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Saadia Gaon and Medieval Arabic and Hebrew Language Study in Baghdad

Introduction:

Saadia Gaon is one of Judaism's most innovative and influential figures. He brought the rabbinic

tradition up to date with the intellectual trends of his era by adopting styles and disciplines

developed outside the rabbinic sphere, and he was one of the first rabbinic figures to do so. Born

in 882, Saadia grew up in Fayyum, Egypt. There, Saadia participated in intellectual

conversations regarding theology and philosophy with local Muslim, Christian and non-religious

scholars (Sklare). He moved to Tiberias (in present day Israel) in his young adulthood where he

continued his studies in Jewish law, poetry and philosophy with the budding Jewish

philosophical community there. He also studied in Cairo and Aleppo. Saadia spent the last

fourteen years of his life in Baghdad, the capitol and intellectual and cultural center of the

Muslim empire under the Abbasid Caliphate. There, Saadia was named the Gaon of the most

influential yeshiva, or Jewish learning institution, in the global Jewish community. Gaon was the

title for the leader of the yeshiva in Saadia's time. In his works on grammar, exegesis and

philosophy, Saadia incorporated numerous aspects of contemporary Islamic scholarship from the

realms of philosophy, grammar and linguistics. [1] This paper explores similarities between

Saadia's perspectives on the Hebrew language and those of Muslim scholars contemporary to

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[1] I label the Baghdadi scholarship of Saadia's time as Islamic because the intellectual scene of the era was dominated by Muslim scholars.

him on language in general, and Arabic in particular. The paper concludes with sources that indicate a direct line of communication between Saadia and his Muslim contemporaries.

Born in northern Egypt, Saadia grew up under Muslim rule and thus spoke Arabic as his first language. In Palestine he studied Hebrew, Tiberian and Aramaic as well as *piyyut* (a form of Jewish liturgical poetry), and philosophy under Isaac Ben Solomon Israeli (d. 932), one of the first Jewish philosophers[2]. Saadia's writings range widely in subject matter and feature formats and content that distinguish him from the Geonim and rabbis who preceded him.

Saadia translated a number of his works into Arabic and wrote polemics in Arabic as well, making him the first rabbi to write extensively in a language other than Hebrew. Additionally, Saadia was the first rabbi to dedicate systematic works to the study of Hebrew grammar, using comparative Semitics to do so. Saadia also innovated in the realm of *piyyut* where he created original grammatical forms and added cantillation signs like those written for recitation of the Bible. Saadia's books cover many topics in theology, philosophy, linguistics, biblical exegesis, halakha (Jewish law) and polemics (Brody 38). The content of Saadia's scholarship alone was innovative because his Jewish forbearers generally wrote and studied Jewish law only. In the Mishna and Talmud there are remarks about God, belief and morality, but in Saadia's time, theology and philosophy were not approached by the rabbis in any organized way (Brody 40). Even though there was poetry in Palestine and biblical exegesis within the new Jewish group called the Karaites, Saadia was the first to write extensively and systematically on these subjects. Finally, Saadia was a trailblazer in Jewish scholarship particularly because he introduced and legitimized spheres of knowledge outside the rabbinic

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[2] In Rabbinic literature before Saadia, there was little to no written works dedicated to rational inquiry and touting a particular dogma on God, tradition, belief etc. Jewish philosophy, or the inquiry into topics of theology and belief through rational inquiry emerged as a result of Greek, Christian and Muslim influence. Isaac Israeli and David al-Muqammas are the only two Jewish writers who preceded Saadia in writing philosophical works (Brody 40-41).

tradition such as philosophy, grammar, and linguistics (Brody 29). Saadia encountered these areas of scholarship in great part through his education in an Islamic context and by way of Muslim scholars. This paper explores this encounter.

