

CHAPTER ONE

R. SAADIAH GAON *THE BOOK OF BELIEFS AND OPINIONS*

Introduction

I shall preface this book that has been my intention to write with an account of the causes of the uncertainties that beset men in their quest [for the truth], and the methods for resolving them so that they may achieve their quest.¹

With these words R. Saadiah Gaon — the great tenth century Jewish legal authority, communal leader, theologian, biblical translator, exegete, grammarian and liturgist — explains what prompted him to write the treatise, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*.² This treatise, written in Arabic, is one of the earliest works in medieval Jewish philosophy, and among the most influential in the history of Jewish thought. Completed in 933 C.E. in Baghdad, during the period of R. Saadiah's forced retirement from the position of head of the academy of Sura, its discussions reflect the diverse and vigorous intellectual currents that characterize this tenth century cosmopolitan center.

R. Saadiah Gaon has non-Jews, as well as Jews, in mind when he speaks of the confusions engulfing his age. He sees many of his positions as applicable, even crucial, to humanity. Truth is universal. Yet his treatise is not designed as a

¹ *Kitāb al-'Amānāt wa'l-'Itiqādāt*, Joseph Kafih ed. and trans. [Arabic and Heb.] (Jerusalem: Sura Press, 1968): 1. The translations from R. Saadiah's treatise in this chapter are modifications of the English translation of Samuel Rosenblatt, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* (New Haven: Yale University, 1948). I have also made use of the translation of Alexander Altmann, *Saadya Gaon: Book of Doctrines and Beliefs in: Three Jewish Philosophers* (New York: Atheneum, 1973).

² For a general overview of R. Saadiah's activities and compositions, see Henry Malter, *Saadia Gaon: His Life and Works* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1921). There is reason to believe that a number of sections, most notably the second (Unity of God) and tenth (Ideal Human Conduct), were initially written as independent treatises.

dispassionate guide book to truth, but as a passionate defense of Judaism. "Reason" is called upon to serve as an instrument in this endeavor. The "uncertainties" he seeks to resolve are the perplexities weakening his compatriots' commitment to the teachings of their ancient heritage. *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* is essentially a Jewish book written for a Jewish audience, and should be appreciated in that light.

The close relation between Jewish and Islamic theology on several fundamental issues allows R. Saadiah to draw from the literature of the *mutakallimūn*, the Islamic theologians, in formulating some of his views and arguments.³ Following in their path, he sets out to prove the existence of God by first demonstrating the world is created. He presents several arguments proving that a single creator, who is totally separate from the world, created the world *ex nihilo*.⁴ Proof of God as Creator, however, is only a preliminary step to the ultimate aim — proof of the obligatory nature of the commandments, and the reward and punishment that follow in their wake. God as Revealer of the Law and truthful Judge is the conception that R. Saadiah most ardently labors to inculcate. He devotes the bulk of his treatise to this endeavor.⁵ One can detect this aim already in the

³ See Harry Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1976). For the influence of Islamic theology on Jewish thought in general, and on R. Saadiah in particular, see Wolfson's *Repercussions of the Kalam in Jewish Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1979).

⁴ R. Saadiah devotes the first section of his treatise to this topic. In the third chapter, he attempts to refute the alternative explanations regarding the existence of the world. For a study of the sources for R. Saadiah's proofs, see Herbert Davidson, *Proofs for Eternity, Creation and the Existence of God in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1987): 86-153.

⁵ R. Saadiah divided his treatise into ten sections. The first deals with God as Creator; the second with divine unity; the third with the commandments; the fourth with obedience and disobedience (focusing on human free will, and divine justice in rewarding and punishing individuals on the basis of their fulfillment of the commandments); the fifth with merits and demerits (the different categories of human beings in terms of their level of obedience); the sixth with the soul (a section which forms a bridge between the preceding sections dealing with obedience to the law and the following sections dealing with reward and punishment); the seventh, eighth and ninth with the various forms of reward (resurrection, redemption and the World to Come). In the final section, R. Saadiah outlines the way of life that is in complete harmony with the

introduction, where he presents his epistemological views. He maintains a correspondence theory of knowledge. Knowledge consists of forming clear ideas in one's mind of what is external to the individual as it truly is. Learning is a process of discovery, not creation.⁶ The theological significance of this view emerges explicitly in the course of R. Saadiah's discussion:

The reprehensible fool is the one who sets up his opinions as his guiding principle, assuming that the truth of things is patterned after his opinions ... In this connection, I must express my amazement at certain people who are slaves but think they have no master. They are confident that whatever they deny is null, and whatever they assert is established ... It is absolute folly for people to think that their refusal to acknowledge the sovereignty of the Lord exempts them from His commandments and prohibitions, His promises of reward and threats of punishment, and similar matters.⁷

The theological assumptions upon which R. Saadiah bases his views also emerge in the course of his discussion. He maintains that whatever is learnt from our immediate sources of knowledge — the senses, intellectual intuition (axioms), and logical proofs — is completely trustworthy. The contradictions we encounter result from the faulty use of these sources, not from their being intrinsically unreliable. R. Saadiah provides his readers with many pointers for how to avoid faulty conceptions.⁸ The basis for his conviction in the truth of this position is that God gave us all these sources of knowledge. God is both wise and beneficent. Whatever God does has a purpose, no action being in vain, and reflects justice and graciousness. R. Saadiah's epistemological views are consciously framed to uphold this fundamental conception of the Deity.

fulfillment of the commandments and the variety of character traits and aspirations that God implanted in human beings. For his view on the centrality of the commandments, see also his *Commentary on Psalms*, Joseph Kafih ed. and trans. [Arabic and Heb.] (Jerusalem: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1966): 23. An English translation of the introduction to this commentary was published by Moshe Sokolow, "Saadiah Gaon's Prolegomenon to Psalms", *PAAJR*, 51 (1984): 131-74.

⁶ *Ibid.* introduction.4. R. Saadiah's theory of knowledge has been explored in studies by Israel Efros and Abraham Heschel in *JQR*, 33 (1942): 133-70, 265-313.

⁷ *Ibid.* introduction.4 (Kafih, 13; Rosenblatt, 15).

⁸ *Ibid.* introduction.5.

Prophecy

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