

VEHICLES OF TRANSMISSION,  
TRANSLATION, AND TRANSFORMATION  
IN MEDIEVAL TEXTUAL CULTURE

Edited by

Robert Wisnovsky, Faith Wallis,  
Jamie C. Fumo, and Carlos Fraenkel



BREPOLS

PROLEGOMENA AS HISTORICAL EVIDENCE:  
ON SAADIA'S INTRODUCTIONS  
TO HIS COMMENTARIES ON THE BIBLE

Sarah Stroumsa

In our attempts to reconstruct the transmission of knowledge to the Islamic world, we rely mainly on the information given by sources whose intention is to discuss precisely this question, namely, the transmission of knowledge. Such sources are straightforward and informative, but are at times suspected of being biased, intended to promote a specific agenda. Maimonides' picture of the transmission of philosophical and scientific knowledge to his Jewish predecessors, for example, intends to show the deterioration of classical philosophy when it was harnessed to the politico-religious needs of Christianity, and its deplorable results in the theology of the *mutakallimūn*. As is quite common in such reconstructions, Maimonides presents a linear schema of transmission: from Christians to Muslims to Jews. Such a schema ignores the many direct contacts among Christians and Jews in the formative period of Jewish *kalām* — as demonstrated by the case of the first Jewish theologian and philosopher, Dā'ūd al-Muqammas.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, significant parts of the transmission process in this multicultural society were probably quite diffused, and it is difficult to reconstruct the journey they made before reaching their final form in a specific community.

An earlier version of this article appeared as 'A Literary Genre as an Historical Document: On Saadia's Introduction to his Bible Commentaries' [in Hebrew], in *'A Word Fitly Spoken': Studies in Qur'an and Bible Exegesis, Presented to Haggai Ben-Shammai*, ed. by M. Bar-Asher and others (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2007), pp. 193–204. I wish to thank Dr Jeff Green for his help in translating that article.

<sup>1</sup> See S. Stroumsa, 'Al-Fārābī and Maimonides on the Christian Philosophical Tradition: A Re-evaluation', *Der Islam*, 68 (1991), 263–87; and see below, note 10.

10.1484/M.CURSOR-EB.1.100261

The Jewish community in the Islamic world is usually left out of the main narrative of transmission. Its somewhat liminal position, however, may prove an asset in this field, as adding the Jewish element to the discussion may encourage a more nuanced approach to the question. The cultural milieu of the Jews of the Arabic Middle Ages was shaped by its intimate dependence upon the Jewish cultural and religious heritage as well as by strong bonds with its non-Jewish surroundings. These bonds — ‘symbiotic’, to use Shlomo Dov Goitein’s expression — must have left their mark on Jewish literary activity. However, in the effort to distinguish non-Jewish influences and describe them, it is easy to err by identifying features that have in fact an ancient source within Jewish literature as signs of external influences. By employing the general term ‘influence’ we risk overlooking a more complex process. The transmission process should instead be seen in the broader context of encounters among cultures, which is accompanied by the internalization and adaptation of ideas stemming from various sources, including external ones.

In seeking clear evidence for the existence of external influences, the comparison of similar texts among Jews and their neighbours is a central research tool. Paradoxically, the most conspicuous similarity — the use of the same written language, Arabic, by both Jews and Muslims in the Middle Ages — is liable to be deceptive. Because of the shared language, scholars have frequently focused their attention on small units: words, technical terms, idioms. The identification of similar technical terms or even of several similar lines in a Jewish and a Muslim text can indeed make us aware of the existence of a specific influence, but this is insufficient to explain the process by which the influence came into being. If we nevertheless try to reconstruct the process according to small units, the picture we draw will quite likely be rather schematic and simplistic.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore necessary to turn one’s attention to larger units as well, for in their complexity lies the possibility of attaining a more nuanced, rich, and accurate picture of influence.

Saadia Gaon (d. 942) was unquestionably a central figure in the renewal of medieval rabbinical literature, and he certainly merits the epithet ‘leader’, applied to him by Haggai Ben-Shammai.<sup>3</sup> Rina Drory argues that Saadia adopted the Karaite literary repertoire, and that he developed his literary project according to

<sup>2</sup> On the need for caution in reaching conclusions on the sole basis of similar terminology, see the remarks of Sara Sviri in another context: S. Sviri, review of *Between Mysticism and Philosophy: Sufi Language of Religious Experience in Judah Ha-Levi’s Kuzari*, by D. Lobel, *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 53 (2002), 177–80.

