

## Nota

*The Dawn of Hebrew Linguistics - The Book of Elegance  
of the Language of the Hebrews by Saadia Gaon*

*Introduction and Critical Edition by Aron Dotan, Volume I:  
Introduction, Volume II: Text and Translation, World Union  
of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem 1997. 668 pages.*

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## A

For more than a thousand years the composition of Rabbi Saadia Gaon (882-942), אֶלְעִבְרָאֲנִיִּין פְּצִיחַ לְגוֹהּ (=The Book of Elegance of the Language of the Hebrews)<sup>1</sup> lay undisturbed. Then Harkavy discovered the main manuscript of the work in the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg (RNL),<sup>2</sup> and in 1898 he announced his discovery, mentioning the names of the

1 Below: Elegance.

2 Formerly known as the Saltykov-Ščedrin Public Library in Leningrad, Ms. II Firk., Evr.-arab. I., 3073.

chapters of Rabbi Saadia Gaon's work.<sup>3</sup> In 1906 Harkavy published three pages from the beginning of the manuscript with an accompanying translation to Hebrew and added information concerning the fifty-five pages of the manuscript.<sup>4</sup> This discovery should have brought about a revision in the analysis of the grammatical theory of Rabbi Saadia Gaon, but the manuscript failed to receive the attention it deserved in the literature which ensued, and according to Dotan (*Elegance*, I, p. 26), «Harkavy imagined that he found a delightful treasure, except that no one was interested in taking possession of it.»

In 1932 Skoss rediscovered the manuscript in the RNL, and some time later, he published a preliminary review of his findings.<sup>5</sup> In 1942 he published the third chapter of the work (Inflection - הִלְצֵרְתָּ),<sup>6</sup> and in 1952, he published chapter five (Vowels - וּמְגִלָּה).<sup>7</sup> Between 1952-1954, Skoss published a review of the content of the work in three parts, and in 1955 the three parts appeared together in an English language book version.<sup>8</sup> The publications of Skoss and Harkavy were the only sources for the linguistic theory of Rabbi Saadia Gaon.

In 1989-1990 Professor Aron Dotan discovered a photocopy of the Leningrad manuscript at the Annenberg institute (formerly Dropsi College) in Philadelphia, that had been brought there previously by Skoss. Dotan rearranged it wherever the order seemed inappropriate, virtually creating a new arrangement (*Elegance*, I, pp. 267-269). Today after its rescue by Dotan, we have access to a splendid edition of Rabbi Saadia Gaon's work.

Thus far I have been speaking of the main manuscript of the work. Over the years, since 1932, more sections of the com-

3 See A. Harkavy, «Liqqutim meRav Saadia Ga'on», *Hagoren* I (1898), pp. 89-91.

4 —, «Hadašim gam yešanim II. no. 8», *Hagoren* VI (1906), pp. 26-40.

5 See S. L. Skoss, «Fragments of Unpublished Philological Works of Saadia Gaon», *JQR* n.s., XXIII (1932-1933), pp. 329-336.

6 —, «A Study of Inflection in Hebrew from Saadia Gaon's Grammatical Work 'Kutub al-Lughah'», *JQR* n.s., XXXIII (1942-1943), pp. 171-212.

7 —, «A Study of Hebrew Vowels from Saadia Gaon's Grammatical Work 'Kutub al-Lughah'», *JQR* n.s., XLII (1951-1952), pp. 283-317.

8 —, Saadia Gaon, *The Earliest Hebrew Grammarian*, Philadelphia (1955).

position have come to light, some found by the editor, in various libraries in the world: in Oxford, Cambridge, in the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, and even in St. Petersburg itself. Altogether, the editor was in possession of seven segments of various lengths, taken from five different manuscripts (in Volume I of the present study, between pages 272-273, Dotan provides photographic facsimiles of most of the manuscripts). In Dotan's opinion (*Elegance*, I, p. 41), the manuscripts that have survived contain eight chapters of the composition and not nine as Skoss had thought.

## B

Rabbi Saadia Gaon, for the first time in the history of the development of Hebrew grammar, wrote a book that was purely about grammar; this is an in-depth, comprehensive and detailed study of grammar, with the objective of examining the entire range of problems of Hebrew grammar. According to Dotan (*Elegance*, I, p. 31), the name of the book was intended «to convey the precision and fine detail of the structure of the Hebrew language». Rabbi Saadia Gaon analyzes the available linguistic material: Biblical Hebrew and, sometimes, Mishnaic Hebrew, in order to learn from it what the correct language is and how to generate from it, that is, to learn the normative and generative rules of the language.

Dotan suggests (*Elegance*, I, p. 18) that Rabbi Saadia Gaon spent the years 915-921 in Palestine, more precisely, in Tiberias. There he lived in the company of Masorites (בעלי מסורה) and poets (פייטנים). It was this proximity to the center of the linguistic action and to those immersed in the biblical and poetic tradition in Tiberias that aroused him to compose this book, a work dealing with the grammar of the Hebrew language that is, according to Dotan (*Elegance*, I, p. 32), «the first book of grammar of the Hebrew language in the full sense of the word». In his research Dotan concludes (*Elegance*, I, p. 39) that Saadia went back to work on the book, at least on certain portions of

it, in a second or third edition, in Mesopotamia, between 930-937, the years of his controversy with the Exilarch.

