PART ONE

THE EARLY MASTERS:
FROM SAADIA TO HALEVI
CHAPTER ONE

R. SAADIA GAON

Jewish philosophical literature first developed under the influence of Moslem philosophers in Babylonia (Iraq) during the Geonic period, in the first half of the 10th century. We know the names of some Jewish philosophers who lived prior to R. Saadia Gaon and from whom he learned. But Saadia—who may be regarded as the father of medieval rabbinic literature in all its many varied branches—was the first whose philosophical works have come down to us in their entirety. One may consider him the founder of the philosophical tradition that interprets holy writ from a Jewish/rabbinic viewpoint.

His Life

R. Saadia Gaon was born in 882 in Fayyum, Egypt. At about the age of 30 he left under circumstances that are unclear (apparently because of persecution by the Karaites) and came to Palestine. His varied literary activity began in Egypt and continued throughout his life, spurred on by the many controversies in which he was deeply involved, especially those between the Rabbanites and the Karaites, and between the Jewish communal leaders of Babylonia and Israel. He moved to Babylonia in 922 and was appointed Gaon of Sura in 928. He died in 942, after a life full of struggle and controversy.

His Fields of Productivity

Saadia’s fields of productivity were varied, but one tendency is clearly recognized in all—to establish the authority of the rabbinic tradition against all its opponents. His philosophical work was devoted to the same goal. He was creative in six principal fields: lexicography and study of the Hebrew language; prayer and liturgical poetry; biblical translation and commentary; polemical literature; halakhic literature, and philosophical literature. As our interest here is in his philosophical thought, I shall content myself with pointing out the new tendencies that came to expression in his contribution to codifying the prayer