<sup>3</sup> H. Ben-Shammai, ‘The Exegetical and Philosophical Writing of Saadya Gaon: A Leader’s Endeavor’ [in Hebrew], *Pe’amim*, 54 (1993), 63–81.

the Karaite example: a system of literary genres, all of which have a direct or indirect connection with the Bible.<sup>4</sup> The translation and interpretation of the Bible were central to this literary project, but Saadia's innovation, according to Drory, not only lay in the individual components of the enterprise, but also involved a fundamental change in the status of the written composition. She argues that Saadia was the one who introduced the model of the written composition into canonical rabbinical literature, thus giving the written work an official status.<sup>5</sup> Drory defines the written text as 'a literary unit with independent existence and value'; it is 'intended for a readership and not simply for private, unofficial use', and it has 'a systematic structure, with a methodical introduction and chapters arranged logically by content'.<sup>6</sup>

The distinct composition (that is, one with a known author and a specific title, a defined topic, and a determined structure, and which often begins with an introduction) appears in the early Muslim period in every branch of Arabic literature. The first examples of such compositions were probably written as early as the eighth and ninth centuries, in both Muslim and Jewish literature.<sup>7</sup> The process of the development of the composition, however, was gradual, and we can only guess at its origin. Its typical traits emerge separately and gradually over a rather long period. For example, in the first Halakhic (i.e. Jewish legal) work, *Halakhot Gedolot*, composed in the ninth century, the intervention of the editor, Rabbi Shim'on Kaira, is evident. It cannot, however, be said that this work or other early Halakhic compositions of its type had an author in the modern sense of the word.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> R. Drory, *The Emergence of Jewish-Arabic Literary Contacts at the Beginning of the Tenth Century* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Tel-Aviv University, 1988), p. 162; R. Drory, *Models and Contacts: Arabic Literature and its Impact on Medieval Jewish Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 142–43. On the centrality of the Bible in Karaite literary work, see *ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>5</sup> Drory, *Emergence of Jewish-Arabic Literary Contacts*, p. 172; Drory, *Models and Contacts*, p. 136.

<sup>6</sup> Drory, *Emergence of Jewish-Arabic Literary Contacts*, p. 10; Drory, *Models and Contacts*, pp. 136–37.

<sup>7</sup> On the development of the literary genre of introductions in Muslim literature, see A. Charaïbi, 'La "Muqaddima"', in *Entrer en matière: les prologues*, ed. by J.-D. Dubois and B. Roussel (Paris: Cerf, 1998), pp. 89–101. As Charaïbi points out (p. 95), the emergence of the book as an individual endeavour of a particular author is connected both to the translation movement and to the development of philology, and when there is individual authorship, the book has an introduction.

<sup>8</sup> See R. Brody, *The Geonim of Babylonia and the Shaping of Medieval Jewish Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 250.

There is also an introduction in *Halakhot Gedolot*, but this is not an introduction in the ordinary sense but rather a kind of preface: an amalgam of words in praise of the oral law along with a list of the commandments. The introduction has two versions, and it is not clear whether Rabbi Kaira composed them in the ninth century or whether they were composed later. Nevertheless, if this introduction is an original part of the composition, it is the earliest example of any kind of introduction in rabbinical literature.<sup>9</sup>

If so, Saadia Gaon was not the first Jew to write an introduction to his work. Nor was he the first Jew in the Middle Ages to engage in biblical commentary in Arabic: he was preceded in this matter (as well as in other aspects of his cultural project) by Dā'ūd Ibn Marwān al-raqqī, also known as David Habavli and by the epithet al-Muqammaṣ.<sup>10</sup> According to the information provided by the tenth-century Karaite author Ya'qūb al-Qirqisānī, al-Muqammaṣ received his education (in the first half of the ninth century) among the Christians in Nisibis. He translated commentaries on Genesis and Ecclesiastes from Syriac (doubtlessly adapting them somewhat to Judaism). Unfortunately, only a single page of these commentaries is extant. This page, identified by Haggai Ben-Shammai in the Geniza collection at Cambridge, belongs to the fifth chapter of the *Commentary on Genesis*.<sup>11</sup> In the second half of the ninth century, the Karaite Daniel al-Qūmisī composed commentaries on Psalms and on the Twelve Minor Prophets. These commentaries, of the *pitronim* ('deciphering') type, are written in Hebrew, and in the parts that

<sup>9</sup> See R. Brody, *Readings in Geonic Literature* [in Hebrew] (Tel-Aviv: Hakkibutz Hameuchad, 1998), p. 121. On the introduction which appears after the title in Halakhic monographs, see *ibid.*, pp. 147–49. The introduction described by Brody begins with praise for God, like the Muslim model. The attributes of God that the writer mentions in this praise are chosen according to the subject dealt with in the work. This subject is then indicated explicitly, and following it appears a detailed account of the order of discussion — a kind of table of contents.

<sup>10</sup> On al-Muqammaṣ, see Dāwūd Ibn Marwān al-Muqammaṣ's *Isbrūn Maqāla*, ed. and trans. by S. Stroumsa, *Études sur le judaïsme médiéval*, 13 (Leiden: Brill, 1989), pp. 15–35; B. Chiesa, 'Dāwūd al-Muqammaṣ e la sua opera', *Henoah*, 18 (1996), 121–55; S. Stroumsa, 'From the Earliest Known Judaeo-Arabic Commentary on Genesis', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 27 (2002), 375–95, esp. pp. 377–80; S. Stroumsa, 'Soul-searching at the Dawn of Jewish Philosophy: A Hitherto Lost Fragment of al-Muqammaṣ's Twenty Chapters', *Ginzei Qedem*, 3 (2007), 137\*–161\*.