## C

Dotan's edition consists of two large volumes:

The first volume is an introduction, in which the author elegantly, as is his wont, discusses, primarily the foundations of the linguistic theory of Rabbi Saadia Gaon, and analyzes, clearly, lucidly, and precisely, the eight parts of Rabbi Saadia Gaon's book that have survived. Below are the subjects discussed in this volume:

A. Saadia Gaon, B. The Book, C. Linguistic Thinking, D. Grammatical Theory, E. Terms and Concepts, F. Introductions to the Chapters, G. The Edition, H. Bibliographical Abbreviations.

The second volume consists primarily of Saadia's composition (the original Arabic source, its translation to Hebrew and its interpretation), but also includes doubtful portions and indices. The subjects include:

First Chapter - Letters; Second Chapter - אלתפכים ואלאכתצאר (=Augmentation and Contraction); Introduction to the Third Chapter, Third Chapter - אלתצריף (=Inflection); Fourth Chapter - אלתשדיד ואלארכא (=Dageš and Rafe) [version A], Fourth Chapter - *Dageš* and *Rafe* (version B); Fifth Chapter - אלנגם (=Vowels); Sixth Chapter - אלגזם (=The *Šewa*); Seventh Chapter - אלתחול ואלחולף (=Letters and Gutturals); Eighth Chapter - אלתחולף שרות (=The Rules for Gutturals); Fragments of Doubtful Affiliation, Indices.

Dotan has chosen to present the work of Rabbi Saadia Gaon with diplomatic respect, avoiding eclecticism; the internal version of the Arabic text usually reflects one particular manuscript without correction or intervention on the part of the editor. On the other hand, Dotan has made many comments and suggested many emendations, based both upon parallel manuscripts and upon rational inference, wherever possible, usually

where there was a parallel version. There is also an *apparatus criticus* on the left hand page containing comments comparing the Arabic versions only.

In his edition, Dotan places the Arabic text of Rabbi Saadia Gaon on the left hand page, and facing it, on the right, is his translation to Hebrew. Such a presentation permits an immediate comparison of the source and the translation, greatly assisting both reader and researcher.

The edition Dotan has placed before us is thus one of incomparable importance, a complete and marvelously detailed study of the first Hebrew grammar book, in which Rabbi Saadia Gaon aspired to an in-depth, detailed, and comprehensive treatment, the first of its kind in the Hebrew language. No other comparable text appeared on the scene until the study by Yona Ibn Jānaḥ (in the first half of the eleventh century), *Sefer ha-Riqmah*, «*Kitāb al-Luma'*», as it was called in Arabic. Even Ḥayyūj, in the second half of the tenth century, did not write a truly comprehensive, systematic grammatical treatise. And even after Ibn Janāḥ, few indeed are the systematic, comprehensive grammar books that encompass all branches of the Hebrew language and its offshoots that are so well composed and well-ordered as Rabbi Saadia Gaon's book of grammar.

## D

In his introduction, Dotan sets out and analyzes the fundamentals of Saadia Gaon's linguistic theory. This presentation is of great importance to the study of both Saadia Gaon's theory and the history of medieval Hebrew grammar, because Saadia's is the first grammar of the Hebrew language. Saadia's composition deals with Hebrew grammar as a whole and not only with the biblical language; its originality lies in constructing the first system of grammatical rules in Hebrew and in creating the very idea of grammar as a subject. Dotan's presentation affords us a perfect tool for an understanding of Saadia Gaon's treatise.

Below are several examples that demonstrate the importance of Saadia Gaon's composition and his significant contri-

bution to medieval Hebrew grammar. Saadia Gaon's composition and Dotan's comprehensive and detailed study of it come together to form a single organic whole. Therefore, in discussing the examples, I shall not distinguish between the importance of Saadia Gaon's composition and the importance of Dotan's discussion and analysis that are so necessary for highlighting Saadia's innovations and genius:

1) As the first scholar of the Hebrew language, Rabbi Saadia Gaon did not have any pre-existing terminology available to him. He borrowed terms from Arabic grammar, such as לְעַפּ (=verb/action), הִפְסִיחַ (=construct state), בְּעָמַד (=past tense).

Sometimes, what he found in Arabic grammar was not appropriate to Hebrew. In that case, Saadia Gaon drew on terms from Arabic grammar and adapted them to Hebrew grammar, for example, חָטָא in Arabic: cutting off, stopping, the absence of vowel. In Rabbi Saadia Gaon's book, the term indicates 'mobile *šewa*' and 'latent *šewa*'. This innovation of Saadia Gaon's shows his understanding of the *šewa* as the essence of aposiopesis (Elegance, I, pp. 160-161). The term בָּצַח in Arabic, as is known, indicates the accusative. Here, this term denotes the dot in the *qamaṣ*, *pataḥ*, and *segol* vowels (Elegance, I, pp. 173-174).