One significant way that Saadia's works differed from the Jewish scholars before him, and the central point of discussion in this paper, was his perspective on the Hebrew language and his scholarship on it. For previous Jewish scholars, Hebrew was a means to understanding the Hebrew Bible and its instructions for the practical application of Jewish law. In other words, the Hebrew language was a mere tool in a bigger, more important project. Additionally, while the Hebrew poetry of Palestine which preceded Saadia reflected some linguistic inquiry, it did not include a systematic study of Hebrew, nor a clearly expressed approach to the language. In contrast, Saadia dedicated entire scholarly works to the exploration of Hebrew as an end in itself through grammatic and linguistic study (Brody 79). Crucially, Saadia's innovative justification story for grammar and linguistic study, parallels a prevalent Muslim view of language in the Baghdad of Saadia's time.

This paper outlines a number of similarities between Saadia and his Muslim contemporaries with regards to perspectives on Hebrew and Arabic respectively. The three sections are the origin of language, expressed efforts to preserve a holy language and the methodology employed to study Hebrew and Arabic. These similarities indicate the great likelihood that there was Muslim influence on Saadia's scholarship because trends so prevalent in Saadia's writings first appear in Muslim scholarship. The paper concludes by presenting a number of possible indications of direct communication between Saadia and Muslim scholars.

Section I: Origin of Language

In the introduction to his Hebrew dictionary, the *Egron,* Saadia expresses his thoughts on the origin of Hebrew. Saadia's view was revelationist in that he believed that God created the Hebrew language and then revealed it to Adam. Below is a telling excerpt:

> The book of Egron[3] of the holy tongue, which our God has chosen from primeval times and in which his holy angels praise him . . . There was one language . . . throughout the land from the day when God created man on the face of the earth . . . until the days of the stormy herd [the generation of the tower of Babel] . . . The holy tongue remained in the mouths of the children of Ever [i.e. the 'Hebrews'; Ever appears in the genealogy of Noah's descendants and Abraham's progenitors in Gen. 11:14–17] alone . . . their feet trod throughout the land and the language did not depart their mouths, and when they left Egypt God spoke to us in it, eloquent words by the hand of his servant Moses on Mount Horeb . . . and one hundred and one years after the destruction of God's city we began to forsake the holy tongue and speak in the languages of the foreign peoples of the land . . . and we were exiled afterwards through all the gates of the land and the isles of the sea, and there were no people among whom our people were not dispersed, and in their midst too did we beget children and learn their languages: and their uncouth speech concealed the beauty of our diction . . . Our heart is appalled, and our spirits too, that the sacred speech is removed from our mouths . . . it behooves us and all the people of our God to study and investigate it always, us and our children and wives and servants; let it not depart from our mouths because through it we understand the laws of the Torah of our Rock that are our life and vitality, our light from the Holy One through all eternity… (Allony 156-159).

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[3] Egron literally means compilation.

Saadia writes that Hebrew is the language of God and the angels; it is holy, sacred, and pure. Hebrew was the only language at the time of creation and up until the time of the Tower of Babel. After that time, the progenitors of Abraham and the Israelites, spoke Hebrew and "the language did not depart from their mouths" (Allony 156-159). Saadia continues to narrate the history of the Jews and the Hebrew language, intrinsically linking the people to the language. God continued speaking only Hebrew to the Israelites in Egypt, in the desert and finally in the promised land of Israel. The Israelites themselves also only spoke Hebrew at that time. After the destruction of the temples in Jerusalem by the Roman and Assyrian empires, the first temple in 586 BCE and the second in 70 CE, "that sacred speech" was removed from the Israelites' mouths. Saadia states that, in the diaspora, or territories outside of the Judean kingdom, Jews began speaking the languages of their new neighbors and forgot both the Hebrew language and the fact of its holiness. Saadia specifically cites Arabic and Aramaic as corrupting influences on the Hebrew language (Blau). Essentially, Saadia's thesis is that God created the Hebrew language which meant that the language was holy in its essence, and though it was passed down through the Jewish people for a time, its sacredness was lost and corrupted by other languages up until his time. A very similar narrative about the origin of a "pure" language which was then corrupted appears in Muslim scholarship during Saadia's time. More of the Muslim narrative of Arabic will be addressed in section II.

