Chapter 2

THE MUTAKALLIMŪN AND OTHER JEWISH THINKERS INSPIRED BY MUSLIM THEOLOGICAL MOVEMENTS

The Mutakallimūn are adherents of the kalām. Kalām designates a group of Muslim theological schools that developed from the eighth century onwards, arising, it seems, from dissensions between sects within Islam (the kalām's relation with the fiqh, juridical science, was very close at the beginnings of the movement), and from discussions between Muslims and devotees of other religions under Muslim rule. During the conquest, centres of still lively Hellenistic and Christian culture were absorbed into the new empire and the influence of currents of thought existing before Islam are felt in the kalām; the Muslim Mutakallimūn either availed themselves of arguments drawn from other schools, especially those of Christian theologians, or refuted them. They thought it necessary to expound and justify Islam as compared with other religions such as Christianity, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, but also to make a 'rational' conception of Islam prevail against the ideas of other Islamic sects. Controversy thus became a science, regulated and ruled by well-defined principles. In the history of ideas, the Mu'tazilite school was the most important of the sects of the kalām, and we shall find its conception of reason among Jews, Rabbanites as well as Karaites.

The Mu'tazilites were more or less in agreement on five principles, of which the two first, Divine Justice ('adl) and Unification (tawhid) were so important to them that they called themselves 'people of justice and of unification'.

The proclamation of the unity of God, literally 'unification', is the first principle and defines God as a unique God, or rather, it defines what God is not. In effect, when we say that God is Knowing this does not mean that God and His Knowledge are two distinct entities, it means that God and His Knowledge are one and the same thing. The Knowledge of God is thus not

1 The political factors that equally contributed to the formation of the kalām do not concern us here.
2 (1) The proclamation that God is one, in the strictest sense of monotheism; (2) the justice of God; (3) belief and unbelief, and their definition; the promise and threat of God; (4) a neutral attitude on all that concerns the question relating to the superiority of one of the successors of the Prophet and the problems connected with this attitude and the sinfulness of man; (5) the advancement of good and prevention of evil and what should be done about them. Cf. *Encyclopaedia of Islam* s.v. Al-Mu'tazila.
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comparable to ours, which is acquired and can exist, and afterwards disappear. To say that God is eternal and that the Knowledge of God is eternal, would suggest the existence of an eternal entity comparable to God, who would no longer be unique; in consequence, God and all his attributes must be one, in a perfect and indissoluble unity. Since God’s attributes cannot be separated from the divine essence, the various words that we employ when we speak of God, saying ‘God is powerful, God is wise, God is living’ mean only that ‘God is’.

The justice of God: this means that God’s actions are always good; He could not be supposed to do evil. The good means what is morally beautiful, and evil what is morally ugly. God’s commandments are not good because God has ordered them: God has ordered them because they are good. Divine justice is thus the boundary and limit of divine omnipotence, it is the necessity to which God conforms. In a way, God and man find themselves subjected to the same definitions of good and evil, but contrary to man, who has received free will, God chooses only the good, for He is just. Certainly, God has the power to do evil, but, because of His perfection, which excludes want and need, He does not perform it. God has created man for good and given him free will, so that he may gain his salvation; but He has also given him the means of distinguishing good from evil: reason. This immediate and spontaneous knowledge is the part of all sane men; one may therefore, relying on human reason, find the straight road and show it to others; in this sense, the Mu'tazilites place all men, even the prophets, on the same level. Man, responsible for his acts since he can choose between good and evil, should be rewarded for his good actions and punished for the bad, for God is just. All suffering is just, for if it does not come as punishment for faults committed, a recompense proportional to the suffering undergone will be enjoyed in the next world. For certain theologians, brute animals also will be compensated for their sufferings on earth.

With the unity of God is associated a question treated at great length by Muslims, that of the Speech of God (kalām Allah). If God is eternally one, what is the relation between God and His Speech, that is, the Koran, which appeared at a precise moment of history? Some Mu'tazilites give the following answer: when God wanted to make His Speech reach the prophets, He created it in a material substratum, and the Koran, ‘direct’ creation of God and at the same time multiple and temporal, is created on the lips of him who recites it.

However, for the Jews, God himself engraved the commandments on the Tables of the Law, and the ‘written’ character of the Bible is therefore too essential to permit them to adopt this kind of explanation.

Another question, concerning physics, is approached differently by Arab and Jewish Mu'tazilites: the world, for most Muslim Mu'tazilites, is constituted of indivisible corporeal atoms, which God at every instant maintains and organizes in bodies that appear to exist by themselves and to act one on the other; the causal relation between facts was denied; at every instant God creates new atoms or maintains them. With every atom of time, the world is created anew, and without God, it would be annihilated at every moment; no law of nature represents an obstacle to the divine will. This atomism was generally not adopted by the Jews, who maintained the existence of the causal laws of nature.

From the outset the Jews made certain choices, associating some Mu'tazilite theses with other ideas stemming from Greek philosophy or even Christian theology, and harmonizing these various themes with the Jewish tradition.

There were numerous interactions between philosophy and kalām; however, one fundamental difference remains distinguishing between mutakallimūn and philosophers. The authors who will be discussed in this chapter have in common a certain definition of reason that is specifically Mu'tazilite, differing from that found in the Greek philosophical texts; it is not reason that attempts to distinguish between the true and the false; it is moral law that makes us say that a thing is good or bad, that makes us grateful to a benefactor and impels us to summon the wicked back to the right road. This moral law is universal and transcends races and religions. Every man recognizes its existence in himself and since this law also applies to God, we can be sure of the existence of a good God, in whom we may have confidence.

We shall see with Saadiah Gaon how this moral reason permits an explanation of God and the world that agrees remarkably with revelation. But let us first turn to David al-Mukammis whose work is the earliest of this school to have been preserved.

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DAVID AL-MUKAMMIS

David (Dā'ūd) Ibn Marwān Al-Raqi Al-Shirazi, commonly called David al-Mukammis or David Ha-Bavli, lived between 820 and 890. Of his major work, written in Arabic and entitled 'Ishrān Maqāla (The Twenty Chapters) only part has survived, and it is as yet unpublished. Kirkisānī, a Karaite author of the tenth century, says of him:

Dādūd Ibn Marwān Al-Raqi, known as al-Muqammis, was a philosopher. Originally a Jew, he was converted to Christianity in Nisibis through the agency of a man named Nānā. This Nānā was greatly honored among the Christians, for he was an accomplished philosopher and practised surgery. Dādūd al-Muqammis was his pupil for a great many years; he learned thoroughly the origins of Christianity and its mysteries and mastered philosophy. But afterwards he composed two books against the Christians in which he attacked them; these two books are well known. He also translated from among the books and the commentaries of the Christians a commentary on Genesis, called ‘Book of creation’ and a commentary on Ecclesiastes. (Book of Lights, trans. L. Nemoy, Account of the Jewish Sects, p. 366)

1 Except in the eleventh century, with Yāsuf al-Baṣīr and his disciples, during the full flowering of Karaite Mu'tazilism.
In another text, Kirkisānī confirms:

Dā'ūd ibn Marwān al-Rākki, known as al-Mukammis, has written a fine book containing a commentary on Genesis, which he translated from the commentaries of the Syrians. But in some places he did not say all that needed to be said about the intended meaning of the Sacred Text, while in other places he was guilty of foolish verbosity for which there was no need. Another scholar of our own time also composed a fine book on this subject in which he followed a method similar to that of Dā'ūd. We shall extract the best part of both works and we shall add thereto that which they, in our opinion, have neglected to mention or have failed to explain adequately.

(Ibid., trans. L. Nemoy, Karaite Anthology, p. 54)

What we know of David’s philosophy agrees with Kirkisānī’s comment. For example, wishing to define the unity of God, Al-Mukammis considers the various meanings of the word ‘One’; in doing so he does not use Aristotle’s classifications, but comes nearer to those of his Christian adversaries. Nevertheless, the plan of his discussion of the problem of God follows the scheme of the four Aristotelian questions (does the thing exist? what is the nature of the thing? what are its attributes? why they are attributed to it?). The influence of the kalām is felt not only in the conception of the divine unity expressed in David’s affirmation that the divine attributes are not added to the essence, but also as regards other problems such as the perpetuity of retribution after death and the finality of man’s creation.

In the present state of our knowledge, it is difficult to evaluate Al-Mukammis’ influence on later Jewish thought; the Karaite philosopher Kirkisānī seems to have used him extensively, perhaps exclusively, in some chapters of his encyclopedic work; excerpts from chapters ix and x, translated into Hebrew, are quoted in the Commentary on the Sefer Yeẓira (Book of Creation) by Judah ben Barzillai of Barcelona, a twelfth-century author, and a few fourteenth-century writers have transmitted short citations. However, only a portion of the text has survived, and most of it is as yet in manuscript. We can recognize a reference only when David al-Mukammis is cited by name. He may perhaps have been the link between Christian and Jewish explanations of creation, or sometimes we find striking parallels between early Christian interpretations, for instance those of Saint Augustine, and medieval Jewish commentators in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

SAADIAH GAON

In presenting Saadiah ben Joseph, generally called Saadiah Gaon, it is usual to quote Abraham Ibn Ezra: ‘Saadiah Gaon was the chief spokesman in all matters of learning’, meaning that Saadiah first introduced the cultivation of all branches of Jewish knowledge, and this statement is so true that one cannot avoid citing it. Like his work, Saadiah’s life was exceptional, and yet in some ways characteristic of his epoch. He was born in 882 in Fayyūm (in Upper Egypt) and we can only form suppositions about his education; it is certain that men with knowledge of philosophy and religion were not lacking in Egypt, and Saadiah early engaged in a correspondence on scientific subjects with Isaac Israeli (the neoplatonic philosopher who will be discussed in the next chapter), who was then living at Khartoum.

Saadiah was by nature a ‘fighter’. The events of his life, like a great part of his literary activity, can be explained by his aggressive attitude towards the enemies of rabbinical Judaism, as he conceived it. He considered himself the servant of the truth and in its service was prepared to meet all challenges. At the age of twenty-three, while still living in Egypt, he composed a treatise against Anan, founder of the Karaite sect. We do not know why he moved from Egypt to Palestine; he never returned, although he is known to have regretted this. Having left Egypt in June or July 915, Saadiah lived for some time in Palestine, and then at Baghdad and Aleppo. In 921, he joined issue, on behalf of the Babylonian Geonim, with Ben Meir, a Palestinian sage, on the subject of the calendar. In the biblical period, the Jewish festivals were fixed according to the observation of lunar and solar phases; later, although certain astronomical laws were known to the rabbis, up to the end of the fifth century the whole calendar was fixed according to observation, and the right to announce the new moon was the prerogative of the Palestinian Patriarchs. From the seventh century onward, the observation of the moon was given up and a complete and final system of calendation was introduced; the prerogative of promulgating the calendar attributed to themselves by the Babylonian Geonim was more or less contested by the Palestinians, who felt injured.

At the beginning of the tenth century, the decline of the two great Babylonian academies, Sura and Pumbadita, undermined by their dissensions with the Babylonian Exilarch and perhaps weakened by epidemics, gave Ben Meir, a Palestinian by birth and the head of a school in his native land, the impression that he might profit from the situation by retrieving for the Palestinians the privilege of determining the calendar. Perhaps relying on ancient traditions, he decided that the year 922 had two deficient months, so that Passover would differ by two days from the date fixed by the Babylonians. Saadiah was of the Babylonian party, and during the year 921 he sent several letters to Ben Meir, charging his reckoning with inexactitude and foreseeing the dangers of persevering in his decision. Returning to Baghdad, and finding that his attempts at dissuasion had received no response, Saadiah hurled himself wholeheartedly into the fray. After an official letter had been addressed to Ben Meir, the chiefs of the two Babylonian academies, together with the Exilarch and Saadiah, sent letters to all the communities setting out the dates of the year as they had calculated them, and putting them on their guard against a possible schism if the Passover were not observed by all Jews on the same date. It was Saadiah’s stand that tipped the scale in favour of the Babylonians; this fact gives a good idea of the pularity and respect that he enjoyed. However, the conflict was not
immediately resolved; for two years at least, the communities were divided and there was danger of a split within Judaism. Finally, Ben Meir had to give way. As a result, Saadiah became the target of his resentment, for he considered him, and rightly so, to have been the architect of his defeat.