A few terms were borrowed from Arabic philosophy and logic and were adapted to Hebrew grammar by Rabbi Saadia Gaon. One of these is עֲלֵיוֹן, meaning 'context' or 'in context' (Elegance, I, pp. 151-154). Rabbi Saadia Gaon's innovation, which is without parallel either in Hebrew grammatical terminology or even in his own philosophical terminology, is based on his perception that the context is the fundamental form, and it is thus the form that is determined and assumed from the outset by the 'institutor of the language' (הַמְלַמֵּד אֶת-הַלְשׁוֹן)<sup>9</sup>. Another term is הַיָּשׁוּר, meaning 'free will', 'desire', 'intent' as it appears in his philosophy. In Saadia Gaon's work, this term suggests the semantic content of the word, that is, the signified of the word. According to Dotan, there is a complementary parallel here to 'מִסְאָר', the signifier (Elegance, p. 171).

9 On this issue see Elegance, pp. 97-99.



losophical works such as the writings of the philosopher Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (died in 950), in the writings of grammarians such as Ibn Fāris (918-1004), Jalāl al-Dīn al-Ṣuyyūṭī (1445-1505), and even in the work of men of *lettres (adab)*<sup>11</sup> such as al-Jāhiz (775-868) and others. From Dotan's research we therefore learn not only the views of Saadia Gaon; we also find a thorough consideration of the debate on the emergence of language among Arab philosophers, theologians, grammarians, and men of *adab* beginning in the ninth century and ending in the fifteenth. There is no doubt that Dotan's findings can make a very valuable contribution even to the research on the Arabic writings themselves.

3) Like most medieval Hebrew grammarians, Rabbi Saadia Gaon made comparisons between Biblical Hebrew, Mishnaic Hebrew, Arabic, and Aramaic. Saadia Gaon drew upon Arabic linguistics and philosophy, but he also made note of what was common to all the languages, and in so doing, he laid the foundations for general linguistics.

4) In the chapter on *dageš* and *rafe* (ואלארכא) and his treatment of the letters בגדכפ"ח at the beginning of a word coming just after another word ending in a vowel that is also attached to it by (טעם) a biblical accent (and not דחיק מרחיק) (ואתלי)<sup>12</sup> Saadia Gaon comments that the reason for the tenuity of the בגדכפ"ח letters is not the letters אהו"י which precede them, contrary to what many people think, but rather because of the vowel at the end of the preceding word. For example: בְּרַחֵם יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ (Psalms IX, 11) or דְּבַרְךָ פִּי־חָכְמָם (Ecclesiastes X, 12).<sup>13</sup>

11 On this concept see F. Gabrieli, «adab», *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new edition Vol. I, pp. 175-176.

12 On these two concepts see A. Dotan, «Li-v'ayat deḥiq we-'atei me-raḥiq», *Divrei ha-qongres ha-'olami ha-revi'i le-madda'ei ha-yahdut*, II, Jerusalem (1969), pp. 101-105.

13 For a detailed discussion on this issue, see A. Dotan, *Elegance*, I, p. 213; II, pp. 408-411; «Šeqi'ei Masorah be-diquḏo šel Rav Saadya Ga'on», *Divrei ha-qongres ha'ahad-'asar šel ha-'ergun ha-ben-le'ummi le-ḥeqer ha-Masorah*, Jerusalem (1994), pp. 7\*-16\*.



5) In the chapter on the *šewa*, Saadia Gaon presents a systematic array of simple and basic rules for pronouncing the *šewa* instead of the maze of versions that had been handed down by the ancients in *Masorah* booklets.<sup>14</sup>

6) It is known that the «basic form» in the theory of Saadia Gaon (in Arabic: *טבע, אס, ענצר, אצל, גוהר*) is the minimal nominal unit that serves as the origin for words formation. According to him, from the «basic form» come the plural forms, the construct form, the inflection, and verbal forms. Rabbi Saadia Gaon refers to the derived forms as *פרע, ערץ*.<sup>15</sup>

Everything so far was already known. But now Dotan reveals to us (*Elegance*, 129-131), that in the seventh chapter in his composition<sup>16</sup> Rabbi Saadia Gaon also made use of the idea of sorting words according to the consonants permanently present in them, that is, their permanent skeleton of consonants.<sup>17</sup> Dotan adds that this system had already served the Arab lexicographer al-Ḥalīl as well as later Jewish grammarians and lexicographers.

7) In the section on vowels, published by Skoss,<sup>18</sup> the following sentence follows a lacuna in the manuscript: *פסמעה מנהם בעץ אהל אלעראק פחוהמה בי פקאלו {אל} בא* *וליס כדאך*.<sup>19</sup> Translating it into English as follows: «so some people of 'Iraq heard it from them and thought it was a Ba and they said 'אל{בא}' but it is not so», Skoss did not add any comments, even though the sentence is puzzling and unclear. Here Dotan (*Elegance*, II, p. 445, line 28) reads it as *באש*, which is appropriate, in contrast to Skoss's reading, *בא{אל}*, that has no meaning in this context. According to Dotan (*Elegance*, II,

14 See, for example, S. Baer und H. L. Strack, *Dikduke ha-Te'amim des Ahron ben Moscheh ben Ascher*, