximenes of Miletus (ca. mid 6th century BCE) and Heraclitus of Ephesus (ca. 6th century BCE). For a detailed analysis of these cosmogonic theories in Sa'adiah's commentary on SY and in his *Kitāb al-amānāt wa'l I'tikādāt* (*Book of Philosophic Doctrines and Religious Beliefs*), see Ventura, *La philosophie*, 92–171, particularly 113–153.

<sup>5</sup> See Malter, *Saadiah Gaon*, 181–182.

<sup>6</sup> See Hayman, *Sefer Yešira*, 69–70.

<sup>7</sup> *Sefer Yeširah im perush rabbenu*, Qafih, ed., 54. See also Wolfson, "The Theosophy of Shabbetai Donnolo," 288.

<sup>8</sup> These clearly correspond to the ten categories which according to Aristotle define the existence of anything. See *Sefer Yeširah im perush rabbenu*, Qafih, ed., 46, n. 16. See also *Commentaire sur le Sefer Yeširah*, Lambert, ed., 40 n. 1.

[the sages] found ten categories, no more no less, which are: substance, quantity, quality, relation, place, time, possession, position, activity and passivity. Since the sages derived these ten categories, no rational concept in the world is left over, except for the idea of [the] Creator.”<sup>9</sup> Sa’adiah adds that “the ten commandments which the fathers heard in front of Mount Sinai correspond to these ten categories, so that there is no precept which is not included in them.”<sup>10</sup>

Sa’adiah’s only concession to what he considers the emanationism of SY is to postulate that God’s first created thing was an intangible and rarefied air, a sort of ether permeating all existence, which he distinguishes from natural atmospheric air by defining it as a “second air.” He identifies this “second air” with the *kavod* [“glory”] of the Torah, the *Shekhinah* [“God’s indwelling presence”] and the *ruah elohim hayyim* [“the spirit of the living God”], identical with SY’s first *sefirah*. The “second air” thus represents God’s self-manifestation and indwelling presence in the world, the image which He presented to the biblical prophets:

Scripture calls the second, fine air *kavod* ... the community [of the Jews] calls it *Shekhinah* ... and the author of this book [SY] calls it “spirit of the living God” ... It is in this fine, second, created air, which is within the world just as man’s life is within man, that Moses heard the created things that he heard in the visible air, and that the ancestors heard the commandments in the visible air. It is called “voice of the living God” [Deut. 5:23] ... this is what the sages call “holy spirit.” (my translation. P.M.).<sup>11</sup>

It was out of this *ruah elohim hayyim*, the first *sefirah* and the “second air,” that God created the second *sefirah* (*ruah me-ruah*), in which He carved out the forms of the letters. God combined the letters which SY, according to Sa’adiah, understands as symbolising the elements,<sup>12</sup> with one another, thus bringing everything into existence.<sup>13</sup> This, according to Sa’adiah, is the core of SY’s cosmogonic theory, which he rejects as failing to describe

<sup>9</sup> *Sefer Yeşirah im perush rabbenu*, Qafih, ed., 46.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>11</sup> Hebrew text in *Sefer Yeşirah im perush rabbenu*, Qafih, ed., 108–109. For an exhaustive study on Sa’adiah’s idea of prophetic revelation, see Altmann, “Saadya’s Theory of Revelation,” 140–160.

<sup>12</sup> See *Sefer Yeşirah im perush rabbenu*, Qafih, ed., 30, 120.

<sup>13</sup> Malter, *Saadiah Gaon*, 185. Toward the end of the 3rd chapter of his commentary, Sa’adiah draws a comparison between the universe, the Tabernacle and man, which he defines as macrocosm, mesocosm and microcosm respectively. He refers to a series of eighteen similarities between them, which he had explained in a work, now lost, entitled “Commentary on the construction of the Tabernacle.” This was probably the earliest Hebrew work devoted to the notion of the relation between the micro and the

the real process of creation, offering instead a symbolic representation by which the human intellect strives to portray the process of creation *ex-nihilo*: “When we affirm that God pressed, purified, erected ... we do not mean to say that He did everything separately, one thing before the other. We want to direct our mind to imagine all this and to bring it back to the idea of creation out of nothing (my translation. P.M.)”<sup>14</sup>