Saadiah's activity during the crisis earned him an important place in the community. At this period the two academies of Sura and Pumbedita had deteriorated, as we have said, from their former flourishing condition, and the Geonim at Sura were often quite insignificant. In 928 a candidate was sought who would be truly capable of meeting the requirements of the position. It was the custom to appoint an individual chosen from one of five or six noble families claiming descent from David. The Exilarch David ben Zakkaï found himself in a state of painful uncertainty, as Natan ha-Bavli relates, for he had the choice between Zemah ben Shaihin, of noble birth and some learning, and Saadiah, a foreigner, but extremely erudite. He finally chose a third person, Nissi Nahrawani, a greatly respected man, who refused the post because of his blindness. Asked for his opinion concerning possible candidates, Nahrawani is said to have recommended Zemah: 'It is true', R. Nissi explained, 'that Saadiah is a great man, of extraordinary learning; but he is absolutely fearless and by reason of his great learning and wisdom, eloquence and piety, he does not consider anybody in the world' (H. Malter, Saadiah Gaon, p. 108). Notwithstanding this warning, the Exilarch appointed Saadiah, and soon had reason to regret his decision, for in less than two years the two men were engaged in a quarrel that continued for several years and led to the dismissal and then the reinstatement of Saadiah in the Gaonate. It seems that a struggle for power was the cause of the dissension. David ben Zakkaï, the Exilarch, the head of a numerous and powerful faction, wanted the right of decision, an aspiration that had a historical foundation, for several centuries earlier the Exilarch had been the king and chief of all the Jews of Babylonia; the academies had gradually achieved independence, although the Exilarchs had never formally renounced their rights either over the academies or over the social and religious life of the communities. On the other hand the Gaonim, who wielded great spiritual influence, contested the Exilarch's hegemony over the Jews of Babylonia and other countries. The Exilarch and Saadiah both employed all the means at their disposal; that is, their influence at the court of the Caliphs and in the various communities; they did not spare each other. Saadiah's adversaries, including Aaron ben Sargado, who was to succeed him in the Gaonate of Sura, launched ignominious accusations. H. Malter writes: 'The document is full of the coarsest invectives, and some of its accusations, repeated again and again, are so vile and impudent that one shrinks from reproducing them' (Saadiah Gaon, p. 114). Saadiah's polemical pamphlets are more moderate in tone, but we know that his partisans, the powerful bankers Bnei Natira, were not over-scrupulous, and, like their adversaries, tried to buy decisions in favour of their faction when they judged this possible. The two sides held

firmly to their positions and each man remained at his post for three years, neither having been able to obtain a ruling from the Caliph. But when a new personage acceded to the Caliphate, the Exilarch's party emerged victorious; Saadiah was deposed and for several years led a retired life. It was at this time that he composed his great book of theology, and his celebrity as theologian was perhaps due to his setback in the conflict with David ben Zakkaï. Another juridical affair was to lead to the reconciliation that was in fact desired by the two adversaries and to an even greater degree by the whole Jewish community of Baghdad. It was celebrated with much ceremony and Saadiah was reinstated in the Sura Gaonate in 936 or 937. He died at the age of sixty, in 942. David ben Zakkaï died before him, in 940.

Saadiah was an exceptionally prolific writer. He produced grammatical and lexicographical works; he translated almost the whole Bible into Arabic (twice: one translation is fairly literal, the other is rather a kind of paraphrase and commentary intended for cultivated readers); he composed a book of prayers and numerous liturgical poems; he introduced a scientific methodology and a new interpretation into the study of the Talmud, defined and codified numerous questions of halakhah, expounded important decisions in response to questions from communities of the Diaspora, and composed talmudic commentaries; he wrote many works on the calendar and on biblical and rabbinical chronology; he elaborated a rational theology to which many Jewish medieval thinkers later referred, and finally, he engaged in polemical strife against all enemies of rabbinical Judaism. These two activities, polemical and philosophical (the latter word being used in the special sense that I have defined), were closely linked. The doubt cast on rabbinical Judaism by other religions that proposed to supplant it and also by Jewish sects and various philosophies or scepticisms, demanded not a retreat behind the barriers of the Torah, but the elaboration of a system of rational thought capable of answering attacks, of vindicating the rightfulness of Judaism and demonstrating its absolute superiority.

Saadiah's rationalistic ideas, discernable in most of his works, are systematically expounded in two of them: Tafsir Kitab al-Mabadi (Perush Sefer Yezira, Commentary on the Book of Creation), several times translated into Hebrew and used in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, but later falling into oblivion; and Al-Amanan Wa-l-I'tiqadat (Sefer Emunot we-De'ot, The Book of Doctrines and Beliefs), which has to the present day remained one of the basic books of Jewish theology.

Saadiah's method, which is clearly polemic, is illustrated by his arguments in favour of the ex-nihilo creation of the world. He not only set out to prove that the creation of the world from nothing was as true according to reason as according to the Torah, but that all other theories were false. In the Amannat, Saadiah cites twelve false theories and in the Commentary on the Book of Creation he gives eight (of which six are different from those noted in the Amannat), making a total of eighteen mistaken theories of which he
demonstrates the falseness. While some of these theories were in fact maintained at this period, most of them were drawn from doxographies and go back to philosophers like Thales of Miletus, Heraclitus, Anaximenes, and so on. These doxographies were in fashion until the sixth or seventh centuries, but by Saadiah’s time, the most important works of Plato and Aristotle had been translated into Arabic. However, if Saadiah had read these translations, he hardly ever cites them. He aimed at more than the refutation of contemporary philosophy; he wished to demonstrate incontrovertibly that all the doctrines imagined in the course of history to explain the existence of our world are false and that none of them can contend against the truth of Judaism.

In his inquiry Saadiah often uses arguments drawn from the kalâm, and the plan of the Amânât immediately delimits his intellectual context. The first two chapters treat of the unity of God, as is generally done at the beginning of Mu’tazilite treatises, the next seven of the justice of God, the second Mu’tazilite principle. The tenth chapter is only a sort of appendix and is not an integral part of the work. We should remark, however, that one of the central ideas of the Mu’tazilites, atomism and creation renewed by God each instant, with its corollary, the negation of the laws of nature, was not adopted by the Gaon, who preferred a rather imprecise Aristotelian physics.

In the introduction to the Amânât, Saadiah defines the theory of knowledge and what he calls ‘belief’ (i’tiqad):

We affirm that this is an idea arising in the soul as to what an object of knowledge really is: when the idea is clarified by speculation, Reason comprehends it, accepts it, and makes it penetrate the soul and become absorbed into it; then man believes this idea which he has attained, and he preserves it in his soul for another time or other times, as is said, ‘Wise men lay up knowledge’ (Prov. 10.14), and as is further said, ‘Receive, I pray thee, instructions from His mouth, and lay up His words in thy heart’ (Job 22.22)

(The Book of Doctrines and Beliefs, trans. A. Altmann, p. 34)

This conviction is sustained by three sources: (1) external reality apprehended by (2) reason, that is, the knowledge of good and evil, and (3) what reason necessarily deduces from the reality of things and the knowledge of good and evil.

By the knowledge of sense perception we understand that which a man perceives by one of the five senses, i.e. sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. By the knowledge of Reason we understand that which is derived purely from the mind, such as the approval of truth and the disapproval of falsehood. By inferential knowledge we understand a proposition which a man cannot deny without being compelled to deny at the same time some proposition obtained from Reason or sense perception. Where there is no way of denying these propositions, the previous proposition must of necessity be accepted. E.g. we are compelled to admit that man possesses a soul, although we do not perceive it by our senses, so as not to deny its obvious functions. Similarly, we are compelled to admit that the soul is endowed with Reason, although we do not perceive it by our senses, so as not to deny its [Reason’s] obvious function.

(Ibid. p. 36)

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To these three sources Saadiah adds a fourth: the true tradition, that of the Torah (which evidently includes the oral law, that is, the Talmud).

How can we be sure that this tradition is true? Its truth has been proven, says Saadiah, by signs and prodigies and especially by the miracle of the manna, the heavenly food that God bestowed on Israel in the desert.

Certainly, it is possible to create an illusion of miracle and simulate a prodigy. But the miracle of the manna could not have been counterfeited, for it continued for forty years, nor does the publicity that surrounded it allow the supposition of a carefully elaborated lie. Nor can one think of a natural phenomenon produced by Moses, for the philosophers would have known of it and would have used this technique for their own benefit. The true tradition, fourth source of knowledge, is thus founded on the historical experience of the Jewish people and the argument of Saadiah is so much the stronger because none of the other religions cast any doubt on the historical reality of the Exodus and the Jews’ sojourn in the desert.

Now, the Torah itself enjoins us to attempt to understand its tradition, for two reasons: first, that traditionally transmitted knowledge should become firmly anchored in the intellect; secondly, that we may answer detractors of the Law.

All the various kinds of knowledge that scientific effort may uncover are in conformity with the true tradition. Saadiah was convinced that Torah and science spring from the same branch; they cannot contradict each other in any way, and, if there is an apparent contradiction, this is due to our faulty reasoning or to our failure to interpret the revealed text correctly. This optimism, this deep confidence in the harmony between faith and reason, is characteristic of Saadiah, and the whole book of the Amânât is constructed on the basis of the identity of tradition and reason. Each chapter begins with an introduction to the problem, followed by an exposition of the biblical texts affirming the thesis, and the rational examination and refutation of antagonistic theses. I shall briefly discuss the creation of the world (first chapter of the Amânât), and the unity of God (second chapter); divine revelation, treated in the third chapter and in the Commentary on the Book of Creation; and finally man’s psychology and the explanation of the divine commandments.

The Creation of the world

In the chapter on creation, Saadiah first determines how this inquiry should be conducted. The senses can be of no help here; only rational proofs can be used; whatever the thesis advanced – eternity of the world, eternity of matter – and so on, one must try to establish it on rational proofs.

Now, Scripture teaches us that God created the world at a given moment of time; there are four proofs of this:

(1) The world being limited in space, if the force moving it were the world
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itself, it would also be limited; since the world moves perpetually, a force other than that of the world must be the mover of the world.

(2) The world is made up of parts that are sometimes joined and sometimes separate: neither the separation nor the union are part of their essence; one must therefore admit that an external force joins or separates them in order to form bodies, small like plants, or large like the spheres; this force is God the Creator.

(3) The third proof is based on accidents: everything in this world is composed of necessary substance and of accidents (like the form of an object, its colour, its warmth, its movement); as no thing is without its accidents, which succeed each other in the same body and change continually, it must be God who produces these changes.

(4) The fourth proof depends on time, which is finite; for if the succession of instants were infinite, it could not be retraced in thought: only a succession with a temporal beginning could explain the existence of the world at the present time.

These proofs figure among those advanced by the Mutakallimún. The world is composed of atoms disposed in such a way as to form the universe, and it only subsists by the continual creation of God: the only difference between the creation of the world and the moment at which we live is that the world, at its creation, was, after not having been, while at the instant at which we live the world is, after having been. The first and the fourth proofs are also found in the Christian critics of Aristotle. The second and third proofs are much less convincing in Saadiah, whose system does not admit atomism, but accepts Aristotelian physics. The text itself, often difficult to understand because of its concision and over-simplification, indicates that he used his sources without considering them deeply or criticizing them. He was profoundly convinced that only the infinite action of God is able to sustain and explain the constant alteration of the corporeal universe, the perpetual generation of a finite world in space and time.

The world and man, limited and imperfect, are evidence of an infinite and perfect being and lead us to the knowledge of the unique God. What is God, creator of the world? This is the question examined in the second chapter of the Amānāt, the unity of God. The introduction is instructive, for Saadiah describes all the objections to rational thought that were raised at the period.

I found that people rejected this whole inquiry, some because they could not see God; others on account of the profundity and extreme subtleness of His nature; still others claim that beyond the knowledge of God there is some other knowledge; others again go so far as to picture Him as a body; others, while not explicitly describing Him as a body, assign to Him quantity or quality or space or time, or similar things, and by looking for these qualities they do in fact assign to Him a body, since these attributes belong only to a body. The purpose of my introductory remarks is to remove their false ideas, to take a load from their minds, and to point out that the extreme subtleness which we have assigned to the nature of the Creator is, so to speak, its own warrant, and the fact that, in our reasoning, we find the notion of God to be more abstract than other knowledge shows that reasoning to be correct.