Saadia's theory of Hebrew's origin was the first of its kind in Jewish scholarship. He has precursors in midrash, but one would be hard pressed to find a Jewish scholar who posited a single theory of how Hebrew originated and attributed a divine essential quality to its words and exploration. Additionally, Saadia will go on to posit a more human-made view on the origin of language which likely indicates that his perspective on this subject developed throughout his

career (Brody 89). Nevertheless, Saadia passionately expresses the revelationist theory of Hebrew here which was an innovation in the Jewish tradition. Like Saadia's other innovations in the Jewish tradition, it is legitimate to claim that he took inspiration from the ideas about language from his Muslim scholarly contemporaries when we compare his ideas to theirs.

To explore the origin of language from a Muslim scholarly perspective, it is crucial to know that a revelationist theory of language among Muslim scholars was hotly debated during Saadia's time (Shah Classical 314). The revelationist theory in Islamic literature is called *tawqif*. In his "Classical Islamic Discourse on the Origins of Language: Cultural Memory and the Defense of Orthodoxy," Mustafa Shah states that *tawqif* is the theory of the "pre-eminent role that divine agency played in the imposition of language" (314). To *tawqif* inclined scholars, the Quran is the essential speech of God as revealed to Mohammed through the angel Gabriel. Thus, the Arabic language itself is holy and claims that humans took part in creating it would reduce its exceptional quality. *Tawqif* is generally associated with an orthodox view, usually held by a group of Muslim thinkers called 'Asharites. *Tawqif*'s antithesis was *istilah* which claimed that Arabic came together by common convention and agreement. This means that words and meaning are assigned by people and are arbitrary. *Istilah* is generally associated with and finds its philosophical foundation in the rational Mu'tazilite movement, which held political sway during the Abbasid Caliphate. Mu'tazilites argued against the anthropomorphizing (ascribing human attributes) of God and thus the notion that God could not have "spoken" the language of Arabic. God's divinity precludes him of being "the locus or substrate for contingent acts" (316). Additionally, Mu'tazilites believed that religious observance is rooted in seeking God through rational speculation. Thus, if God had simply placed language in man's head, the individual would "spontaneously recognize God, rendering futile the concept of religious obligation" (322).

The debate between *tawqif* and *istalah* was extremely polarized during the ninth and tenth centuries, particularly in Baghdad, though by the eleventh century the debate moved to more of a position of neutrality on the matter. By then, most scholars agreed that the origin of language was some balance between *tawqif* and *istalah*. This debate is important in our study of Saadia because the *tawqif* perspective on language's origin shares many similarities with Saadia's concept of the origin of Hebrew.

Tawqif's questions about which language or how many languages were revealed to Adam vary. Some sources hold that God revealed language to Adam, but that language was not necessarily Arabic. Abu l-Fath Uthman ibn Jinni (d. 1002), a tenth century Arabic grammarian and philologist, for example, held that God revealed all the languages to Adam. These included Arabic, Persian, Hebrew, Syriac, Greek, and more (Shah Philological 32). However, Islamic *tawqif* accounts of the origin of language still parallel Saadia's scholarship because both hold a revelatory origin of language. Additionally, even when Muslim scholars did not attribute divinity to the Arabic language because of God's revelation of Arabic to Adam, they still described Arabic as Godly and holy (much like Saadia) because the Quran was revealed in Arabic. The source of perfection, imitability and divinity of Arabic is an immense study in itself[4] but for this paper suffice it to say that the theory of language that Saadia articulated in his revelationist theory of Hebrew reflects many opinions in his contemporary Islamic intellectual circles.