Sa’adiah’s commentary on SY is based on philosophical grounds which, as we will see below,<sup>15</sup> differ from the speculative premises on which Donnolo, a few years after him, conducts his analysis of SY. While Sa’adiah’s most important exegetical effort is to correct what he considers to be the emanationism of SY, conceiving and defining the *sefirot* and the letters as intellectual categories by which the human mind tries to grasp the meaning of *creatio ex-nihilo*—the only true theory of Creation—Donnolo does not attribute any allegorical or symbolic intent to the narrative of SY where, on the contrary, he finds the description of the actual events that took place in the sphere of eternal ideas—the metaphysics of Creation—which were the necessary ontological conditions for the manifestation of empirical reality. Between SY and the biblical book of Genesis, therefore, there seems to be in Donnolo’s mind perfect contiguity and, as we will see later in detail,<sup>16</sup> substantial identity, each of them describing one of the two phases (the creation of ideas and eternal patterns, and out of them the creation of empirical reality) which, according to the Neoplatonic view, make up the process of Creation.

### *Dunash ibn Tamim*

Dunash ibn Tamim composed his commentary on SY in Arabic, between the years 950–955, some ten years after the death of Sa’adiah. He probably became familiar with the text of SY long before 950, since, as a pupil of Isaac Israeli, he was introduced to the philosophical and scientific issues on which his teacher had corresponded with Sa’adiah Gaon.<sup>17</sup>

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macrocosm which, as we will shortly see, became the central issue in Donnolo’s exegesis of SY. Unfortunately, this is the only instance in which Sa’adiah refers to the idea, and it is not possible to say what influence his work might have had on later authors. See *ibid.*, 186.

<sup>14</sup> *Sefer Yeşirah im perush rabbenu*, Qafih, ed., 125.

<sup>15</sup> See below, Donnolo’s *Sefer Hakhmoni*, 57–58.

<sup>16</sup> See below, *The Commentary on Sefer Yeşirah*, 74–76.

<sup>17</sup> None of these letters, which in the introductory section of his commentary on SY,

Dunash wrote his commentary with the explicit aim of correcting Sa'adiah's interpretation of SY, the study of which, he affirms, requires a fluent knowledge of philosophy, mathematical and natural sciences:

We have seen that many of our colleagues have erred in knowing (this book's) subjects ... one can only become sufficiently prepared to understand what is included in its allusions if one has become fluent in philosophy in general, so that one's knowledge incorporates the principle of its various parts, beginning with the mathematical sciences, and then the sciences of physics, and third the science of unity and the spiritual beings.<sup>18</sup>

As pointed out by Vajda,<sup>19</sup> at the basis of Dunash's exegesis of SY lies a rational approach which, unlike Sa'adiah's commentary, does not seem to find any contradiction between the idea of creation described in SY and the biblical notion of *creatio ex-nihilo*. Dunash does not define in his commentary an original philosophical or theological system concerning the origin and creation of the universe, but simply affirms that the origin and cause of everything is God, incorporeal and transcendent,<sup>20</sup> whose Creation is the supreme good, and the manifestation of His omniscience, in which all created things are combined together in perfect harmony.

In order to explain this, Dunash embarks on a detailed analysis of the human body, which he shows to be in perfect correspondence with all the other elements of Creation, relying largely on some of the most important sources of Arabic Neoplatonic thought, such as the *Theology of Aristotle* and the *Encyclopaedia of the Brethren of Purity*.<sup>21</sup>

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Dunash claims to have read and studied, have survived. See Vajda, "Le commentaire kairouanais [I]," 114.

<sup>18</sup> English translation from Jospe, "Early Philosophical Commentaries," 382.

<sup>19</sup> Vajda, "Le commentaire kairouanais [III]," 13, 23.

<sup>20</sup> Fenton, ed., in Vajda, *Le Commentaire*, 13.