(Ibid. p. 78)

and a little further:

Our Lord (be He exalted and glorified) has informed us through the words of His prophets that He is One, Living, Powerful and Wise, and that nothing can be compared unto Him or unto His works. They established this by signs and miracles, and we accepted it immediately. Later, speculation led us to the same result. In regard to His Unity, it is said, 'Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One' (Deut. 6. 4); furthermore, 'See now that I, even I, am He, and that there is no god with Me' (Deut. 32. 39), and also, 'The Lord alone did lead him, and there was no strange god with Him' (Deut. 32. 12).

(Ibid. p. 80)

Thus God, Creator of the world, is One, but who is He? And when we say of Him that He is One, of what unity do we speak? What is His knowledge so that we may say that He is knowing? And what acts are attributed to Him so that we may say that He is acting? To these questions Rabbanite Jews answered with the biblical verses that often use not only adjectives like 'powerful', 'good' and 'merciful', 'jealous', in referring to God, but attributes bodily movements to Him: 'God ascends', 'God descends', and even members: 'God's arm', 'God's hand'. The midrashim also often present God in human form and we have already spoken of one of them, the Shiur Qomah (Measure of the Divine Stature), which attributes to Him measurements exceeding the limits of the human imagination. The Karaites often accused the Rabbanites of believing in divine anthropomorphism, and tenth-century Muslim authors made fun of the Rabbanite Jews who, contrary to the Karaites and to enlightened Muslims, believed that God had a body. Saadiah expresses himself vigorously against the notion of divine corporeality. One of the central points of his thought is the purification of the idea of God, and the demonstration of the divine incorporeality and transcendence.

All the things existing in this world are substances, that is to say, bodies, more or less dense, more or less light, but bodies. They can be described by answers corresponding to one or several of the ten questions propounded by Aristotle in the Categories: substance, quantity, quality, relation, place, time, position, possession, action, passion. Thus, to define a person, we say that this is a man (substance), measuring 1 metre 70 centimetres (quantity), white (quality), smaller than the average (relation), at Jerusalem (place), last year (time), standing (position), and so on. Everything that is to be found in our world can be defined according to these categories; even the soul and even, as we shall see, 'the divine Glory' are definable substances and in consequence more or less corporeal, for body and substance are, for Saadiah, one and the same thing. As for God, He cannot be defined by any of these categories; He transcends all of them, and there is nothing in common between bodies, finite, composite, subject to change, and God, immaterial
and immutable. His attributes, power, knowledge, mean first of all that God is not impotent, that He is not ignorant, but power and knowledge, as they are found in man, cannot describe Him, for in God the attributes are identical with the essence. In man, knowledge is acquired, and not only acquired at a certain age: it exists after not having been in existence; in old age it diminishes and disappears with death. God, on the contrary, is Knowing in all eternity. When we speak of God with the help of positive attributes, we are alluding to ‘something else’ of which we can only have a vague idea, and of which we know only that it cannot be compared with that which exists in this world. Can one, somehow, separate the attributes from the divine essence? More simply, when we say of God that he is ‘living’, ‘knowing’, ‘omnipotent’, we use three different words; does this mean that this distinction exists in God himself or does this simply mean that human thought expresses itself in sequences and not simultaneously? The question was important for the Muslims as well as for the Jews, for it was necessary to answer the Christians (or at least some of them) who identified certain attributes with one or another of the persons of the Trinity. For a Jew, as for a Muslim, this implies introducing an unacceptable multiplicity into God, so that all the Mutakallimûn, and with them Saadiah, affirm that the attributes, whatever they are, are identical with the divine essence (or quiddity), and none is outside His essence; in God there is only absolute unity.

If by the use of human reason we may arrive at a refined and exact knowledge of God, why were the prophets necessary? And how can we explain all the anthropomorphic expressions of the Scriptures and the Tradition? The first question was not rhetorical. At the beginning of the eleventh century a Muslim thinker and notorious heretic, Ibn Ar-Rawandi, was casting doubt on the necessity of prophecy. The second question also urgently required an answer. The Scriptures were being criticized in a book that is said to have been in vogue in the schools, the Two Hundred Questions concerning the Scripture by Hiwi al-Balkhi. Whatever the theological bases of his critique, and one can only offer suppositions on the subject, the fact remains that Hiwi drew attention to a number of contradictions in the Scriptures as well as in the conception of God as His actions are depicted in the biblical narrative. At the same time, the Karaites were attacking the talmudic and midrashic tradition precisely on the ground of its anthropomorphisms, and Saadiah wrote his Commentary on The Book of the Creation in order to show its non-anthropomorphic sense.

First of all, Saadiah thus had to demonstrate the necessity of prophecy, and then explain how, from the eternal and immaterial God, emanated the visible and audible messages that the Bible reports. Finally, the Gaon had to show how the various biblical passages can be interpreted according to this theory of prophecy, which conforms to reason:

For I have heard that there are people who contend that men do not need prophets and that their reason is sufficient to guide them aright according to their innate cognition of good and evil: I, therefore, subjected this view to the test of true reasoning and it showed me that if things were as they make out, God would know it better and would not have sent us prophets, for he does not do things which have no purpose.

(Amânât III, 35, trans. A. Altmann, p. 103)

The first argument employed by Saadiah to justify revelation is that Omniscient God acted ‘with a view to the good’ and did nothing in vain. This argument is founded on the ‘justice of God’ (âdîl) as it is conceived in the second of the Mu'tazilite theses. And it is only after having established the legitimacy of prophecy on the basis of the essence of God that Saadiah expounds the reasons why revelation is necessary to man, reasons to which he was to return in greater detail in his exposition on the commandments and the prohibitions.

- Revelation specifies the acts that allow one to put into effect in the best possible way the very general moral laws that reason imposes;
- It contributes other commandments which reason does not teach, and which are of undoubted usefulness;
- It permits immediate action, while reason, which in fact rests on the same principles, is not fully developed before a considerable length of time; furthermore, certain men never reach the level of rational knowledge because of their imperfection or their lack of inclination for study, or the doubts that assail them.

Revelation is therefore necessary, as much on the level of the divine essence as on that of human conduct. Nevertheless, the Bible often employs anthropomorphic terms, a usage that does not conform to reason, nor to Saadiah’s description of the revealed Law. For reason teaches us that God is unique and incorporeal, and Tradition draws on the same sources as rational knowledge: namely the apprehension of the senses, the principle of reason, the necessary inferences, and it constitutes for believers the fourth source of knowledge. This tradition, the Bible, therefore cannot be contrary to reason; and a rational explanation should be given of the entire revealed text and especially of the prophetic visions.

The solution proposed by Saadiah is founded on two principles: first, supernatural apparitions are God’s doing, and should be attributed to the divine omnipotence and not to man, and, secondly, God makes use of the ‘second’ air, the first of his creations, to manifest His presence in a way that men can perceive.

Supernatural apparitions, whether prophetic or magical in manifestation (such as the episode of the Witch of Endor) are due uniquely to a divine act. Saadiah does not consider it necessary to explain veridical dreams or witchcraft, the existence of which was commonly admitted by his contemporaries, for it would have been necessary to admit natural causes for these supernormal apprehensions. Neither does the Gaon admit the existence of an exceptional aptitude that may be designated as prophetic or favouring prophecy. To him, prophecy is a grace that God places in a human receptacle,
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which is then called 'prophet'. The prophet is as mortal as other men. He cannot live without eating or drinking, he leads a normal conjugal life, he cannot predict the future or perform miracles except in exceptional circumstances, for, if it were otherwise, one would have to suppose him the possessor of superhuman faculties. The prophet is only an instrument of the divine will: 'Since the prophets are in all ways men like ourselves, and, nevertheless, they do things which we are actually powerless to do, the signs accomplished prove the divine provenance of the prophetic words' (Amudat iii, p. 121).

For the same reason, it is not the angels who perform miracles, for men, ignorant of the capabilities and limitations of the angels, might attribute to them acts that belong to God alone. Thus, on the one hand, no creature has a specific nature permitting him, in any action at all, to equal the divine omnipotence; on the other hand, the fact that the receiving subject was less remarkable than he was often supposed to be, renders the prophetic word and the signs that accompany it more convincing. These miracles in their supernatural aspect stand out conspicuously against the well-ordered and predictable sequence of the natural laws that govern man and the world.

The prophet receives the divine communication in the same way that he perceives things apprehended by the senses and the reason, by an act of apprehension in which the irrefutable evidence of the senses and the inner truths of reason are inextricably mingled. The conditions of rational truth, that is, sufficient knowledge of the object and diligent care in inquiry, are therefore applicable to prophetic apprehension.

How, in these circumstances, may one recognize a prophet? In the first place, by the intrinsic value of the Law that God has communicated to him. Then, by his miracles, which are the signs that God has given him as proof of his mission.

Miracles are of two kinds; they may transform the regular phenomena of nature, subduing the diverse elements and forming composite things in spite of the antagonistic character of these elements: preventing fire from burning or water from flowing are examples; they may also transform the original nature of beings: changing water to blood and a rod into a serpent. The miracle, proof of the divinity of the Word, is always preceded by an announcement to the prophet. However, a capital difficulty is present in the Scriptures themselves: if the accomplishment of miracles is of divine origin and proves the authenticity of the prophets, how were the sages and magicians of Pharaoh able to perform the same miracles as Moses? This, says Saadiah, was because they imitated the real miracles by ruse and enchantment, or, in modern language, they produced the illusion of these miracles by charlatanism and prestidigitation. In any case, they were able to simulate only the earlier miracles, and soon had to avow their impotence.

The announcement of a miracle and the miracle itself always coincide: thus, the prophet is always warned of a divine manifestation by the apparition of a pillar of cloud, or a pillar of fire, or a bright light. At the time of Moses the whole people could see the pillar of cloud.

God manifests himself to man pedagogically, going from the easier to the more difficult; this was his way with Adam, and with the revelation on Mount Sinai, and with Moses.

'Those who wanted to make His voice heard by Moses, He was careful to treat his sight gently, taking into account its degree and strength.' Thus, He made a terrestrial fire appear to him in the bush, as it is said: 'He looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire' [Exodus 3: 2]; when He was able to support this light, He made the light of the angel appear to him, as it is said: 'And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him' [although in fact the text mentions the angel before the bush]; when Moses could support [the light of the angel], He showed him the light called the Shekhina [Indwelling], as it said, 'God called unto him out of the midst of the bush'.

(Tafsir Kitab al-Mabadi', p. 39)

The apperition of God therefore signifies the apperition of the light called the 'Indwelling of God'.

The Bible speaks of God, unknowable and incorporeal, as manifesting Himself, but, in reality, He manifests His Created Glory. The glory may be compared, in a very inadequate fashion, to the air we know, the First Air; it impregnates all things and exists in all things, without however being affected by the defilements of bodies, nor divided by their divisions, nor touched by their imperfections. Thus, God is in relation with the created world by the intermediary of the first of created things, the Throne, which is an air in the air, a Second Air, finer and more subtle than the first one, the visible air.

The Holy Script calls the Second Air, which is finer, Glory...The people call it Indwelling...and the author of the Book of Creation called it the Breath of the living God...It is by this fine air, which is the second, that was carried the word of prophecy, as it is said 'The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me' [Isaiah 61: 1]. And it is by it that appear all the miracles visible to prophets, as it is said 'in a vision by the Spirit of God' [Ezekiel 1: 24] and it is evidently a created thing, for everything which is not God is a creature, as it is said 'there is none else beside Him' [Deuteronomy 4: 35].

It is through this second air, very fine but created, which is in the world as life is in man, that was produced the created word heard by Moses in the visible air, and the Decalogue that our fathers heard in the visible air, and it was called 'the voice of the living God'.

(Ibid. p. 72)

This second air is both audible and visible and, relying on the verse 'And all the people saw the thuderings' (Exodus 22: 18), the Gaon links the graphic form of the letters of fire written on the black air to the movement that occurs when these letters are pronounced; he recalls the words: 'And the Lord spake unto you out of the midst of the fire: ye heard the voice of the words, but saw no similitude; only ye heard a voice' (Deuteronomy 4: 12); and also (Deuteronomy 5: 23) 'And it came to pass, when ye heard the voice
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out of the midst of the darkness, (for the mountain did burn with fire,) that ye came near to me, even all the heads of your tribes, and your elders.'