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[4] See: Al-Baqillani's *I'jaz al-Qur'an,* ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī's *Dala'il ijaz al-Qur'an* and more in
https://referenceworks-brillonline-com.i.ezproxy.nypl.org/entries/encyclopedia-of-arabic-language-and-linguistics/ijaz-EALL_SIM_vol2_0019?s.num=0&s.mode=and&s.f.s2_parent=s.f.book.encyclopedia-of-arabic-language-and-linguistics&s.q=ijaz+alquran

I will now discuss some *tawqif* sources that parallel Saadia's revelationist language theory, and divinity of language theory. All three scholars I will discuss were considered Mu'tazilites. I focus on them particularly because they were contemporaries of Saadia and they all spent time in Baghdad while Saadia led the yeshiva there. The first source is from Abu l-Fath 'Uthman ibn Jinni (d. 1002) who was born in Mosul but studied in Baghdad. Ibn Jinni included a section on the origin of language in his work on Arabic linguistics. He goes through the rationales for both *istilah* and a revelatory *tawqif* origin of language. He mentions that his mentor Abu 'Ali al-Farisi (d. 987), a Persian linguist who also studied in Baghdad, believed that language was "from God" and used the word *tawqif.* They both cite the main scriptural proof for *tawqif* which is Q 2:31, "And indeed God taught Adam the names (*asma*) of all things." After Ibn Jinni considers both sides of the debate he concludes that language is "from God Almighty" (Shah Classical 331).

Another famous *tawqif* proponent was the grammarian Abu al-Husayn Ahmad ibn Faris ibn Zakkariya ibn Muhammad ibn Habib al-Razi (d. 995). He states unequivocally that "the language of the Arabs (is based on) *tawqif*" (Shah Classical 332). In support of this view he cites the standard support of Quran 2:31, as does Ibn Jinni. Ibn Faris also presents the additional rationale that the practice of resorting to past usages (philological conventions and poetic precedents) of Arabic words to ascertain meanings of challenging words shows that there must be some essential meaning that we trust our predecessors to have known. For Ibn Faris, Arabic must have an essential meaning from revelation, not a conventional meaning from common agreement. Because we continue to give previous scholars prestige and authority, Arabic must have essential meaning via *tawqif.*

In concluding his discussion on classical Islamic discourse on the origin of language, Shah states that "placing [Arabic] on the plane of *tawqif* was inevitable; it provided a means of conceptually accentuating the inimitability of the language in which the sacred text was revealed" (Shah Classical 333). Shah attests to a prevalent revelationist origin of language and its connection to the holiness of Arabic during Saadia's time in Baghdad. This similarity likely indicates an influence of the contemporary Islamic thought on Saadia's philosophy.

Section II: Preservation of a Divine Language

In the previous section, we saw Saadia's revelation theory of Hebrew and his attribution of divinity to Hebrew through that theory. We also saw how Saadia embedded the narrative that Hebrew had been corrupted as a result of the exile of Jews from the Land of Israel. In our exploration of Muslim scholarship, we also saw a revelationist theory of language during Saadia's time. In this section, I will show that Saadia professed that his linguistic and grammatical works were meant to preserve a divine language that had been lost by the Jewish people. This section will also chart similar accounts of corruption of the Arabic language from Muslim scholars and their professed motivations for writing their own grammatical treatises.

In Saadia's introduction to the *Egron* where he discusses the morphological structures of Hebrew words, he describes Hebrew as a "holy tongue". He writes that "[o]ur heart is appalled, and our spirits too, that the sacred speech is removed from our mouths…it behooves us all and all the people of our God to study and investigate it always" (Allony). Thus, because the "sacred" Hebrew has been corrupted it must be explored and studied to return it to this pure state. Saadia dedicates his work to taking this corrupted Hebrew, and through exploration and study, restoring it to its holiest form. When Saadia publishes an Arabic version of the Egron, he links

his efforts to preserve the eloquence of Hebrew to the Muslim effort to preserve the eloquence of Arabic:

> And just as the children of Ishmael recount that one of their notables saw that the people did not speak Arabic eloquently and this distressed him, and he composed for them a brief discourse from which they might learn eloquence[5], so too did I see that many of the children of Israel are ignorant of the most essential articulacy in our language, let alone its more difficult [aspects], and when they speak, much of what they say is ungrammatical; and when they compose poetry, few are the ancient elements they adopt and many of those they forget…till even scripture is like unintelligible and incomprehensible speech to them. And so I was compelled to write a book wherein I collected most of the words into two lists…so that it will be easy to grasp everything and retain it [in memory], and so that the words of the] language, both simple and difficult, will be preserved (Allony Egron 156-9).