<sup>21</sup> The *Theology of Aristotle* was an Arabic paraphrase of Books 4–6 of Plotinus's *Enneads*, written by 'Abd al-Masih Ibn Nā'ima al-Ḥimṣī in Baghdad in the first half of the 9th century. The *Encyclopaedia of the Brethren of Purity* (*Ikhwan al-Safa'*) consisted of 52 short treatises which blend Aristotelian doctrines with Neoplatonism and Neo-Pythagoreanism. The other sources informing the Jewish Neoplatonists of the 10th century, which in various degrees also influenced Dunash's thought, were the *Liber de Causis* (or *Kalam fi mahd al-khayr*), an elaboration of the Neoplatonic Proclus's *Elements of Theology*; the pseudo-Empedoclean *Book of Five Substances*, an anonymous text which appeared for the first time in the first half of the 9th century in Pseudo-Ammonium's *Book of the Opinions of the Philosophers*, and *Ghāyat al-ḥakim* (*Aim of the Wise*, known in the Middle Ages in Latin translation under the title of *Picatrix*), composed in Spain and falsely attributed to al-Magritī. All these works were adaptations of Greek texts, most of which were translated in the philosophical milieu of the 9th-century philosopher al-Kindi. For a more detailed analysis of these sources, see Pessin, "Jewish Neoplatonism,"

Dunash accepts the definition of *sefirot* as numbers as previously affirmed by Sa'adiah<sup>22</sup> but, as observed by Wolfson,<sup>23</sup> he seems to hint, probably under the influence of Israeli's teachings, that knowledge of the *sefirot* is tantamount to knowledge of the divine world and the unity of ideal reality, thus moving toward a metaphysical understanding of the *sefirot* which, as we will see below in detail, comes close to the definition given by Donnolo in SH. Though apparently very similar, there is however a difference between the two interpretations. While for Dunash the *sefirot* represents part of the metaphysical world and, as observed by Wolfson, the way metaphysical reality expresses itself in the empirical world (similar to the hypostasis of many Platonic and Neoplatonic systems), Donnolo claims that the *sefirot* are parts of the Godhead, so that having knowledge of them would be tantamount to understanding, not only the truth of metaphysical reality, but the essence of the divine being.<sup>24</sup>

Dunash's principal criticism of Sa'adiah concerns the meaning of *b<sup>e</sup> limah*, which Sa'adiah had interpreted as "closed," deriving it from *b-l-m* (literally, "to stop," "to curb"). *B<sup>e</sup> limah*, specifies Dunash, is a compound noun, made up of *b<sup>e</sup> li* ["without"] and *mah* ["substance"], which the author of SY had coined in order to indicate the infinite possibilities of mathematical calculation.<sup>25</sup>

Dunash maintains a twofold conception of the letters, which he conceives as either elements of language or symbols of material substances. The "three mothers," according to him, represent respectively fire (*aleph*), water (*mem*) and *shalom* [literally "peace"], the balancing element (it is not clear from the text if this is material or ideal, even though the latter seems the most plausible in the context) which mediates between the opposing qualities of heat (fire) and cold (water).<sup>26</sup> The result of this interaction is the creation of the other two primary elements, earth and air, out of which everything came into existence. The seven double and twelve simple letters are said to correspond, as in SY, to the different elements

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91–110, particularly 92–93. For a comprehensive overview of the Islamic context of Jewish philosophy, see Kraemer, "The Islamic context."

<sup>22</sup> See Vajda, "Le commentaire kairouanais [I]," 115.

<sup>23</sup> Wolfson, "The Theosophy of Shabbetai Donnolo," 288.

<sup>24</sup> For further discussion on Donnolo's theosophical understanding of the *sefirot*, see below 66–68.

<sup>25</sup> See Vajda, *Le Commentaire*, 53–54.

<sup>26</sup> See Vajda, "Le commentaire kairouanais [III]," 7–8.

of Creation, such as the seven orifices of the body, the seven days of the week, the twelve months of the year and the twelve constellations of the Zodiac.

Dunash, like Sa'adiah, sets out in his commentary a theory of prophecy, which he derived from a similar theory outlined by his teacher Israeli in his *Book on the Elements*,<sup>27</sup> and based on the analysis of three terms, *qol* ["voice"], *ruah* ["spirit"] and *dibbur* ["speech"] used in SY. *Qol* is the voice created in the air, by which God spoke to human beings. As observed by Sirat, the idea of *qol* is identical to the notion of "second air" in Sa'adiah's commentary, from which Dunash probably derived it. *Ruah* ["spirit", "wind" or "breath"] is the way in which God manifested Himself to the prophets, who perceived Him as an internal vision; *dibbur* ["speech"] is the highest level of prophecy and the utmost attainable level of knowledge which only Moses, whose intellect was united with the supernal world, could experience.<sup>28</sup>