That sound can be visible we know from practical experience: ‘when someone speaks on a cold day and the articulation of his sounds tears the air apart, it produces forms varying according to the line that the sounds follow in it, in a straight line or inflected’ (Tafsır Kitāb al-Mabādī, p. 11).

When God wished to reveal himself to the people of Israel, ‘He compressed the air which produced, as it were, phonemes and articulated sounds, perceptible and ordered sounds, analogous to human speech, which cuts up the air in sounds and words, so that the Israelites could hear the word of God’ (Commentary on Exodus).

The Second Air, instrument of the divine Word, differs from the usual air; God models it according to His desire:

'Sometime] God wishes to speak to a prophet so that the person then near the prophet does not hear, thus Samuel alone heard the word of God and Elijah did not hear it although he was in the same place. The air prevented Elijah from hearing and carried the Word only to Samuel.'

(Commentary on Leviticus cited in Kitāb Ma’ani al-Nafs, p. 68)

The Second Air is also luminous, flamboyant, splendidly iridescent and colourful. In saying ‘the throne of Glory and all the legion of the heights’ the author of the Book of Creation had in mind the seven colours of the fire that Ezekiel saw:

‘The first is a great cloud and fire infolding itself’ [Exodus 1: 4]. The fire which condenses is feeble since there is a great quantity of air in it, because of the fineness [of the fire]; afterwards, in the interior, a bluish fire, as it is said: ‘and out of the midst thereof, of the colour of blue’ [Ezekiel 1: 4]. And the body of the four Hayot (Beasts) ‘had the appearance of burning coals of fire’ [Ezekiel 1: 13]. And it was surrounded by a radiance of yellow light, as it is said [in the same verse]: ‘And the fire was bright and out of the fire went forth lightning.’ And all over their bodies [there was] a black fire as if it were eyes, as it is said: ‘And all their flesh and their backs and their hands and their wings, and the wheel were filled with eyes.’ And on their heads was an arch of white fire, as it is said: ‘And the likeness of the firmament upon the heads of the living creature was as the colour of the terrible crystal, stretched over their heads above’ [Ezekiel 1: 22].

Above it was a throne of crystalline fire, less white than the vault, so that it could be distinguished from it, as it is said: ‘And above the firmament that was over their heads was the likeness of a throne, as the appearance of a sapphire stone’ [Ezekiel 1: 26]. And all this was created from the air after its humidity had been extracted, and was formed by the sefirot and letters and from this resulted the mixture of these different kinds of fire.’

(Tafsır Kitāb al-Mabādī, p. 88)

The emission of light varies in intensity, and its brilliance is unbearable when its source is approached. This is demonstrated by the care that God takes in initiating his prophet to the advent of the apparition. But it seems that Saadiah conceived of a unique luminous creation, bearing different names according to its relation to the source and also to the events announced:

The Rabbantes

The names of the angels vary according to the events which they are sent by God to accomplish. When God sent them to Abraham [to announce] the good news, [they behaved] like men and were called ‘men’. When he sent them to Sodom to destroy it, they were called ‘messengers’, . . . to Isaiah to burn with the ardent brand, ‘seraphim’.

When Ezekiel saw them . . . they were called Hayot and those who were turned towards him were called Ofanim and the highest of them were called Cherubim.

(Ibid. p. 20)

The living God, immaterial, Eternal, Knowing, Omnipotent has revealed himself to man, whom He has created. How does Saadiah describe the recipient of revelation: man? We find some of his ideas in Book X of the Doctrines and Beliefs, or, more accurately, we have a glimpse of the ethics that a cultivated man like Saadiah could read in Arabic texts. This Book X seems to have been added as an afterthought in the arrangement of the Amana and, more than in the rest of the work, we find comments on everyday life.

Human conduct should be guided by the divine design. Now God has created a diversified world, in equilibrium between the contraries: existing beings are composed of four elements, not of only one. How can one construct a house entirely of bricks, or of wood, or of straw, or of nails? In order that a house should be stable and well-constructed, each of its materials must be utilized to the necessary extent.

In the same way, man should not devote himself to one particular virtue, whatever it is, but give a part of himself to each one. It is the cognitive faculty that determines this part, for it has to judge of the importance that the other two faculties have to assume: the appetitive, which comprises the senses and the corporeal pleasures, and the irascible, which gives rise to love and hate.

As long as equilibrium is maintained by reason, which should be regarded as paramount, man is on the moral road; if on the contrary, he lets himself be dominated by one of the passions, to the exclusion of the others, he is on an immoral road.

Thirteen things, loves and hates, may be chosen by man as the essential pivot of his conduct, and Saadiah enumerates them one after the other, illustrates them with biblical verses and demonstrates the disadvantages that each of them represents when it occupies the entire life of an individual:

First, isolation from the world, for – this is the reasoning of hermits – this world is no more than a vale of tears and no pleasure endures; it is therefore better to accustom oneself from the beginning to sadness and misfortune. It is indeed true, Saadiah answers, that human society, like man himself, most often produces sorrow; but these people forget that society is necessary to all men, for the satisfaction of spiritual as well as material needs, and if all men adopted their doctrine, this would mean the destruction of the human race and its reduction to the level of the beasts.
Secondly, gluttony carries with it its own dangers, which Saadiah enumerates with much medical terminology, although he concedes that food and wine are pleasures that give zest to sociability.

Thirdly, sexual voluptuousness justifies itself by the continuation of the human race, and the incomparable pleasure that it procures. The disadvantages, especially medical, are again numerous.

Fourthly, passionate attachment to another human being, i.e. homosexual or heterosexual love, is considered by some as the purpose of life:

They go even further in this matter, attributing the workings of this dominant passion to the influence of the stars. Thus they assert that, if two human beings were born in the ascendant of two stars facing each other, in full or in part, and both stand under the influence of one zodiacal sign, they will inevitably love and attract one another.

In fact, they carry their theory still further, attributing the consuming passion to the work of the Creator, magnified and exalted be He. They maintain, namely, that God has created the spirits of His creatures in the form of round spheres, which were thereupon divided by Him into halves, each half being put into a different person. Therefore does it come about that, when a soul finds the part complementing it, it becomes irresistibly drawn to it. From this point they proceed further yet, making a duty of man's surrendering himself to his passion. They assert, namely, that this is only a means of testing the servants of God, so that by being taught submissiveness to love, they might learn how to humble themselves before their Master and serve Him.

(The Book of Beliefs and Opinions, trans. S. Rosenblatt, p. 374)

Saadiah concludes his exposition of the chief disadvantages of this kind of attachment by affirming that it should exist only between husband and wife, for the greater good of procreation.

The fifth love is that of money.

The sixth is the longing for children, who bring joy to their parents' souls; they delight man in his old age and praise him after his death. It is true, says the Gaon, that this is very good, and without children a man has neither aim nor object; but to have too many children is an intolerable burden; it is not enough to bring them into the world; one must take care of them and nourish them properly, and this exhausts an over-prolific father and brings misfortune on his ravenous brood.

Follows, seventhly, the possession of goods, praiseworthy as long as it does not occupy a disproportionate place in a man's life, for otherwise it brings with it hardness of heart and envy, and the destruction of the possessor himself.

Eighth, longevity is a good thing, as long as it does not become of the first importance; some take a laudable but exaggerated care of their health, forgetting that hygiene preserves the body but does not give life, and those who take the greatest care of their body are not those who live longest.

Power and authority is the ninth, and vengeance the tenth of human tendencies.
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the existence of the priestly class are held to be made known by revelation. This in no way signifies that the latter commandments are inferior in importance to the rational laws. The Gaon stresses the fact that they permit the faithful to merit reward. And God always takes man's capacities into account.

The idea of pedagogy is important for Saadiah. One finds it again associated with divine justice in a passage of the Introduction to Job. This book was interpreted by the Aristotelians as an exposition of different philosophical conceptions of providence. Saadiah saw in it a description of divine goodness and justice, which in the final reckoning always acts for man's good. The misfortunes that man suffers in this world have three reasons: the instruction that God gives his creatures, the punishment of faults, and the suffering inflicted by love. One must not pass hasty judgement on the events that occur in the life of a man, for divine wisdom is not what creatures desire, and the actions that cause them to rejoice are not those which are veritably good. Experience teaches us these truths, and the successive stages through which man passes are far from being agreeable at their beginnings; it is against his will that man passes from one stage to another of his life, and when he is used to a way of existence he has much difficulty in passing to another which he does not know and which frightens him. Does not the child scream with terror when he leaves his mother's womb and is struck for the first time by cold air and light? And nevertheless, soon he will be happy with air, light, nourishment, knowledge and all the other pleasures. And when he is weaned, the child weeps and despairs because he is being deprived of his mother's milk and does not imagine that other foods will soon be sweeter to him and will suit him better.

It is still more difficult for man to leave this world, for he imagines that he is in danger when he passes from this world to the world of reward. Consequently man's veritable end cannot be judged by imaginary human criteria, God's wisdom being the true measure of events.

The reward that God reserves for the faithful is the after-life, and this brings us to the soul and its destiny. For Saadiah the soul is a very fine and subtle substance. God only is above all corporeality and all definition; the soul, among created things, is of the greatest purity, greater even than that of the heavens. The idea that the soul is a very fine material substance is found in some of Aristotle's writings, but precisely those which were only fragmentarily preserved and did not form part of the medieval Aristotelian corpus. It is possible that Saadiah had encountered this notion in the doxographies. In the medieval Aristotel the soul is the form of the body, and for the Neoplatonists it is immaterial. According to the Gaon, the fine and subtle substance of the soul is separated from the body at the moment of death, nevertheless remaining more or less attached to it for three or four days after this separation; it will again be joined to the body in order to receive punishment or reward.

The Rabbanites

The traditional texts, when they deal with destiny in the world to come, often associate it with the Messianic era. Three terms are employed: life beyond the tomb (the next world), the resurrection of the dead and the Messianic age. These three terms have given rise to a number of different interpretations. Saadiah is satisfied to cite the traditional texts without giving his personal opinion. At all events, he remarks that the world to come differs from the resurrection of the dead, which will take place when the Messiah arrives, so that all the past generations may benefit from it. The theme that emerges clearly from all these passages is the 'justice' of God. This concept of divine justice, one of the foundations of the Mu'tazilite doctrine, is strongly emphasized by Saadiah, who thus answers the eternal question of the suffering of the just, propounded by Job: whether in this world or the next, God rewards good acts and punishes bad; the divine accounting is very exact, and no vain suffering is forgotten before God, not that of little children, nor that of the dumb beasts; to every one God will give the compensation that is due to him in the world to come. As for the end of the world, which according to tradition will be preceded by the coming of the Messiah and the resurrection of the dead, it seems that Saadiah, basing himself on Daniel (chapters 10–12), believed the end of the world to be near, and foresaw it within twenty or twenty-five years; an opinion shared by certain Karaites.

The link between God and man is the Law, which permits man to attain the supreme Good. Saadiah Gaon respects the literal sense of this Law, the Torah; the allegorical exegesis, sometimes necessary, should never be systematically employed. Each passage must be carefully examined.

As an example of Saadiah's exegesis, let us take the gift of speech to Balaam's ass (Numbers 22) and the account of the resurrection of Samuel by the Witch of Endor (1 Samuel 28), two biblical episodes hard to explain in rational terms.

For Saadiah, the she-ass could not have spoken to Balaam: the angel spoke in the proximity of the ass and Balaam imagined that his mount addressed him with words. Faced with this logical contradiction, an animal deprived of reasoning faculties to whom speech, that is, intelligence, is attributed, Saadiah interprets the text in such a way that both reason and the sense of the passage are safeguarded. A divine message was communicated to Balaam, who was misled by the nearness of the voice to the animal—a clear example of an error of the senses.

Rationalist exegesis, like that of Saadiah, was not unanimously accepted by the Jewish community; thus, in the twelfth century, a Spanish commentator, Ibn Balaam, asserted that Saadiah's explanation was contrary to the biblical text. Is it not written: 'And the Lord opened the mouth of the ass'? This means that in fact it was the ass who spoke, for omnipotent God had perfected the beast's vocal organs, and bestowed on it the necessary discernment and comprehension.

In fact, whenever possible, Saadiah preserves the literal sense of the biblical
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Jewish philosophical history.

Two ideas derived from Saadiah's thought were to have a brilliant future in Jewish philosophical history.