<sup>11</sup> On this commentary, which belongs to the literary genre known as Hexaameron (a discussion of the six days of Creation), see G. Vajda, 'Du prologue de Qirqisānī à son commentaire sur la Genèse', in *In Memoriam Paul Kahle*, ed. by M. Black and G. Fohrer (Berlin: Toepelmann, 1968), pp. 222–31 (p. 224); H. Ben-Shammai, *Geniza Fragments*, 15 (1988), 3; Stroumsa, 'From the Earliest Known Judaeo-Arabic Commentary on Genesis'.

have been found so far, there is no introduction to the commentary.<sup>12</sup> Saadia thus remains the first Jewish author writing in Arabic whose commentaries to the Bible in general and whose introductions to these commentaries in particular are extant.<sup>13</sup> Qirqisānī says in his introduction to the commentary on Genesis that he drew on the commentary of al-Muqammaṣ, and he hints that he also made use of Saadia's commentary. Thus we do not possess a systematic Karaite commentary on the Bible in Arabic composed before Saadia's time,<sup>14</sup> and systematic commentary on the Bible in Arabic appears among Karaite and Rabbinical Jews at approximately the same time. The first extant introduction to commentaries on the Bible in Judaeo-Arabic was written by Saadia, although it is definitely possible that al-Muqammaṣ also preceded him in this respect. Saadia does not mention al-Muqammaṣ's commentary, but it is likely that, like Qirqisānī, Saadia, too, was familiar with this work.<sup>15</sup> If al-

<sup>12</sup> See A. Marmorstein, 'Remains of the Pitronim of the Karaite Daniel al-Qūmisī', *Hatsofe le-Hokhmat Yisrael*, 8 (1924), 44–60, 321–37; 9 (1928), 129–34, esp. pp. 327–37, 129–45 (Psalm 17. 63–86); *Pitron shneim-ʿasar, perush le-trei-ʿasar, ḥibro Daniel al-Qūmisī*, ed. by Y. D. Markon (Jerusalem: Meqizei Nirdamim, 1958). On al-Qūmisī and his commentaries, see H. Ben-Shammai, 'Major Trends in Karaite Philosophy and Polemics in the Tenth and Eleventh Century', in *Karaite Judaism: A Guide to its History and Literary Sources*, ed. by M. Polliack (Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 339–62, esp. p. 341; M. Polliack, 'Major Trends in Karaite Biblical Exegesis in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries', in *ibid.*, pp. 363–413.

<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, there is no reason to assume that Saadia was the first Jewish exegete to provide his commentaries with introductions (as suggested by Ben-Shammai, albeit merely as a hypothesis; see H. Ben-Shammai, 'Sa'adia Gaon's Introduction to Isaiah: An Introduction to the Books of the Prophets' [in Hebrew], *Tarbiz*, 50 (1981), 371–404, mainly p. 372). The introductions mark one stage in the development of the concept of the composition, and compositions, in this sense, were written by Jews before Saadia, as noted above. The introductions to biblical commentaries are also not independent works; they reflect the fact that the commentary was perceived as a composition. Since such commentaries were written before Saadia, they too probably had introductions. It is therefore likely that al-Muqammaṣ also wrote introductions to his commentaries; on this, see below.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Drory, *Emergence of Jewish-Arabic Literary Contacts*, p. 105, who states: 'the new literary model for the written text [...] was massively represented in Jewish literature for the first time in Karaite literature, with the intermediary of Sa'adia Gaon's exegetical project [...] it was brought into rabbinical literature and received there.' Likewise see her remarks in *ibid.*, p. 111. Drory later presented a slightly more nuanced view, insisting that 'connecting Sa'adya Gaon's literary activities with those of the Karaites does not constitute a claim that the Karaites preceded Sa'adya Gaon' (Drory, *Models and Contacts*, p. 143).

<sup>15</sup> On the likelihood of Saadia's familiarity with al-Muqammaṣ's *Twenty Chapters* (which he also fails to mention), see S. Stroumsa, *Saadia Gaon: A Jewish Thinker in a Mediterranean Society* [in Hebrew], ed. by M. A. Friedmann, *Jewish Culture in Muslim Lands and Cairo Geniza Studies*, Tel-Aviv University (Tel-Aviv: Tel-Aviv University, 2001).

Muqammaṣ's commentary had an introduction, it might have been one of the sources that influenced Saadia in structuring his introductions.