Here, Saadia professes his intention to preserve the "eloquence" and grammar of the Hebrew language in his work. From his direct comparison to the efforts of the "children of Ishmael" (i.e. the Muslims) to do the same thing for their language, the reader can note the similarity of professed intention in writing the linguistic works.

Saadia may have had other motivations to preserve Hebrew outside of a religious imperative to protect the "eloquence" of a divinely revealed language. One possible motivation was that there was an increasingly popular challenge to rabbinic Judaism during Saadia's time from a new sect who called themselves Karaites. Karaism denied rabbinic authority and claimed that the only legitimate divine source of law in the Jewish tradition was the written Torah. In

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[5] Saadia uses the Arabic word *fasaha* here.

support of their theology, Karaites initiated the study of Hebrew grammar and biblical exegesis within the Jewish tradition. In order to properly argue against this threat to traditional rabbinic Judaism, Saadia had to formulate a rabbinic conception of Jewish law that complemented the grammatical sciences. Thus, Saadia may have been motivated to write books on grammar and use those tools in exegesis for that polemical reason (Brody 40). Additionally, within the rich intellectual milieu of tenth century Baghdad, Jews encountered different religions that generally utilized the sciences of grammar and philosophy to justify their theologies. Thus, Saadia could have been motivated to use to same sciences to show that the accepted form of thinking of the age also aligned with the traditional Jewish outlook. Regardless of possible other motivations for the study of Arabic, Saadia directly expresses that his motivation for writing books on Hebrew grammar was to preserve the eloquence of a corrupted language. Thus, we will use Saadia's professed motivation as a point of comparison to his Muslim contemporaries.

To compare Saadia's professed motivation for writing books of grammar with an Islamic motivation for studying Arabic grammar, below is a famous story in Arab tradition featuring what is generally accepted as the birth of Arabic grammar (Goldizer 6). It is the story of Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali (d. 688), who is considered the creator of Arabic grammar and orthography. Ignaz Goldziher summarizes the story in his *On the History of Grammar Among the Arabs:*

> According to what is related by Abu Ubayda, Abu l-Aswad learned the rules of grammar from Caliph Ali but did not tell anybody what he had learnt from the Caliph until Ziyad, the governor of Iraq asked him to compile a work that would serve as a guideline for the people, and with the help of which the book of God could be understood more easily. Abu l-Aswad asked the governor to spare him this commission. Shortly after this, however, he witnessed a man reciting the 3rd verse of the 9th Chapter of the *Qur'an,*

which correctly reads as follows: [*wa-adanun…*] *anna llaha bari'un min al-musrikina wa-rasuluhu* [in the nominative], "[And a proclamation…] that Allah renounces the polytheists and his prophet (scil. Does the same". The Man pronounced the last word was *wa-rasulihi* [in the genitive], whereby the sentence quoted above would mean" Allah renounces the polytheists and his prophet." On hearing it, Abu l-Aswad exclaimed: I would not have thought that the state of affairs was so bad. He went at once to Ziyad and said to him: Oh *Amir*, I am willing to do what you wished me to do (Goldziher 6-7).

It was then that al-Duali indicated where dots were to be put on the letters in the Quran, and added the short vowels that are so essential to the system of Arabic case endings (al-'irab). In this story, revered Muslim leaders and scholars showed a concern for the corruption of Arabic and look to the establishment of a grammatical system as the solution. Muslims were not understanding their holy book because of its complex language and they needed a "guideline". They saw that the "the state of affairs was so bad" and were motivated to create a system to return Arabic to its pure state and preserve it. Grammar was born out of a call to preserve the true meaning of the Quran, one that people used to know. Saadia echoed this idea in the Abu Ubayda source above; he wanted to restore the purity of Hebrew that was used in the revelation to Adam and the giving of the Torah and its historical connection to the Jewish people. The Abu l-Aswad story is foundational in the history of Arabic grammar and was known in Saadia's time as well. Such a similarity is unlikely to be a coincidence and there is a legitimate possibility that the expressed motivation story for Arabic grammar influenced Saadia's narrative for the motivation to study Hebrew grammar.