The conception of the Second Air, luminous and audible creation, close to God and close to men, is found again among the Ashkenazi pietists of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; it has often been preferred to the Aristotelian explanation, because it admirably safeguards the at least almost literal, if not totally literal, sense of the Scriptures.

The division of the divine commandments, that is, the fact of distinguishing among God's commandments between those that are rationally justified and those that are not, was to have a great bearing on the history of Jewish thought, and, little by little, there was to be a tendency to assign greater value to the rational commandments, that is, to those common to all men gifted with reason, in contrast to those which are specifically biblical.

The Karaites

The Karaites represented a considerable danger to rabbinical Judaism during the Middle Ages; at a certain moment they even seemed to prevail over the Rabbanites, and their importance did not diminish until the beginning of the twelfth century. We know that the most important aspect of the Karaites' doctrine was their rejection of the oral tradition, that is, the Talmud and the midrashim, which means that their quarrels with the Rabbanites were not only intellectual but more especially concerned with the performance of the divine commandments, the halakah.

Karaite thought is relatively little known, for many of their texts have not yet been published, and some of the most important manuscripts are inaccessible. However, several points of their doctrine have been elucidated in scholarly studies and H. Ben-Shammai gives a masterly exposition of the religious and philosophical thought of the first Karaites, in a book and various articles that are soon to be published.

Very little is known of the founder of the sect, Anan, who wrote a book on the Commandments of the Torah. According to Japheth ben Ali, he is supposed to have declared, 'Search thoroughly in the Scriptures and do not rely on my opinion'; and according to Kirkišānī, 'It is said about him that he believed in metempsychosis and composed a book about it; some of his followers also professed the same belief' (Book of Lights, trans. L. Nemoy, 'Account of the Jewish Sects', p. 386).

Of Benjamin ben Moses al-Nah'āwendi (ca. 830), who was the first exponent of the sect's thought, Kirkišānī says:

He asserted that the Creator created nothing but a single angel, and that it was this angel who created the entire world, sent out the prophets and commissioned the messengers, performed miracles and issued orders and prohibitions; and that it is he who causes everything in the world to happen, without [the interference of] the original Creator.

Daniel ben Moses al-Qumīṣī is said to have been a pupil of Benjamin ben Moses al-Nah'āwendi. He lived during the ninth century; born in the north of Persia, he settled in Jerusalem (where he died), and perhaps founded there
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a spiritual centre that attracted later adherents of the Karaite school of thought. Only fragments remain of his biblical commentaries, together with citations in posterior Karaite texts. The fullest surviving passages belong to his commentary on the Twelve Minor Prophets. He also composed a Book of the Commandments and perhaps a treatise on the laws of inheritance. Kirkisânî says of him:

First, he was opposed to speculation by means of pure reason, and he despised its devotees; this is to be found in more than one place in his writings. He did not have the same idea of the angels as the people of Israel have, that is to say, that they are living beings endowed with the gift of speech, who are being sent out on missions in the same way as the prophets. On the contrary, he asserted that this word of ours, ‘angel, angels’, denotes the bodies by means of which God does his doings, e.g., fire, clouds, winds, etc. (Ibid. pp. 390–1)

The corpus of Karaite doctrine was elaborated at Jerusalem, principally, during the tenth and eleventh centuries, and bears the strong imprint of the Arab milieu within which it was formed. H. Ben-Shammai draws attention to the fact that the Karaites used the Arabic script. Arabic texts composed by the Rabbannite Jews were generally written in Hebrew letters; the Karaites, on the contrary, tended to use Arabic characters even for the Pentateuch and books of prayers translated into Judeo-Arabic, and this is an unique phenomenon. On this subject Kirkisânî expresses a surprisingly modern opinion: the content of the words is important and not their language or their script. This idea is opposed to the Jewish consensus, which considers the Hebrew language and the Hebrew alphabet as the sacred language of humanity, an attitude that Kirkisânî himself expounds in another place.

The Mu'tazilite kalam was an integral part of Karaite thought, and its writings were not only read among the Karaites but transliterated into Judeo-Arabic. Certain Mu'tazilite ideas that were prominent during the eleventh century even became the ‘true Jewish tradition’ for medieval Karaites.

In the tenth century, however, Karaite thinkers were far from having achieved unanimity, and their positions regarding science and philosophy differed considerably. The anti-secular current was represented by Solomon ben Jeroham (mid tenth century, Jerusalem). Apart from a fierce polemic, in Hebrew, against Saadiah and the Rabbannites entitled Milhamot Adonai (The Wars of the Lord), which he wrote while the Gaon was still alive, he was the author of numerous biblical commentaries in Arabic. His opposition to every object of study other than religion extended to Euclid, to Hebrew grammar, and to foreign languages, although he himself also wrote in Arabic.

JACOB AL-KIRKISÂNî AND JAPHETH BEN ALI HA-LEVI

Very different from Solomon ben Jeroham are Jacob al-Kirkisânî and Japheth ben Ali.

Jacob al-Kirkisânî (Abu Yusuf Yakub al-Qirqisânî) of Mesopotamia flourished in about 930–40, apparently in Iraq. He left a theoretical exposition of Karaite ideology that has remained the foundation of the doctrine. His great work, the Kitâb al-Anwâr wa'l-Marâjib (Book of Lights and Watch Towers) devoted to the Law, is divided into thirteen chapters, the first four being historical and philosophical. Fragments of the introduction to his long Commentary on the non-legalistic parts of the Pentateuch and a short Commentary on Genesis also survive (in manuscript).

Japheth ben Ali ha-Levi (Abu Ali al-Hasan Ibn Ali al-Lâwi al-Bâsîri), of Jerusalem, active during the second half of the tenth century, may to some extent be compared with Saadiah. Like Saadiah, he translated the Bible into Arabic and wrote commentaries on it. These commentaries, composed in Arabic, have nearly all remained in manuscript; however, long excerpts were translated into Hebrew in later Karaita works. He also composed a Book of Precepts.

Both authors, Kirkisânî, by his theological ideas, and Japheth ben Ali, by his biblical exegesis, exercised a great influence on all succeeding Karaita thought. Their basic religious conceptions are largely similar but they differ on the extent of the use of reason.

Both had to face their co-religionists’ opposition to rational speculation. The titles of the first four chapters of the Kitâb al-Anwâr immediately indicate the line of thought adopted:

1. History of the Jewish sects (Christianity is included among these).
2. The validity of rational investigation in theology and in jurisprudence.
3. Refutation of the doctrines of various sects, including Christianity and Islam.
4. Treatise on methods of interpreting the Law.

These chapters are a valuable source of information on the religious sects of the tenth century and their history, for the author’s erudition extended not only to the rabbincal and Karaite Jewish texts, but also to Muslim and patristic writings. Among his informants Kirkisânî cites the ‘bishop’ Jaš‘u’ Sekha, with whom he had formed a bond of friendship.

According to Kirkisânî, rational speculation on religious matters is permissible; it is even a positive commandment, for it is the foundation of all religions and knowledge is acquired through it.

The true procedure should be this: laws should be made along the lines of research and speculation only; whatever is proved by research and speculation to be necessary and logical should be accepted as dogma, no matter who adheres to it, be it the Rabbannites, or Anan, or anyone else. Yea, if scholars engaged in research and speculation should arrive at some new doctrine which none (of the former authorities) had heretofore professed, its acceptance should be obligatory, inasmuch as it is (logically) correct and unassailable. There are other so-called Karaites, for example, those of Persia, especially those of (the city of) Tustar, who, notwithstanding their assertion that they are in favor of speculation, revile those who engage in rational speculation, i.e. in some of the secular sciences, especially dialectics.
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and philosophy. What makes them averse to this (speculative method) is this: first, they are too lazy to learn all about this matter, and it is also too difficult (for their minds); therefore, they seek to be relieved from this fatiguing pursuit. Secondly, some of them erroneously think that rational speculation does harm to him who engages in it by leading him to heresy; in fact, they assert that they have seen some men who have been engaged in this pursuit and have become heretics. This opinion of theirs, however, is the very cause of (all heretical) doubts and suspicions, inasmuch as it makes the listener believe that rationalism is averse to religion and is directly opposed to it; if this is so, then religion is assailable (as something irrational), but this is utterly absurd. They certainly ought, therefore, if they would only try to be just, to refrain from accusing rationalism of being the cause of heresy for the mere reason that some men who have been engaged in speculation went astray (in their faith), since a great many scholars have been pursuing the same method (of thinking) and yet have not become heretics, on the contrary, it only strengthened their faith. Neither should they assert that renunciation of speculation is the cause of added strength of faith, inasmuch as there are a great many people who have never done any speculation by means of (pure) reason and have no idea of it, and yet they are dissenters and believers in all sorts of heresies. We shall show further on the absurdity of the views of these people, and we also shall prove that intellect is the foundation upon which every doctrine should be built, and that all knowledge should be derived by means of reason only.

(Gbid. pp. 320-1)

God manifests himself to man in two ways: by reason, which is given to every man normally constituted, and by revelation. But revelation is not unique, since Jews, Christians and Muslims each claim to have had a revelation of their own. Only reason, common to all men, allows one to determine the authenticity of a revelation. It is necessary therefore that the intellectual and rational process should precede and justify the acceptance of a prophecy, whatever it may be, for even in the Scriptures we see there are false prophets. Moreover, even before accepting the prophecy, one must be convinced that a good and wise God is at the origin of this prophecy; one must then, in the first place, prove, by means of reasoning, the existence of God. To reiterate, reason is the moral law that permits us to distinguish good from evil. It is because this moral law also applies to God that we can firmly establish the existence of a good and just God. It is also reason that allows the allegorical interpretation of ambiguous passages of the Bible, passages that might give rise to false opinions, that is, opinions rejected by reason or contrary to other biblical expressions of which the true sense is the literal one.

In the Scriptures, in effect, God addressed himself to men so as to make himself understood, like a pedagogue.

Scripture addresses mankind in a manner accessible to their understanding and about matters familiar to them from their own experience; this is what the Rabbanites mean when they say, 'The Law speaks with the tongue of men' (B. Berakhot 31b). Thus, when the Creator wished to describe Himself to the effect that nothing visible is hidden from Him, He described Himself as provided with eyes, because men are familiar with the sense of sight and know from their own experience that its seat is the member of the body which is the eye, not because He really is provided with bodily members. Likewise, when He wished to let them know that no sound is veiled from Him, He described Himself as provided with ears, because among men sounds are perceived by the sense of hearing. The same applies to all matters of this sort. This is similar to the reply of a certain scholar who was asked, 'How can the Creator address mankind, seeing that His speech is of a different species from men's speech, inasmuch as it is infinitely more sublime and exalted?' To this, the scholar replied that when God created His creatures and wished to address them with commandments, prohibitions, promises, threats, and narratives, He took into consideration the fact that their constitution could not bear to hear His natural speech because of its sublimity and exaltation and its dissimilarity from their own language, and He fashioned for them a speech akin to their own, near to their comprehension, acceptable to their understanding, and bearable to their faculties. This is comparable to our own procedure with animals and similar creatures, whose constitution is different from ours, whom we must govern and manage, to whom we must communicate our wishes, who do not know our speech, and whose sounds and utterances are not akin to ours. We therefore resort to signs, hints, and noises which make known our wishes, such as whistling, bleating, and various other sounds produced by movement of the vocal organs. Thus, we call qurr to an ass when we want him to start moving, and we call something else when we wish to make him stop. Likewise, we call kitāb to some birds when we want to drive them away; to others we call axx. We say axd to a dog, while we whistle to other animals and use different sounds to signal other species of animals. This scholar's explanation is of great potency and is similar to our own view that God addresses mankind in a manner adapted to their minds and accessible to their understanding. It is for this reason, or one near it, that the children of Israel begged to be excused from listening to the Creator's address, when they said to Moses: let not God speak with us, lest we die (Exod. 20: 16).

(Karaites).

Kirkisāni does not pursue the argument to the end; it is only much later that Aristotelian Jewish thinkers attempted to distinguish what, in the Bible, related to human psychology.

Rational speculation offers proof of a psychological process that exists in any case, for the need to know and to inquire exists in all men and no man is happy when he is called ignorant. Inquiry and reasoning form part of man insofar as he is distinguished from the animals. Like them, he has, certainly, a living soul, but he is different in that it is a 'speaking' soul, that is, a rational soul, thanks to his comprehension and discernment, which include language. Further, the different pieces of knowledge are parts of a whole and this, in itself, is proof of its necessity. Let us take a certain piece of knowledge acquired by rational investigation; it is proved by another piece of knowledge equally acquired by rational investigation, but this latter is proved by the intuitive knowledge that is thus shown to be the base of all logical reasoning.