Drory believed that the decision to make the Bible central to the literary project reflects a principled view that was borrowed from Arabic literature and, implicitly, from Muslim Arabic literature.<sup>16</sup> Drory calls the model of Saadia's commentary as well as that of the Karaites 'an Arabic model', because of its close connection to the world of the Qur'ān and Qur'ān exegesis. Other scholars (of the few who have dealt with this topic) share her opinion on this matter. Nevertheless, Drory notes that Judaeo-Arabic exegetical literature did not copy exactly any single example of the familiar models for Qur'ān exegesis.<sup>17</sup> According to her, although the basic structure of Jewish commentary on the Bible was directly borrowed from the Arabic, the Jewish literary model is different from the Arabic one and peculiar to Judaeo-Arabic literature — a 'domestic model'. Drory raises the question of the source of the main borrowed components of the 'Arabic model', which are not found in the prevalent model of Qur'ān exegesis. Although she does not answer this question, she traces possible directions for seeking an answer. She points out parallels to the Mu'tazila model of Qur'ānic commentaries (*tafāsīr*) and to the Syriac model of biblical exegesis in Saadia's introductions and in his remarks on the function of the introduction.<sup>18</sup>

For Saadia, the introduction is first of all propaedeutic, a stage in the process of studying. The examples he has in mind are the introductions to the study of the sciences, and he mentions them in his *Commentary on 'The Book of Creation'* (*Sefer Yetsira*), after stating the principle that the teacher must lead his student slowly and gradually, from one stage of learning to the next: 'Thus all the arts, both scientific and technical, have antechambers, entries, and introductions, through which one moves, climbing from one thing to another.'<sup>19</sup> In order to explain the methodological role of the introduction, Saadia introduces here a metaphor from the world of architecture. The introduction, he says, is an antechamber (*dihlīz*) or an entrance plaza (*fanā'*), through which one enters the house. Saadia also mentions the

<sup>16</sup> Drory, *Models and Contacts*, p. 135.

<sup>17</sup> Drory, *Emergence of Jewish-Arabic Literary Contacts*, p. 152; Drory, *Models and Contacts*, pp. 135–38.

<sup>18</sup> Drory, *Emergence of Jewish-Arabic Literary Contacts*, p. 120; Drory, *Models and Contacts*, pp. 137–38.

<sup>19</sup> *Sefer Yetsira (kitāb al-mabādi')* 'im perush haga'on rabbenu Sa'adia b'r Yosef Fayyūmī, ed. by Y. Qaphih (Jerusalem: [n.pub.], 1972), pp. 70–71: 'kadhālīka fi jamī' al-ṣanā'ī' al-'ilmiyya wa'l-mihniyya, lahā dahālīz wa-afniya wa-muqaddimāt yartaqīhā min shay' ilā shay' '.

introduction to the sciences in his *Commentary on Proverbs*, and there, too, he uses this metaphor. Saadia identifies another aspect in his *Commentary on Sefer Yetsira*, where the introduction (*madkhal* or *muqaddima*) clearly means 'introduction to a scientific field', which is a literary genre in its own right. In the *Commentary on Proverbs*, on the other hand, the distinction between the introduction to a field (an introduction which is often a book) and an introduction to a book is blurred. In this last case it seems that Saadia regards propaedeutic study as a literary unit which precedes a scientific book. Proverbs 24. 27 states: 'Prepare thy work without, and make it fit for thyself in the field; and afterwards build thine house.' Saadia offers three interpretations for 'prepare thy work'. The focus of the first interpretation is that a person should prepare a secure economic foundation for his family.<sup>20</sup> The thrust of the second interpretation is that this world is merely a preparation for the World to Come, and it alludes to the words of Rabbi Jacob in the Mishnaic *Aphorisms of the Fathers* (*Pirquei Avot*): 'Prepare yourself in the antechamber, so that you may enter the banquet hall.' In this interpretation, the metaphor uses the word 'antechamber' in its physical, architectural sense. It seems, however, that in Saadia's vocabulary 'antechamber' was also one of the commonly used words to indicate 'an introduction' (as we have seen above in his words in the *Commentary on Sefer Yetsira*). Thinking associatively he thus moves to speak of 'antechamber' in the sense of 'pedagogical introduction', and proposes a third interpretation:

The Greeks call the introduction (*madkhal*) to any science, such as logic, astronomy, geometry, and medicine — *isagoge*. If the student first studies the book itself, before its introduction, he will not understand it.<sup>21</sup>

Here Saadia refers the reader to the Greek scientific and philosophical tradition connected with the development of rhetoric.<sup>22</sup> It is known that the curriculum in late antiquity, for example in Alexandria, placed the study of Porphyry's *Isagoge* before the Aristotelian corpus (beginning with logic) and the Neoplatonic

<sup>20</sup> See Saadia, *Commentary on Proverbs*, ed. by Yoseph Qaphih (Jerusalem: [n.pub.], 1973), pp. 191–92. Saadia calls this kind of interpretation 'zāhir', whereas the truly literal meaning is confined to the translation of the verse. On the commentary on this verse and on Saadia's terminology, see H. Ben-Shammai, 'The Rabbinical Literature in Sa'adya's Exegesis: Between Tradition and Innovation', in *Heritage and Innovation in Medieval Judaeo-Arabic Culture*, ed. by J. Blau and D. Doron (Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University, 2000), pp. 33–96, esp. pp. 42–44 and the translation, p. 43.

<sup>21</sup> Saadia's *Commentary on Proverbs*, ed. by Qaphih, pp. 191–92: 'wa'l-yūnāniyya tusammī al-madkhal ilā kull 'ilm, min mantiq wa-nujūm wa-handasa wa-tibb — isāghūghī, fa-in sabaqa al-muta'allim bi'l-kitāb bi-'aynihi, qabla madkhalihī, lam yafhamhu'.

<sup>22</sup> See Eva Riyad, *Studies in the Syriac Preface* (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1998), p. 222.



commentaries written on them. However, in Saadia's words cited above, *isagoge* does not refer to a specific book. Rather, it indicates the introduction to any scientific field, as well as to any scientific book. The academic curriculum in Alexandria also included such introductions as part of regular didactic structure. Prior to the study of any new field or book devoted to a new subject, the student was required to discuss several questions that would prepare him to read the book. They might number six, seven, or ten set points, such as the intention of the book, its utility, the authenticity of its attribution to its author, its place in the curriculum, its title, structure, and the subject it deals with.<sup>23</sup> Saadia directs the reader to these Greek introductions, indicating that their form was familiar to him. One cannot conclude from this that Saadia read Greek philosophy in the original (most probably he could not read Greek) or even in Arabic translation: many intellectuals in that period became acquainted with the fundamentals of philosophy by means of paraphrastic versions in which the main points of philosophy (especially logic) were summarized. These paraphrases might have been the source from which Saadia learned the structure of the classical introduction, and we could have expected him to write his own introductions in that structure as well. However, this is not the case.

Every one of Saadia's compositions has an introduction, and in all of them he deviates from the classical structure of philosophical introductions. The introductions to his philosophical, polemical, and Halakhic works are worthy of a separate discussion. Here I will only discuss his introductions to the scriptures. As Drory pointed out, introductions were usually methodological. Authors used introductions to explain their motive in writing the composition and to present the arguments to be raised as well as the manner of presenting them.<sup>24</sup> However, the introductions to the scriptures were slightly different, for the commentary is not presented as an independent composition but rather as dependent on one of the

<sup>23</sup> These are the seven Alexandrian points, repeated in the sixth century by Probus, the 'theoretician of introductions'. On the scholastic introductions, see I. Hadot, 'Les Introductions aux commentaires exégétiques chez les auteurs néoplatoniciens et les auteurs chrétiens', in *Les Règles de l'interprétation*, ed. by M. Tardieu (Paris: Cerf, 1987), pp. 99–122; L. G. Westerink, *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy* (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1962); J. Teixidor, 'La Dédicace de Paul le Perse à Chosroès', in *Entrer en matière*, ed. by Dubois and Roussel, pp. 199–208, esp. pp. 202–03; P. Hoffmann, 'La Fonction des prologues exégétiques dans la pensée pédagogique néoplatonicienne', in *ibid.*, pp. 209–45, esp. p. 220. On the development of these points in the work of al-Fārābī, see Charaībi, 'La "Muqaddima"', p. 77; Al-Fārābī, *Kitāb al-Khatāba*, in *Deux ouvrages inédits sur la rhétorique*, ed. by J. Langhade and M. Grignaschi (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1986), p. 128.

<sup>24</sup> Drory, *Emergence of Jewish-Arabic Literary Contacts*, p. 102; Drory, *Models and Contacts*, p. 137.

books of the Bible, and the commentator's introduction is not meant to explain his own intention but primarily the intention of the author of the biblical book. The biblical book was conceived of as a 'composition' and it was necessary to discuss its structure and the purpose of its writing.<sup>25</sup> I will confine myself here to a single example, the introduction to the *Commentary on Psalms*.<sup>26</sup>

Like all his commentaries on the Bible, Saadia's *Commentary on Psalms* bears an Arabic title of his own invention: *Kitāb al-tasbīḥ* (*The Book of Praise*). In this commentary the Arabic name translates the name of the biblical book (which is not the case with all of Saadia's biblical commentaries).<sup>27</sup> As Saadia states explicitly at the end of the introduction: "This book was revealed at that time, and for that reason we called it "The Book of Praise";<sup>28</sup> and again: 'the book was called "The Book of Praise".<sup>29</sup> There are three introductions to this book; they were all apparently written by Saadia, at various stages of the work of translating and commenting.<sup>30</sup> The first introduction begins, as usual, with praise of God, and, in line with the above-mentioned literary convention, the praises that were chosen for this purpose reflect the subject of the book (or the commentary, or the introduction) as the

<sup>25</sup> Drory, *Emergence of Jewish-Arabic Literary Contacts*, pp. 118–77, and p. 118, n. 21. On the structure of Saadia's introductions, see H. Ben-Shammai, 'Saadia's Introduction to Daniel: Prophetic Calculation of the End of Days vs. Astrological and Magical Speculation', *Aleph*, 4 (2004), 14–15.

<sup>26</sup> See Saadia's *Commentary on Psalms*. On this commentary, see U. Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms* [in Hebrew] (Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University, 1982), esp. chap. 1: 'Saadia Gaon's Approach: The Book of Psalms — a Second Torah'; see also H. Ben-Shammai's comments following the appearance of Simon's book, *Kiryat Sefer*, 58 (1983), 400–06. For Simon, Saadia is the 'father of the commentators on the Book of Psalms among the Jews, though he was not the first' (p. 13). Simon's analysis of the commentary and its uniqueness deals mainly with the Jewish tradition and context, both rabbinic and Karaite. Ben-Shammai, *Kiryat Sefer*, pp. 402–03, adds to this the context of Arabic terminology and semantics.

<sup>27</sup> In his other commentaries the Arabic name summarizes the content of the biblical book. For example, he gave the title *The Book of Theodicy* (*Kitāb al-tādīl*) to his *Commentary on Job*; *The Book of Wisdom Seeking* (*Kitāb talab al-hikma*) is his title for the *Commentary on Proverbs*; and *The Book of Seeking Perfection* (*Kitāb al-istislāḥ*) is the name he gave to Isaiah. On the titles that Saadia gave to his commentaries, see Ben-Shammai, 'Saadia Gaon's Introduction to Isaiah'; Ben-Shammai, 'Saadia's Introduction to the Commentary on Daniel', p. 15.

<sup>28</sup> 'Nazala hādha al-kitāb fi hādha al-waqt, wa-li-dhālika laqabnāhu bi-kitāb al-Tasbīḥ' (literally: 'The Book of Giving Praise') (Saadia, *Commentary on Psalms*, p. 27).

<sup>29</sup> 'Summiya hādha al-kitāb: kitāb al-Tasbīḥ' (Saadia, *Commentary on Psalms*, p. 30).

<sup>30</sup> See Qaphih's Introduction to Saadia, *Commentary on Psalms*, pp. 10–11; Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms*, pp. 13–14.

author understands it.<sup>31</sup> The praises in the introduction to the *Commentary on Psalms* indicate that God teaches wisdom to man, the chosen of His creatures, by means of His words. Indeed, the main subject of both the first and second introductions is speech as a means of communication and divine guidance.<sup>32</sup> Saadia analyses several of the types of discourse that appear in scripture at great length: summoning, questioning, recounting, commanding, and prayer. With their secondary categories, they total eighteen types, and for each of them he presents an example from the book on which he is offering a commentary. In the second introduction he lists ten types of speech, each of which is intended to reform people, and all of which are found in the Book of Psalms. It follows, he says, that the Book of Psalms works in the fullest, most mature fashion to reform people, and this reflects the rather late period of its composition or revelation — after the completion of Moses's prophecy, the settlement of the Land of Israel, and the building of the Temple. Saadia then analyses the name of the book, *The Book of Praise*, and discusses the prophet to whom it was revealed, David, the circumstances of the beginning of his prophecy, and the use of the book in the Temple. He concludes with a discussion of the uniqueness of the language of the psalms.

Saadia's discussion of types of discourse is connected to a discussion of that subject in Aristotle that is also mentioned by al-Muqammaṣ. Thus it is clear that the Hellenistic tradition also stands in its background. Saadia's discussion here has an additional element, however, which characterizes all his introductions to the biblical commentaries, and which does not draw directly on the classical Greek tradition. According to Saadia's conception, the introduction to a book — any book — must reflect the book's subject. In his commentary on Proverbs 25. 11, 'A word fitly spoken', he says:

A common [feature] of any select book is that its introduction illuminates its intention; and if it is possible for it to present a few chapter headings or even all of them in advance, this is a better and more appropriate structure.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> A clear formulation of this literary convention can be found in Yosef Ibn Shim'on's *Silencing Epistle*; see my *The Beginnings of the Maimonidean Controversy in the East: Yosef Ibn Shim'on's Silencing Epistle Concerning the Resurrection of the Dead* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1999), p. 23 (Arabic text), p. 95 (Hebrew translation), and the notes on p. 132.

<sup>32</sup> On the analysis of the types of discourse in the introduction, see Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms*, pp. 14–17.

<sup>33</sup> Saadia, *Commentary on Proverbs*, ed. by Qaphih, p. 302: 'mimmā ya'ummu kull kitāb mukhtār an yakūna ṣadruhu muwaḍḍiḥan 'an gharadihi, wa-in amkana an tuqaddama jumal minhu aw kulluhā fi ṣadrihi, fa-huwa anzamu wa-atqanu'.