Additionally, the grammarian Ibn Faris held that "the sciences of grammar, orthography and prosody were also primordial" but disappeared gradually only to be revived and retaught by

Arabic grammar legends al-Du'ali and al-Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi (d. 822) (Shah Philological 31). Thus, Ibn Faris is another example of a Muslim scholar who saw Arabic grammar study as a revival of an ancient tradition.

Abu Zayd 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Muhammad ibn Khaldun al-Hadrami (d. 1406), known as Ibn Khaldun, was an Arab sociologist, philosopher and historian who described the era of the Islamic expansion as the cause of the Arabic language's corruption (Versteegh Language 102). As Arabs conquered lands from Sicily to parts of Central Asia, including Persia, Mesopotamia, Syria, Egypt and North Africa, they brought Islam and Arabic with them (Versteegh Tradition 2). Scholars of the Quran, and by extension Arabic, were appalled at the corruption of what they described as a "pure" dialect as the language spread across the vast expanse of the empire. The result, according to the grammarians themselves, was the development of a science of the Arabic language that aimed to ensure the preservation of a divine language. Thus Ibn Khaldun states that "grammar is a weapon against linguistic change" (Versteegh Tradition chapter 12).

It is worth mentioning that there are also other possible motivations for Muslim Arabic scholars to push a "pure" Arabic on speakers of the language. Today there is critical scholarly literature that identifies a political motivation for linking an eloquent Arabic with a religious imperative.[6] Regardless, this study investigates the texts of Muslim scholarly literature and what each scholar himself posits about the Arabic language. As shown above, a prevalent expressed motivation for Arabic grammar study was the preservation of the holy language of the Quran and we will use this information as a point of comparison.

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[6] For example, see Niloofar Haeri's *Sacred Language, Ordinary People: Dilemmas of Culture and Politics in Egypt.*

Thus, both Saadia and his contemporary Muslim scholars approach their study of Hebrew and Arabic, respectively, as a measure to preserve a "pure" form of the language. They utilize similar descriptions of their motivations to explore the grammars of the language.

Section III: Methodology of Inquiry

As the first Jewish scholar to dedicate a scientific study to the Hebrew language, Saadia wrote books exclusively focusing on Hebrew grammar and morphology such as the *Egron* or *The Book of the Eloquence of the Language of the Hebrews*. Saadia also wrote books featuring the study of Hebrew language as a component of a broader study. For example, Saadia's explanation of the Mishna, the basis of Oral Rabbinic tradition which records rulings in Jewish Law and was compiled in around 200 CE, is replete with dictionary passages about Mishnaic Hebrew (Brody 97). Additionally, Saadia's commentary on the ancient mystical work *Sefer HaYeztira* features commentary and explanations of Hebrew words and their rules. Needless to say, Saadia's translation and explanation of the Torah showcases a certain grammatical prowess.

The methodology Saadia used to study Hebrew has clear roots in Muslim scholarship as seen in the overwhelming similarities between the literatures. Nearly all of Saadia's books follow the traditional Muslim *adab* style[7] (Blau and Yahalom). His works began with an introduction that blesses God and explains the purpose of the work (Brody 37). Additionally, Saadia divided his books into sections. For example, *The Book of the Eloquence of the Language of the Hebrews* contains 12 distinct parts. This work actually features the first conjugation table in the history of Semitic grammar (Brody 86). It is unclear if Saadia intended for the twelve parts to be distinct treatises or one multi-volume book and his view on the matter may have changed as he released

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[7] *Adab* literally means literature but in this context it is synonymous for the etiquette of intellectual inquiry of the era.

each section. Regardless, this format that includes an introduction and systematized, scientific treatment of a topic very much finds its origin in the Muslim literature preceding and contemporary to Saadia (Blau and Yahalom). Additionally, Saadia's innovation within the Jewish tradition to study Hebrew in this systematized way is a strong indication of the influence of the Muslim scholarship of his era.