The human soul, by its natural disposition, as it has been created by God, thinks and understands the true definitions of things and has the power to make a choice. It is the capacity of discerning and choosing the good rather than the bad, of perceiving past and future events and not only, like the
animals, of obtaining what is necessary for physical survival, that is the ‘image and resemblance of God’.

For Kirkisānī, the four sources of knowledge are:

1. The perceptions of the senses;
2. Things evident in themselves, like the fact that lying is bad and blame-worthy;
3. Demonstrative knowledge;
4. Traditionally transmitted knowledge, which in fact depends on the three preceding sources.

Japheth ben Ali enumerates three sources of knowledge:

1. Rational knowledge, which includes objects perceived by the senses and self-evident things;
2. Revelation;
3. The true tradition.

The first two sources, and most probably also the third, are divided into primary and secondary knowledge; the latter is demonstrated with the aid of speculation, argument and analogy.

The fundamental difference between Japheth ben Ali and Kirkisānī is that for Japheth revelation represents one of the sources of knowledge, while for Kirkisānī, revelation agrees with reason and perception, but does not constitute a separate source:

These, then, are the rational proofs built upon the knowledge based on sense perception; and it is for this reason that King David, in describing the Law and stating that it is allied with both reason and perception, says: The Law of the Lord is perfect (Ps. 19: 8-10); i.e., its perfection is due to its close connection with reason free from error. He says further: The commandments of the Lord are upright, rejoicing the heart, referring to the satisfaction felt by the human heart because of the truth of the premises and conclusions contained in His commandments; and further: The precept of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes, refers to the clarity and lucidity of the precept, caused by its freedom from ambiguities; and further: The fear of the Lord is immaculate, enduring forever, meaning that the word of the Law is firmly established in the face of disputes and attacks against it, and remains irrefutable. The full truth is then made evident by the combination and union of all five of these principles in the concluding words: The judgments of the Lord are the truth, they are righteous all together. (Ibid. pp. 57-8)

Another difference between Japheth ben Ali and Kirkisānī is their attitude to the limitations of human knowledge.

According to Yefet (comm. on Ps. cxxx. 1), human knowledge is limited mainly in four areas: a) marvels of the creation; b) man's lot in this world; c) the success of wicked governments; d) the reasons for the revealed laws. The third of the four belongs to Yefet's tendency to actualize Scripture. With respect to the second and the fourth Yefet presupposes that he who deals with these matters is most probably liable to question God's wisdom and to reach conclusions which will influence his belief and behaviour. It is thus a moral-religious consideration which is involved in the limitation of human knowledge in these matters. To the first area Yefet devotes a lengthy discussion in his comm. on Prov. xxx. 1-6. Much of the knowledge of the scientists is unfounded, because they were unable to acquire it at first hand. Solomon knew these things by inspiration; therefore he was allowed to deal with them. But ordinary men should devote their time to the Torah, and not to the teachings of infidels and gentiles. Elsewhere Yefet explicitly mentions the target of his attack: the heritage of classical Greek philosophy and science. The whole body of human knowledge is thus classified by Yefet according to religious-moral criteria into two classes: the wisdom of this world and the wisdom of the world to come, i.e. the Torah. Yefet is not worried by the fact that his favouring and necessitating of rational speculation inevitably implies resorting to the achievements of philosophy and science. He is worried by the danger that preoccupation with philosophy may lead to heresy, and this worry causes him to adopt an 'anti-intellectualistic' position.

(H. Ben-Shammai, The Doctrines, pp. xvi-xvii)

For Kirkisānī certain verses of the Scriptures show that the study of science and philosophy is not prohibited. King Solomon studied science in the same way as did 'the doctors and philosophers'. There is no opposition between the doctrine of creation and the laws of science and philosophy; on the contrary, they prove each other. Science is an instrument for attaining the knowledge of the truths of the Torah. Like religious belief and revelation, the sciences are based on the use of reason, the foundation of which is the perception of the senses and the self-evident things.

We have mentioned there – by way of showing the validity of investigation into matters rational and disciplines philosophical, and proving that the Sages of our nation had engaged in such investigation – the biblical account of King Solomon as the most learned of the children of Adam, in that he discoursed upon all the various kinds of plants, from the largest, which is the cedar tree, down to the smallest, which is the hyssop, and upon all the various kinds of animals, including beasts, birds, fish, and insects. Consider now, what could he have discoursed about, as regards all these things, if not in the way of describing their natural properties and causes, their beneficial and harmful qualities, and similar matters? This is in fact what the Greek and other philosophers quote in his name and is now incorporated in their books. A similar thing is related in the biblical account concerning Daniel, Hananiah, Michael, and Azariah; to wit, that they were skilled in all matters of wisdom and understanding (Dan. 1: 20), indicating that the king inquired of them about various matters of wisdom and that their knowledge of it was ten times greater than that of his advisers and court philosophers. This is an incontrovertible proof that they were scholars skilled in all branches of philosophy, since they were ten times more learned than the king’s magicians.

(Book of Lights, trans. L. Nemoy, Karaite Anthology, pp. 55-6)

To the argument that science and philosophy can lead to heresy, Kirkisānī opposes a hierarchy of science and scholars. The highest, the subtest degree, is reserved for the few who have a well-proportioned nature and a sound natural intellect, who look for truth without wanting to turn it to personal profit, and do not wish to do harm.

Thus, it is permissible to study magic, for example, in order to know how
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it differs from miracle, and to confound the magicians, but not for the purpose of using it. Similarly, man may study astronomy on condition that he does not do so for astrological ends, which are prohibited.

Certainly, many things cannot be understood by man and only God entirely understands them (for instance, the substance of the soul and its future destiny), but this does not necessarily prevent man from trying to understand them, within the limits of human possibility. Thus, according to Kirkisišānī, the exploration of divine creation is limited by the nature and intellectual potential of the scholar, far more than by the subject of the study; it is not reserved for prophets, but for an intellectual élite of naturally gifted philosophers.

In the physics as in the cosmology of our two authors we can recognize the influence of philosophy, and probably more specifically that of Al-Kindī. Both Kirkisišānī and Japheth ben Ali admit that the world is formed of four elements. For Japheth ben Ali, creation took place exactly as it is related in Genesis 1, taken literally. For Kirkisišānī, the three first elements (earth, water and air) were created simultaneously, and composite bodies are born from their mixture. As for fire, two kinds exist: celestial (ether) and concrete fire.

Celestial fire arises in the following way:

Every moving body moves with it the body which is attached to it. The latter becomes hot by that movement. When the celestial sphere moves, it moves with it the air attached to it. This air, while moving with the sphere, becomes hot, and consequently becomes thinner and lighter. This [thinner and lighter air] is fire. This is why fire is the highest element. This [process] is also demonstrated by sense perception, for when two solid dry bodies are rubbed forcefully against each other fire is produced in between them. [The reason for] that is that the few particles of air which exist between the two solid bodies heat and change into fire.

(H. Ben-Shammay, ‘Studies in Karaite Atomism’, p. 5)

Since ether is born from the friction of two bodies and has no independent existence, it was not mentioned in Genesis. The void does not exist and all the interstices between the bodies are filled with air. Time is the duration of the celestial movement; nevertheless it is not absolutely bound to movement, for theoretically, even if the celestial bodies ceased to move, time would continue to be.

In the same way that time at its beginnings was not preceded by an anterior time, the universe is not in a certain place, but within the universe all bodies have a place and each body can be the place of another body.

The definition of the body is important and shows that Kirkisišānī, and perhaps even more Japheth ben Ali, were aware of atomist theories. The three components of the world are body, accident or substance, for everything is either a body or an accident or a substance. ‘Substance’ and ‘accident’ probably refer to the ten Aristotelian categories.

The body has length, width and depth, and is divisible. The accidents are indivisible and require a substance in which to inhere. The substances are

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generally bodies, except for the soul, the air and the angels, which are spiritual substances.

These definitions of the body are the basis of the Karaite refutation of the anthropomorphists, the Manichaeans and the Christians.

For Kirkisišānī the Rabbanites are anthropomorphists:

They attribute to Him [human] likeness and corporeality, and describe Him with most shameful descriptions; [they assert] that He is composed of limbs and has a [definite] measure. They measure each limb of His in parasangs. This is to be found in a book entitled ‘Shī‘ūr qomāh’, meaning ‘The measure of the stature’, i.e., the stature of the Creator. This, as well as other tales and acts, etc., mentioned by them in the Talmud and their other writings, does not suit [even] one of the [earthly] creatures, much less the Creator.

(‘Account of the Jewish Sects’, p. 337)

Now, God cannot be a body for two reasons:

(1) A body has three dimensions;
(2) A body cannot create another body.

He cannot be two, for each of two gods would be limited by the other; He cannot be three for ‘a substance in three hypostases’ would signify that one was applying to God Aristotelian definitions that only refer to the world of bodies; however, the Christians do not admit that God is a body with three dimensions. In reality, one cannot compare anything in this world to God; the divine acts are not analogous to human acts and His action is different from ours.

God is One, and commenting on the verse ‘Hear O Israel, the Lord is thy God, the Lord is one’, Kirkisišānī shows how rational investigation agrees with the revealed text to give us an idea of the oneness as well as the unity of God.

This discussion about the meaning of the unity, the opinions about the oneness of the Creator and its significance, and an explanation of the passage which follows that verse is given in the fourth chapter:

We will first discuss the oneness and the meaning of the words of Scripture ‘the Lord is one’. The learned have taught that the noun ‘one’ is used to signify the following six aspects:

(1) With respect to simplicity; e.g. the soul is simple, in contrast to the body which is composed and assembled.
(2) With respect to composition; e.g. soul and body constitute one composition.
(3) With respect to genus; e.g. man and ox with respect to animality.
(4) With respect to number; e.g. Khālid and Zayd, each of whom is counted as one.
(5) With respect to species; e.g. ‘man’ which is predicated of both Khālid and Zayd.
(6) In the sense that [that one] has no equal with it; e.g. you say [about someone] ‘he is unique and no body equals him in his characteristic’.
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[Opinions of various scholars about the predication of God as one:]

[a] God is one with respect to simplicity, i.e. He is one, not of any composite essence in any sense of the expression.
[b] He is one in His essence and His action, i.e. there is nothing similar to Him in His essence nor in His action. These two opinions are simultaneously true.
[c] It is admissible to say 'God is one' with respect to a number, not in a quantitative sense, rather in the sense that He is the first and that [His] creation does not resemble Him, but is second to Him as being after Him [in time]. [In other words, He is one because] He is eternal, without a second or a third [eternal being] except for the Eternal who is incessant, while the created has come to exist after it had not existed.
[d] He is one in a numerical sense, because He is the First and the One, and is therefore, by virtue of Himself, in no need for the existence of a second, while the second cannot do without the existence of the first. The reason for that is that the number one [as such] is separate, it is not attached [to the other numbers] while the numerical [noun] 'second' is attached to the first and [necessarily] indicates [its existence]. The same is true with regard to the following numbers, such as third and fourth etc. for this reason it may be said that God is one as any number.
[e] He is one in the sense that he has neither beginning nor end, while anything other than Him has a beginning and an end.
[f] God is one in that He is not an effect, but rather He is the cause of every effect.

Any thing other than Him is an effect.

These are the opinions concerning the Oneness and the significance of the One in the words of the Scripture 'The Lord is one'.

(Book of Lights, trans. H. Ben-Shammai, 'Qirqisânî on the Oneness of God', pp. 107-9)

With the oneness of God is connected the polemic against the pre-existence of the Logos, and the eternity of the Word.

If one [of them] should ask, 'Since the Law is God's Word, how can that which is from God be incipient and created?' - the answer would run thus: [the concept of] a thing from another thing has several variations. One of them is a part of a whole - as we would say [for example], 'the hand is from the man', meaning that it is a part of him; this [variety of the concept] cannot be applied to God, since He is not subject to partition and division. Another variation is [exemplified by] the expression, 'the fruit is from the tree', meaning that it grew out of it; this, too, is inapplicable to God, since He is not subject to happenings and attributes applicable to [earthly] bodies. Another [variation] is [represented by] the saying, 'the ointment is from the sesame-seed', or 'the oil is from the olive', meaning that it had been expressed and obtained from it; again, God is exalted [far] above such an attribute. We say, further, 'justice is from the just', or 'action is from the agent', or 'truth is from the truthful', meaning that he has produced it and given it inception. When we say, therefore, that the Word is from God we mean that He has made it and caused it to be. (Ibid., trans. L. Nemoy, 'Tenth Century Criticism', pp. 526-7)

One can only define God by negative attributes; the only positive attribute being eternity. The other adjectives used in referring to God - Living, Knowing, Powerful, are ways of expressing that He does not die, that He is not ignorant, etc.