Saadia regards the function of the introductions to the books of the Bible in the same manner. He usually identifies one main subject in the biblical book and discusses that subject in the introduction (and usually it is this subject that will also appear in the title). Thus, for example, according to the introduction to Job, the subject of the book is the story of the test that Job withstood and a summary of the opinions presented by his companions in such a way that the reader will learn the justification of God from them. Consequently, the title is also *The Book of the Justification of God* (i.e. theodicy; *Kitāb al-Ta'dīl*).<sup>34</sup> The introduction to Proverbs sums up the goal of the book — to advise the seeker of wisdom how to attain it — and therefore the title of the book is *The Book of Wisdom-Seeking* (*Kitāb talab al-hikma*).<sup>35</sup> This element is absent from what we called the 'Arabic model' in general and from the commentaries on the Qur'ān in particular, nor is it identical in form to the thematic introduction found in the Hellenistic tradition.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, it does appear as a constant element in the introductions to Syriac commentaries on the Bible.<sup>37</sup> Although Hellenistic influence is also apparent in the Syriac introductions, in Syriac exegetical literature a unique model was created.<sup>38</sup>

The pattern for this model was already determined by Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373) and it is found in Theodor of Mopsuestia (d. 428). Eva Riyad has studied Syriac introductions, distinguishing between prefaces and introductions. In Arabic literature in general, however, and especially in Judaeo-Arabic literature, it is not always possible to make a sharp distinction between the two. Riyad also excludes topical introductions from her discussion,<sup>39</sup> although in the introductions to the Bible commentaries (to which she devotes only nine lines in her book), topical introductions are very common. As Riyad shows, the ordinary Syriac preface to a Bible commentary has a personal part, a part about the subject, and the 'elṭa (cause), which is, in fact, already part of the composition itself.<sup>40</sup> The 'elṭa is the

<sup>34</sup> Saadia, *Commentary on Job*, pp. 17–19.

<sup>35</sup> Saadia, *Commentary on Proverbs*, ed. by Qaphih, p. 22, and see note 27, above.

<sup>36</sup> Contrary to the opinion of L. E. Goodman, *The Book of Theodicy: Translation and Commentary on the Book of Job by Saadia ben Joseph al-Fayyūmī* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 56: 'Even the use of Introductions to set out the issues thematically, the watermark of Saadia's philosophical and exegetical writing, derives not from [...] the *kalām*, but from the influence of the Graeco-Arabic Isagoge-literature.'

<sup>37</sup> On introductions in Syriac literature, see Riyad, *Studies in the Syriac Preface*.

<sup>38</sup> Riyad, *Studies in the Syriac Preface*, pp. 19–22.

<sup>39</sup> For an example, see Riyad, *Studies in the Syriac Preface*, pp. 24, 31; 'eisagogic introductions'.

<sup>40</sup> Riyad, *Studies in the Syriac Preface*, p. 172.

part of the introduction that discusses the special character of the explicated biblical book and its main subject. In other words, the topical introduction is typical of Syriac introductions to Bible commentaries, and it is connected to the fact that (unlike the Qur'ān) the Bible is composed of several distinct books. In the present case, Saadia's *Commentary on Psalms*, the subject that he regards as particular to the Book of Psalms is the divine discourse in all its types.<sup>41</sup> This, too, is commonly found in Christian commentaries, both before and after Saadia. An example of this can be found in Isho'dad of Merv, a Nestorian commentator of the ninth century, who served as the Bishop of Hadta c. 850, and was thus a near contemporary of al-Muqammas. In his *Commentary on Psalms*, Isho'dad devotes the *'elta* in the introduction to the types of divine speech.<sup>42</sup> He lists ten such types (like Saadia's list in the second introduction), and he states that Psalms alone, of all the books of the Bible, contains all of them.<sup>43</sup>

Moshe Bar Qefa (d. 903), a monophysite commentator and an older contemporary of Saadia's, states in the introduction to a *Commentary on Psalms*:

Every book of the Scriptures has a special intention, and its instruction is directed at one subject or at most two. This Book of Psalms combines together the intentions of the prophets, and it alone teaches us all the subjects that they teach.

Bar Qefa then presents the goal of each of the books of the Bible (including the New Testament), concluding: 'And the Book of Psalms teaches all of these subjects.'<sup>44</sup>

Although Bar Qefa does not deal explicitly with the forms of divine discourse, he, too, like Isho'dad before him and like Saadia, labours to show that the Pentateuch and the Book of Joshua direct their instructions to a certain aspect, appropriate to their time, and that in the Book of Psalms, which is more mature, all these

<sup>41</sup> On scholastic introductions to the Bible in general and on Psalms in particular, see A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship* (London: Scolar, 1984), chap. 2, esp. pp. 42–48. On Syriac introductions to Psalms, see J. M. Vosté, 'L'Introduction de Mose bar Qepha aux Psaumes', *Revue Biblique*, 38 (1929), 214–28; L. Lazarus, 'Über einen Psalmencommentar aus der ersten Hälfte des VI Jahrhunderts p. Chr.', *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, 9 (1923), 85–108, 181–224 (a commentary by Daniel of Salah, d. 524).

<sup>42</sup> On Isho'dad's introduction to Psalms, see *Commentaire d'Iso'dad de Merv sur l'ancien Testament*, vol. VI: *Psaumes*, ed. by C. van de Eynde, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Scriptorum Syri, 185 (text) and 186 (translation) (Leuven: Peeters, 1981), esp. IV. 2, p. ix.

<sup>43</sup> Vosté, 'L'Introduction de Mose bar Qepha', pp. 201–10.