Another similarity in methodology is the terms and categories of grammar that both Saadia and Arabic grammarians use. This phenomenon naturally follows because Saadia uses the Arabic language to explain the grammar of Hebrew. Thus, the grammatical terms overlap and refer to the same grammatical categories. Joshua Blau and Yosef Yahalom wrote about Saadia's polemical work called *Sefer HaGaluy,* which Saadia originally wrote in Hebrew but re-wrote in Judaeo-Arabic so it could be more accessible to his audience. Blau and Yahalom note that Saadia uses "*haya*" or "to be" to govern imperfect forms, which was common in Arabic but not in Hebrew. These similarities in the methodologies used to study language reflect the Muslim influence on Saadia Gaon's literature on the Hebrew language.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to show that Saadia Gaon's scholarship on the Hebrew language greatly resembled parts of Muslim scholarship of the Arabic language. The three areas explored were origin of language theory, utilization of grammar to preserve a "pure" language and methodology of inquiry into Hebrew and Arabic. The glaring similarities between Saadia and the Islamic scholarship of his era indicate the Islamic influence on Saadia's thought. These similarities also indicate that there were cultural and intellectual interactions between Saadia and his Muslim contemporaries. Thus, in the hundreds of years before the first university, the spirit of joint

intellectual inquiry had already been born. People across religious, ethnic and cultural lines connected over ideas. Today, we cannot pinpoint the exact points of communication between Saadia and his Muslim scholarly contemporaries. However, there are strong indications in Saadia's work and in accounts of him that he directly corresponded with Muslim figures.

One example of possible direct communication between Saadia and other Muslim scholars is the *majlis al-kalam*. *Majalis* (sing. *majlis)*, were intellectual salons where participants discussed religious and theological matters. In the tenth century, Baghdad had a flourishing intellectual culture and where these meetings occured. In his article titled "Responses to Islamic Polemics by Jewish Mutakallimun in the Tenth Century", David Sklare references the account of a tenth century Baghdadi *majlis* made by Ibn Sa'idi:

> After being cajoled into attending a *majlis al-kalam*, [Ibn Sa'idi] was appalled at what he found. There were representatives of all the Islamic sects, pagan, Jews, Zoroastrians and Christians who agreed that only rational argumentation could be used within the framework of their polemical discussion. The use of citations from one's own Scriptures was not permissible since these Scriptures were not accepted as authoritative by all present. Not being accustomed to this sort of openness, Ibn Sa'di fled from the gathering (Sklare 140).

The Arab historian al-Mas'udi reported that Saadia participated in a Baghdadi *majlis* of the vizier 'Ali ibn Isa (d. 946). These meetings would necessarily include a direct communication between Saadia and his Muslim contemporaries on the topics of language, revelation, and God. Thus, the *majlis* may be one place where Muslim thought and literature influenced Saadia.

Another indication of a direct communication can be found in Saadia's revision and rerelease of the fourth section of his *Book of the Eloquence of the Language of the Hebrews*. There he writes:

> And one who wished to learn the language of the Hebrews requested that I supplement the book of conjugation that I composed with a chapter that would include the full range of verbal inflection, in past, present, and future tenses. And so I have obliged him, knowing that it would be of assistance to those who study this book (Dotan 414-15).

This quote indicates that a "non-Hebrew" requested an elucidation of Hebrew grammar from Saadia. Robert Brody, the foremost scholar on Saadia Gaon, claims that the inquirer was a Muslim scholar (Brody 81). Even if the inquirer were not Muslim, the quote indicates that Saadia directly communicated with scholars outside of the Jewish community, and this would include Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Saadia's writings on the Hebrew language indicates that he drew from sources outside of his tradition to set the new standard for Jewish scholarship. He wrote seminal books in the Jewish rabbinic tradition with the aid of interactions and correspondences with Muslim scholars. In our global and technological age, we have countless opportunities for cross-cultural and cross-religious conversations. It is within our reach to recreate countless of *majalis al-kalam* using the medieval model and facilitate open inquiry across religious and linguistic lines. If we utilize the wisdom gained from these interactions, imagine the next great ideas and works we can produce.

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