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In contrast to Kirisiâni, Japheth ben Ali makes only vague allusions to the negative attributes, and rather tends to employ terms like 'knowing by essence', or 'eternal by His essence', which reflect Mu'tazilite terminology.

For both, the problem of the attributes is associated with the revealed text, and Japheth writes:

... the Creator may not be described nor defined, and space does not contain Him. It is not permissible to say of Him that He is in the world or outside thereof, since this is one of the attributes of created things, which are contained in space and subject to accidents. This being so, there is no doubt that by saying, 'the Lord came down', [the verse] indicates a created, defined something and a local compression [of the air] on the top of the mountain.

(P. Birnbaum, The Arabic Commentary, p. xlv, passage on Exodus 19: 20)

while Kirisiâni propounds the following exegetical principles:

Scripture as a whole is to be interpreted literally, except where literal interpretation may involve something objectionable or imply a contradiction. Only in the latter case, or in similar cases which demand that a passage be taken out of its plain meaning - e.g., where a preceding or a following passage requires it in order to avoid a contradiction - does it become necessary to take the text out of the literal sense. If it were permissible for us to take a given biblical passage out of its literal meaning without a valid reason for doing so, we would be justified in doing likewise with the whole of Scripture, and this would lead to the nullification of all the accounts therein, including all commandments, prohibitions, and so forth, which would be the acme of wickedness. Thus we are compelled to say that the verse, And they saw the God of Israel ... (Exod. 24: 10), must not be understood literally and does not signify seeing with one's eye, since it is contrary to reason to assume that the Creator may be perceived with man's senses.

(Book of Lights, trans. L. Nemoy, Karaite Anthology, p. 60)

Japheth takes up this theme at greater length at the beginning of his commentary on Daniel 11.

We are not justified in setting aside the literal meaning of the Word of God or of His prophets, save where that literal meaning is hindered or precluded as being contradicted by the reason or by a clear text. In such a case it is understood that the first text requires an explanation reconciling it with the reason or with the other text; the words having been used in some metaphorical or improper sense, as we have observed in a number of places in the Law and the Blessed Prophets. Ideas repudiated by the reason, are such as 'God descended', 'God ascended', etc.; precluded by the reason, because, if we take the verse literally, it follows from it that God must be a material substance, capable of inhabiting places and being in one place more than in another, moving and resting, all qualities of created and finite beings, and He must possess these attributes. Such texts must therefore be capable of being explained away, and the term indirectly interpreted may be either the noun or the verb. The first is done in cases like 'and God descended', 'and God ascended', where we affirm the action of the person of whom 'ascending' and 'descending' are attributes; only the person intended is the Angel of God, or the Glory of God or the Apostle of God, with the ellipse of a word. The second is done in cases like 'God was glad', 'God was sorry', or 'God was jealous'; all of which are accidents
not to be predicated of the Immortal Creator. This phrase must contain a sense to be evolved in whatever way the words will allow. The language has employed in such cases metaphors and inaccurate expressions, because the application of the reason can point them out. Where one text is precluded by another, the one which admits of two or more interpretations must be explained away.

(Commentary on the Book of Daniel, p. 56)

The explication of the divine visions and the auditory revelations recounted in the Scriptures should be based on this fundamental principle: only created, therefore non-eternal beings and things, can be heard and seen.

If one [of them] should ask, ‘But do you not believe that God addressed Moses from the thornbush?’ – we would answer, indeed we do, in the sense that He created a Word and placed it in the bush; God was the speaker, although the Word was located in the bush, just as in the case of the Ten Commandments, the verses were God’s Word, although they were located upon the two Tablets; the Word was God’s, and not the thornbush’s or the Tablets’, even though it was placed in the bush and upon the Tablets. If he should retort, ‘But it was the thornbush who said, “I am God”’ – we would reply, “Nay, God was the speaker of this, in the sense that He produced the Word within the bush by means of His omnipotence, not that He himself took up position in the bush, even as He created man within the belly of his mother without His setting foot in it himself, as Job expressed it [31 15]: ‘Did not He that made me in the womb make him?’”.


That which was seen and heard by the Patriarchs and the prophets was thus the world of the angels, which was created by God.

We find in the Scriptures many places in which angels are mentioned, and in two different ways. Sometimes they appear sensibly and are seen by men when awake, like any other visible object; sometimes in dreams, and there too like other objects: instances of the first case occurred to Jacob, Moses, Balaam, Joshua, Gideon, Manoah, David, Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel; of the second to Abimelech (as some think), Jacob, and Balaam. Their voices too have been heard without their being seen, as by Hagar, Abraham, Samuel, David. These all occur in our Chronicles, and there is no ground for rejecting these texts. It is known that nothing but body can be perceived by the sense of the eye: and that an accident cannot exist by itself.

Of these created beings, some are more terrible and frightening than others: observe, too, that in this chapter he says of one like the similitude of a man, and tells us that he came near him, and was not afraid, whereas he was terrified and alarmed by the great angel; such things are common in our books; and their powers are limited according as the Creator has given them. Observe that when Jacob wrestled with the angel, the angel was at the time unable to get rid of him (Gen. xxxii. 26). Though their forms be terrible, yet God has given the children of men power to behold them, save the great and mighty Glory which the blessed Apostle asked God to shew him, when He said ‘thou canst not’, etc. (Ex. xxxiii. 20). (Ibid. p. 57)

The angelical beings were created by God for his Glory and to serve him as an instrument of communication with men; are they nobler than man in the order of the creation?

Mu’tazilites maintained that the angels are superior to man. Yefet expresses this opinion when he writes on Gen. 1:26 as follows: ‘People are not in agreement as to the rank of the angels. Some say that they [the angels] are inferior to Adam, adducing the argument that Adam had qualities which angels lack, and that whatever is to be found in angels is likewise to be found in Adam, since he is the micro-cosm. Because, therefore, Adam surpasses the angels in eminence, he becomes the most important of created beings. We, however, say that the angels are higher in rank than he, for [the Psalmist] says, “Thou hast made him lower than the angels’” (Ps. 8:6).

(P. Birnbaum, The Arabic Commentary, p. xvi, passage on Genesis 1:26)

In fact, there is a whole hierarchy of angels, and in the Commentary on Psalm 103 the Karaites exegete gives us a table of the angelical world, beginning from the bottom of the ladder.

The Angels (malakhim) are close to men in form and speech, and it is not always easy to distinguish them from men, as in the episode of Manoah and his wife (Judges 13:6).

The Powerful (giborei koah) include the angels set over the nations, such as the tutelary angel of Israel and the angel who spoke to Daniel.

The Armies and the Servants are deployed close to the Glory. The Armies are like soldiers, who come and go, while the Servants remain constantly before the Glory, praising and exalting the Lord.

The Glory is the most eminent of all these divine creatures, and in his commentaries on Ezekiel 3:13, Japheth relates the tribulations of the Glory: It was created by God on the sixth day and lived in the Garden of Eden until the day of the revelation on Mount Sinai. Afterwards, it moved with the Tabernacle and then resided in the Temple of Jerusalem. After the destruction of the Temple God restored the Glory to its primordial home, although He sometimes shows it to a prophet.

For Japheth as for Kirkišān, the angels are simple, non-composite substances. Japheth writes that some angels are of air, live in the air and have no need of the heavy earth; they are like the winds that blow and they descend towards the earth with a swiftness that outruns the imagination.

The highest class of angels was created from fire, and their bodies are of fire, as it is said of the angel whom Moses saw in the bush:

‘And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush’ [Exodus 3:2], and in his description of the Glory Ezekiel says ‘from the appearance of his loins even downward, I saw as it were the appearance of fire’ [1:27], a flaming fire, for their bodies flash and delight the sight . . . Those who descend on earth are the Angels and the Powerful, who are of air, while the Servants and the Armies remain on high for they are of flaming fire, and fire is more exalted and more sublime than air.

(Commentary on the Psalms, MS cit., fol. 204v)
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It is because the angels, in contrast to men, are simple, non-composite substances, that they remain in being. Probably in reply to Daniel al-Qumisi, who thought that God creates an angel only with a view to the task with which He charges him and only for the duration of the task in question, Japheth affirms:

An angel therefore being created must be capable of persistence; and what is there to necessitate his annihilation? If any one hold that an angel is only created for the moment, for the sake of a message or something similar, and that, when that is finished, there is no reason why he should endure, - what, we ask, indicates that he is created at the moment, - or created merely for the message or purpose which renders him for the moment necessary? If you say: 'Then what has the angel to do besides delivering messages and similar tasks?' We answer: To praise and glorify his Creator. Is not the prophet too chosen to deliver a message? but nevertheless he is not created merely to speak. We find, too, in our accounts that angels do endure. Thus the Glory abode with the children of Israel nine hundred years; and Daniel says of Gabriel, and the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the Vision at the beginning, and there had elapsed between the two occasions a year. Nor can we suppose the second Gabriel was merely like the first, who had been created a year before and then destroyed; for that would not entitle the second to be [called] the same as the first. Again, there are the words of this angel who is speaking to Daniel, who says: 'I have been some time in war, and am going to fight those who remain:' who thought that God creates an angel only with a view to the task with which He charges him and only for the duration of the task in question?

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(2) The Holy Spirit, or inspiration, common to Moses and to numerous prophets;

(3) The degree of Samuel, who heard God speak to him directly without the intervention of a 'vision' or of a 'dream'; this speech proceeded from a Glory, according to the verse ‘And the Lord appeared again in Shilo’ (1 Samuel 3: 21);

(4) The fourth degree is that of vision, the level of Aaron, Miriam, Ezekiel and most of the prophets;

(5) The degree of Daniel, who saw the angel directly and heard the words proceeding from him, according to the verse ‘Yea, while I was speaking in prayer, even the man Gabriel . . .’ (Daniel 9: 21); the apprehension thus did not present itself in a 'vision' or in a 'dream';

(6) The dream. The prophetic dream differs from other dreams, for in it one sees the Glory or the Angels, as Zechariah saw the angel of the Lord and heard the discourse proceeding from him. In the same way, Daniel saw the angel in his dream and heard the discourse that he addressed to him: ‘I came near to one of them that stood by’ (Daniel 7: 16) (Commentary on Numbers, MS cit., fol. 77 r-v).

Of the six degrees of prophecy, the first and the third highest are auditive, the second highest is purely spiritual; the other three are both visual and auditive. This distinction between Voice and Glory is maintained even in the inferior degrees of prophecy. For all the personages seen by the prophets including Moses himself, are created beings: the most sublime of which is the Glory. It has the appearance of a man, rises to the heavens or descends on earth; the Voice of God, on the other hand, springs from God Himself; we do not know the nature of this voice, but it is certain that God sees, hears and makes His Voice heard, without the aid of organs. His voice is of the same nature as His 'Holiness'.

According to Kirkisānī, man cannot hear the veritable Voice of God, therefore God creates a 'Voice' adapted to human corporeal capabilities. The connection between the world of God and the angels on the one hand and the terrestrial world on the other is instituted by the intermediary of the prophets. As in Saadiah Gaon, the prophet is chosen by God for his moral and religious qualities, and is not distinguished from other men by any special faculties; prophecy itself however, according to Japheth, is manifested on six levels (or five according to another text).

(1) The first is the degree of Moses – 'mouth-to-mouth' – and no other prophet shares his rank;
Criticism of the tradition is thus one of the arguments used in polemics against the other religions which pride themselves on true prophets. Thus, on the miracles attributed to Muhammad in the Hadith, the Muslim tradition: 'The proof (of the veracity of a tradition about a miracle) does not consist of the multitude of its transmitters, but of the multitude of those from whom it was transmitted and those who witnessed the performance (of the miracle)' (H. Ben-Shammai, 'Attitude', p. 37).