What is clearly apparent from this brief survey of Dunash's commentary is its substantial independence of and distance from the work of Donnolo. Even though there seem to be some exegetical similarities between Dunash and Donnolo—particularly the metaphysical understanding of the *sefirot*, as observed above—these are not sufficiently clear to suggest a direct relationship between SH and the commentary of Dunash who, on the contrary, displays a good knowledge of the commentary of Sa'adiah (either criticising it or sharing some of its exegetical positions). Although he follows a Neoplatonic scheme largely compatible with Donnolo's exegesis of SY, Dunash's position toward SY is somewhat ambiguous. While, on the one hand, he seems to consider the explanation in terms of micro and macrocosm in SY a true definition of the link between the ideal and the empirical worlds as well as of the mechanisms which underlie the creation of material existence, on the other hand, like Sa'adiah, Dunash defines the letters and the *sefirot* in more abstract terms as intellectual categories by which the human intellect can attempt to comprehend the phenomenon of Creation. From this it follows that for Dunash two definitions of SY are possible: an account of the creation of ideal patterns, a text which, ideally speaking, can be positioned before the biblical book of Genesis, but also, as for Sa'adiah, an allegorical representation of the process of Creation.

<sup>27</sup> See Sirat, *A History of Jewish Philosophy*, 66–67.

<sup>28</sup> Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 158; Sirat, *A History of Jewish Philosophy*, 67 and Rudavsky, "Medieval Jewish Neoplatonism," 155.

The reasons why Donnolo did not assimilate the fruits of an exegetical tradition that started long before the composition of the SH with the commentary of Isaac Israeli and which, at the beginning of the 10th century, had developed further with the commentary of Sa'adiah, are twofold. One is linguistic in nature: since the time of Israeli, the debate on SY was conducted in Arabic, a language that Donnolo and probably most of his Byzantine fellow Jews did not know. The second can be attributed to the fact that Donnolo operated, as observed by Sermoneta,<sup>29</sup> in an intellectual milieu which was quite different from the one in which Israeli, Sa'adiah and Dunash operated. His was a Jewish environment which, as pointed out by Colorni,<sup>30</sup> was sympathetic to Greco-Roman and Hellenistic-Byzantine traditions and, until the 9th century, as shown by Bonfil,<sup>31</sup> maintained strong connections with the Palestinian Jewish community, while being unaware of an important part of the Jewish cultural tradition—particularly the Babylonian Talmud—which informed the religious and intellectual life of the Jewish communities under Babylonian influence, where Sa'adiah and Dunash lived.<sup>32</sup>

While Donnolo's attachment to this cultural milieu is self-evident if considered from a mere geographical standpoint, it can be demonstrated in more substantial terms as well. Firstly, he appears to have drawn on and elaborated sources derived from late Christian Patrology, particularly in his commentary on Genesis 1:26 which, as shown by Sermoneta, was modelled on the anthropological works of Gregory of Nyssa. Secondly, his interpretation of Neoplatonism derives not from Arabic elaborations of the classical sources, such as were available to Dunash, but from Hebrew sources, such as the *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, composed in southern Italy or in other parts of the Jewish world under Byzantine and Palestine influence.

In allowing for the distinctive character of southern Italian Jewry in the 10th century,<sup>33</sup> we are better able to locate SH within the broader

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<sup>29</sup> "Il neoplatonismo," 873–874.

<sup>30</sup> See Colorni, "L'uso del greco."

<sup>31</sup> Bonfil, "Tra due mondi," 147.

<sup>32</sup> It is not my intention to claim, as was once commonplace and is becoming increasingly evident to be wrong (see de Lange, "Qui a tué les Juifs"), that Byzantine Judaism and the Jewish communities living within the borders or under the influence of Byzantium were in some way peripheral to the major developments of Judaism taking place in the regions under Babylonian influence.

<sup>33</sup> On this see above, Apulian Jewry, 6–11.



context of the textual exegesis of SY, particularly in relation to the near-contemporary commentaries of Sa'adiah and Dunash.

The aim of the next section of this chapter is to offer a detailed analysis of SH. I shall draw attention to the coherence of the Neoplatonic scheme which Donnolo applied to the interpretation of the text, highlight and clarify some of the most obscure passages of the work, and where necessary, offer a more detailed comparative analysis with the commentaries of Sa'adiah and Dunash.