Sa‘adiah Gaon

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

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

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

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1 Malter, *Saadia Gaon*, 178.
2 It is not clear to which philosophical theory Sa‘adiah is referring. According to Malter, *Saadia Gaon*, 180, 203–204, Sa‘adiah probably means the pre-Islamic atheistic *dahriyya*, while according to Qafih (*Sefer Yeşirah im perush rabbenu*, 19 n. 26), the passages refer to Aristotelian doctrine. See also Jospe, “Early Philosophical Commentaries,” 377–378.
3 *Sefer Yeşirah im perush rabbenu*, Qafih, ed., 24. This view is based on *mḤagigah* II, 1 which says: “Whosoever speculates upon four things, a pity for him! He is as though he had not come into the world, [to wit], what is above, what is beneath, what before, what after.” Sa‘adiah does not deny the legitimacy of the Mishnaic passage but criticises
fire as the origin of the world.\textsuperscript{4} The seventh theory is that of Pythagoras (ca. 571/70–497/96) according to whom everything originated in numbers. The eighth is the theory of SY, which according to Sa’adiah’s interpretation of the term \textit{sefirot} as mathematical units, presents the world as having emerged out of “ten cardinal numbers and twenty-two letters.” Sa’adiah does not accept this cosmogonic theory which, in his view, implies gradual creation, an idea which is incompatible with the ninth theory, the biblical notion of \textit{creatio ex-nihilo}.

Sa’adiah’s main exegetical endeavour consisted in the reinterpretation of the creative processes described in SY so as to harmonise them with the biblical assumption that everything came into existence through the will of the Creator and all at once. SY’s \textit{sefirot} (numbers) and \textit{otiyyot} (letters) do not, according to Sa’adiah, represent entities endowed with independent existence, predating the Creation of the world. Rather, they are “underlying principles of order and symmetry in all nature” which came into being at the same time as the Creation of the universe.\textsuperscript{5}

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

The \textit{sefirot}, as the principles which underlie reality, are also the ten categories\textsuperscript{8} which define the existence of everything in the created world, except for God whose nature is beyond human comprehension: “… they

\textsuperscript{4} These were the theories of Thales (ca. first half of the 7th century BCE), Anaximenes of Miletus (ca. mid 6th century BCE) and Heraclitus of Ephesus (ca. 6th century BCE). For a detailed analysis of these cosmogonic theories in Sa’adiah’s commentary on SY and in his Kitâb al-amânât wa’l ‘itkâdât (Book of Philosophic Doctrines and Religious Beliefs), see Ventura, \textit{La philosophie}, 92–171, particularly 113–153.

\textsuperscript{5} See Malter, \textit{Saadiah Gaon}, 181–182.

\textsuperscript{6} See Hayman, \textit{Sefer Yeşira}, 69–70.

\textsuperscript{7} \textit{Sefer Yeşirah im perush rabbenu}, Qahîh, ed., 54. See also Wolfson, “The Theosophy of Shabbetai Donnolo,” 288.

\textsuperscript{8} These clearly correspond to the ten categories which according to Aristotle define the existence of anything. See \textit{Sefer Yeşirah im perush rabbenu}, Qahîh, ed., 46, n. 16. See also \textit{Commentaire sur le Sefer Yeşirah}, Lambert, ed., 40 n. 1.