The biblical miracles, on the contrary, have been authenticated by the entire people of Israel. Moreover, this tradition is not only a written but also an oral one since the entire Jewish people knows this tradition by heart in every generation. It is therefore impossible that additions or omissions could have been perpetrated.

Certain people, including the Rabbanites, admit the reality of sorcery, which is supposed to be able to effect prodigies, such as recalling a dead man to life, the transformation of one element into another, the inducing of love or of hatred, the infliction of diseases or the performance of cures without the aid of medicine, only by pronouncing certain words, and so on; but a person who adopts this opinion is no longer able to recognize a true prophet.

The authenticity of the divine mission is proved through miracles performed by the prophet that can only come from God. But if some other man, not sent by God, were able to produce the same phenomenon in some way or another, we could no longer be sure that he who claims to be a prophet does not succeed in producing a miracle in the same way as the other, who is neither prophet nor emissary of God. This would be the end of religion, of the prophet's mission and of the revealed Law. Some people, relying on the biblical narratives, attack prophecy itself, calling it a matter of magic and artifice. Their argument runs thus: assuming the veracity of accounts according to which the prophets performed prodigies and caused the metamorphosis of natural things, it is still possible that they succeeded in this through all sorts of artifices. We know of the existence of natural objects that perform operations contrary to the habitual course of things, like the setting of things in movement without contact between the mover and the moved; this is the case of the magnet that moves and attracts iron without touching it; or certain herbs which, thrown into the water, make fish leap on to the earth; or dragon's blood, which colours water to look like blood; or the stone placed under a woman in difficult labour, who thereupon gives birth; and many herbs and minerals used in the successful treatment of diseases and others that kill and cause to perish.

Given that these things exist in the world, where many people have seen and known them, although perhaps not everybody knows them, one can equally admit that there are other things in the world more subtle in their action and more difficult to find, not known even to those who know the first. They are hardly known except to those who are the most energetic in their search and who carry their ambition furthest, and especially those whom their ambition impels to claim for themselves the rank of leader, by the force of prophecy. One may admit that these claimants to prophecy, thanks to the energy and the care that they have devoted to research and investigation, have obtained information that others have not attained, and it is thus that they have succeeded in their operations.

To this Kirkisānī responds: it is impossible to accept that the prophet performs his prodigies thanks to his knowledge of the occult virtues of natural things like the magnet. In fact, while men are indeed not equal in theoretical knowledge and in the perception of the secrets of nature, many of them possess this knowledge, like the philosophers who know the plants and the minerals of multiple active virtue, and have composed books on the subject. We may say quite justifiably that they get all this from the prophets. The philosophers who possessed this knowledge were not a few isolated men, but were very numerous, Hippocrates, Aristotle, Galen, and many others, and they have recorded everything that they knew. If they had known and spoken of other things they would have recorded them also in their books. If they had had the means of proving that even one of the things accomplished by the prophets had succeeded thanks to an artifice or by the occult virtue of an element, they would not have failed to disclose it. If they have not done so, this proves that the miracle worked by the prophet was not performed either by means of artifice or by the occult virtue of an element. Besides, the philosophers have composed books on magical operations, artifices, prestidigitatory manipulations and automatons. Now in all this there is absolutely nothing that offers the least similarity with the acts, the prodigies or the miracles of the prophets. This shows that the actions and the signs of the prophets can only come from God. (Cf. G. Vajda, Etudes sur Qirqisani, pp. 89–91.)

The mechanism of the miracles is nevertheless not beyond understanding:

How was the serpent [in Paradise] transformed [into a rational being]? The answer is that the accidents of serpent were taken away from it, and it was covered by the accidents of another being, like 'the stick which was turned into a serpent' [Exodus 8: 15]. In [that case too] the accidents of wood had been taken away from the stick, which was [then] covered by the accidents of animality. The same happened with the water turning into blood and the like.

(H. Ben-Shammai, 'Studies in Karaites Atomism', p. 5)

In conclusion, I would like to quote a short passage by Japheth ben Ali where the three leading preoccupations of Karaite thought at this epoch are brought together:

(1) The quest for rational knowledge;
(2) The certainty that this knowledge, given by God, is revealed in the Scriptures (and not in the Oral Law);
(3) The sentiment that the Karaites, contrary to other religions and to Rabbanite Jews, possessed the keys to the truth (a sentiment that all the
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religions shared during the Middle Ages, each for itself), which is expressed in
glorious polemics.

Many shall run to and fro: i.e. the wise and the seekers of knowledge. This running
to and fro may be of two kinds: (1) They shall run over the countries in search of
knowledge, because scholars will be found in every region; the seekers of knowledge,
therefore, will go to and fro to learn from them; this is expressed by Amos (viii. 12).
This shall be at the beginning of their career; when they seek so ardently, God
will make revelations to them. (2) They shall run to and fro in God's Word like those who
seek treasures, and thereafter knowledge shall increase; knowledge of two things:
(a) the commandments; (b) the end. God will not reveal the end until they know the
commandments. They are the men that fear the Lord, who are in possession of His
secrets, which cannot be had save by study and search and inquiry into the Word
of God: compare the prayers teach me, O Lord, the way of Thy statutes; open my
eyes. These and similar expressions shew the vanity of the profession of the traditionalists
like El-Fayyūmī [Saadia], who have destroyed Israel by their writings; who
maintain that the Commandments of God cannot be known by study, because it leads
to contradictions; so that we must follow the tradition of the successors of the prophets,
viz. the authors of the Mishnah and Talmud, all of whose sayings are from
God. So he has led men astray by his lying books, and vouchers for the veracity of
anyone who lies against God.

(Commentary on the Book of Daniel, p. 77)

Yūsuf al-Baṣīr

Yūsuf al-Baṣīr (Joseph ben Abraham ha-Kohen ha-Ro‘eh al-Baṣīr) was blind,
and was euphemistically called ‘the seeing’. He lived in Jerusalem in the
eleventh century and was one of the most important of Karaite thinkers and
the one who paid most attention to the metaphysical foundations of religion.
His great work, the Muḥtawi (The Comprehensive Book), although surviving
in Arabic, is generally known in the Hebrew translation by
Moses, called Sefer ha-Neimot. This book, in forty chapters, was summarized
under the title Al-Tāmiyyīz (The Distinction) in thirteen chapters, also translated
by Tobias ben Moses under the title Makhkimat Peti (Which gives
Wisdom to the Ignorant). Of Yūsuf al-Baṣīr’s other works, it seems that only
a unique manuscript of his book on the precepts has been preserved.

The Muḥtawi is quite simply a book of kalām, difficult to distinguish from
Muslim kalām texts. Like them, it enunciates the five principles of the
unification of God.

(1) The establishment of atoms and accidents. (2) The establishment of the Creator.
(3) The establishment of the attributes of the Creator. (4) The rejection of the
attributes [ascribed] to Him which are inadmissible with respect to Him. (5) The
establishment of His unity; that there is no second with Him; and that His attributes
are unique to Him.

(H. Ben-Shammai, ‘Studies in Karaite Atomism’, p. 33)

As in the kalām, the theoretical base of the argumentation on the divine
unity is the distinction between the atom and the accident.

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[All] generated [things] are divided into [two classes]: atoms of substance and
accidents. Atoms of substance compose bodies and accidents abide in them.

The thin things [daqqīm] which you see [when looking] through the rays of sunlight
are not like the atom [hatīka] which I have mentioned, for the atom is smaller.
Those [thin things] are visible [to the eye] while the atom is not. However, God sees
it, because He does not see with eyes. You should know, from now onwards, that
when I mention in this book [the term] daq I mean that thing which is not divisible
and not visible to the eye [i.e. atom of substance]. It is that [same] thing which I
called above hatīka. [Consequently] when I mention [from now onwards] hatīka,
I mean one particle of the accidents [ha-afā'īm] which do not occupy any space or
place, but rather occur and abide on an atom of substance [daq].

(Ibid. p. 24)

The atoms of substance are invisible, the atoms of accident are visible and
also audible, for Yūsuf al-Baṣīr, following in this the greater number of the
Mu’tazilites, defines the voice as a succession of atoms. The problem is
connected with divine speech, which certain writers considered as a spark,
and Yūsuf al-Baṣīr affirms:

We omitted also the discussion of Divine Speech; although it is under dispute among
the people, [We did so] for the following reasons: (a) The proof which demonstrates
that God alone is eternal [at the same time] denies [the possibility of] the eternity of
[His] speech. (b) The eternity [of God] denies that He be speech, since speech
[generally] is instructive by virtue of its being a composite sequence [bi-l’muwadda‘a],
of which the former parts inevitably precede the latter. A thing which is
described in this way cannot be [other] than created. Therefore when God is said to be speaking,
this does not constitute an Attribute which would be ultimately attributed to
His Essence. Rather, this is related to Him by way of derivation from his creating
[f’ilīhi] the Speech, like ‘doing good’ or ‘hitting’.

(Ibid. p. 24)

We see that Yūsuf’s problems, like their solution, are the fruit of thinking
rooted in Mu’tazilism.

Jeshua ben Judah (Abul-Faraj Furqān Ibn Assad), Yūsuf al-Baṣīr’s pupil,
and like him a fervent Mu’tazilite, was also an exegete, and a prolific writer.
Most of his works, like those of his master, were translated into Hebrew in
the twelfth century by young scholars who came from Constantinople to
study Arabic under his direction.

Karaite thinkers were still numerous during the Byzantine period.
Their work has hardly been studied, but it seems that they were usually content to
repeat their predecessors’ ideas. Thus Judah Hadassi (ca. 1148), author of
Eshkol ha-Kofar (Cluster of camphire: Song of Songs 1: 14), Jacob ben
Reuben, author of Sefer ha-Osher (The Book of Riches), also of the twelfth
century, and Aaron ben Elijah of Nicomedia (died in 1369), author of Ez
Hayyim (The Tree of Life), tried to harmonize these ancient doctrines with
more modern conceptions, availing themselves of certain texts by Maimonides.
For Aaron ben Elijah, the kalām (and atomism) is a doctrine of Jewish origin,
contrary to Greek philosophical thought. At all events, the great Karaite period had come to an end.

During the twelfth century, political events caused the spiritual centre of Karaism to move to Byzantium, where it survived until the sixteenth century. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there were numerous Karaites in the Crimea and in Lithuania. A brief nineteenth-century renaissance occurred, thanks to the work of A. Firkovich, but the Karaite community was not revived in any great numbers, and only a few thousand adherents of the sect now remain, most of them living in Israel.

Chapter 3

THE NEOPLATONISTS

Medieval Neoplatonism, which was largely based on the writings of Plotinus and Proclus, dates from the ninth century. It provided the philosophical context for the thought of many cultivated Jews of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and during the Arabic period it was more or less complemented by elements stemming from Islamic religious traditions and by some Aristotelian ideas.

Neoplatonism in a popular form often provided the intellectual structure of Jewish thinkers, even when they were not philosophers. Sometimes it was one of the constituent elements of an otherwise altogether religious thought, such as that of Hai Gaon or the ascetic theology of Bahya Ibn Paquda.

Similarly, in works devoted to the art of writing, the renowned poet Moses Ibn Ezra constructed his vision of the world in accordance with neoplatonic views. The Jewish thinkers, though not remarkable for the originality of their ideas, introduce us to the intellectual climate of their age, and it is possible that quotations from unknown authors occasionally occur in their works.

The foregoing remarks do not apply to Solomon Ibn Gabirol, who as a philosopher struck out a path of his own and had a considerable influence on Christian scholasticism.

The reconciliation of philosophy and revelation attempted in the Jewish neoplatonic texts is likewise of some interest. The science of astrology was equally an integral part of the vision of the world that can be gleaned from some of these writings.

ISAAC BEN SOLOMON ISRAELI

Isaac Israeli was the first writer after Philo to integrate philosophical ideas drawn directly from Greek sources into Jewish thought, and his thinking offers us an exposition of a Jewish neoplatonic philosophy. Saadiah, as we have seen, not only knew Isaac Israeli but exchanged several letters with him even before he left Egypt. Saadiah was then a young man and Israeli a doctor of repute. Israeli was born in Egypt in 850 and seems to have begun his career as an oculist. He emigrated to Tunisia and became doctor to al-Mahdi, founder of the Fatimid dynasty in North Africa. He lived to a great age, was never married, had no children, and died perhaps before 932 (but other indications suggest that he lived until 955). Israeli is supposed to have