<sup>44</sup> Vosté, 'L'Introduction de Mose bar Qepha', p. 224.

aspects find their expression. Like Saadia, Bar Qefa dwells on the musical side of the book in his introduction.<sup>45</sup>

Thus there is a stylistic-structural component in Saadia which has a parallel in Syriac exegetical tradition. The combination of the stylistic component (i.e. the isolation of one subject from the biblical book that is being interpreted and its discussion in the introduction to the commentary) and the specific choice of the subject of discussion (i.e. the presence of the various kinds of divine speech as a characteristic of the Book of Psalms) is consistent with what is found in Syriac exegesis. The combination of these two similar features — the stylistic component and the content component — suggests that the similarity is not the result of mere chance. Rather, it suggests that Saadia was continuing an exegetical tradition which existed among the Syriac commentators. While it is not known whether Saadia could read Syriac (although such knowledge cannot be ruled out), encounters between Jewish and Christian scholars were not rare, and explication of the Bible was discussed in these encounters both polemically and heuristically.<sup>46</sup> Saadia might have been familiar with the Syriac exegetical tradition through these encounters. Moreover, this tradition might have come to him indirectly through the commentaries of Dā'ūd al-Muqammaṣ, who, as mentioned above, studied with the Christians in Nisibis, and it is known that his commentaries on the Bible were a translation (one may presume an adaptation) of Christian commentaries. As mentioned above, although we do not know that he wrote introductions to those commentaries, it is likely that, as with all Syriac commentaries on the Bible, the ones that he translated and adapted were also accompanied by such an introduction. The scraps of historical knowledge in our possession show therefore that the main literary model for Saadia's commentaries and introductions is to be sought among the Eastern Christians, either those who wrote in Syriac or those who were Saadia's contemporaries, and who already had begun to write in Arabic themselves.

Saadia combines this tradition with issues that were on his own agenda: the controversy with the Karaites. With respect to the Book of Psalms, concern with divine discourse is mobilized for the controversy with the Karaites regarding the

<sup>45</sup> Therefore it is not correct to regard the presence of thematic introductions to commentaries as a definite identifying mark of Saadia's, as Goodman argues. See note 36, above.

<sup>46</sup> See for example the famous description of the consultation regarding exegesis presented by Joseph ibn 'Aqnin, 'Revelation of the Secrets of the Appearance of the Lights', in *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, ed. by A. S. Halkin (Jerusalem: Mergizei Nirdamim, 1954), p. 499, and S. Stroumsa, 'The Impact of Syriac Tradition on Early Judaeo-Arabic Bible Exegesis', *Aram*, 3 (1991), 83-96, esp. p. 94.

identity of the author of Psalms (God or David) and regarding the place of the book in the liturgy.<sup>47</sup> Perhaps this is the meaning of his obscure insinuation in the introduction, where he states that the wise reader will acknowledge that his commentary is preferable to 'what others have said in explicating this book'.<sup>48</sup>

This brief and partial discussion permits us to return to the question of the literary models that influenced Saadia's enterprise. The Muslim conquest and the adoption of the Arabic language were without doubt the decisive factor in the dominance of Arabic culture and in the receptiveness of the Jewish world to that culture. Arabic, and especially Islamic culture, created the framework for this receptiveness. However, with respect to Jewish commentaries on the Bible, it seems that one should not regard the Jewish encounter with the Muslim-Arabic world as the central one in which marginal Christian influences were inlaid. On the contrary, in this area the Christian model was central and basic, with a shift in language (from Syriac to Arabic) and a shift in religion (from Christianity to Judaism). This model made use of the Hellenistic tradition and doubtlessly included both Muslim influences and responses to intra-Jewish struggles. The changes of the model reflect not only the consolidation of a written literary system but also the existence of a cultural system in which every encounter is in fact multiple, simultaneous encounters, with several strata of many cultures.

Department of Arabic Language and Literature, Hebrew University

<sup>47</sup> On the Karaite attitude and on Saadia's approach to these questions, see Simon, 'The Karaite Attitude: Psalms Obligatory Prophetic Prayer', chap. 2 in *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms*; Ben-Shammai, comments in *Kiryat Sefer*, pp. 403–06.

<sup>48</sup> 'Mā akhrajahu ghayrī min tafsīr hādha al-kitāb', Saadia, *Commentary on Psalms*, p. 37. As noted by Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms*; p. 13, n. 1, there is no evidence that in these words Saadia is discussing his predecessor, al-Qūmisī. On the anti-Karaite context of Saadia's introduction to the Psalms, see *ibid.*, pp. 17–24; Y. Y. Rivlin, 'Saadia's Introductions as an Introduction to Scripture', in *Rav Saadia Gaon: qovets torani-madā'i* [in Hebrew], ed. by Y. L. Fishman (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1942), pp. 382–427, esp. pp. 384–85; Y. Shunari, 'The Exegetical Principles of Rabbi Saadia Gaon According to his Arabic Translation of Psalms' [in Hebrew] (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Hebrew University in Jerusalem, 1970), pp. 18–19.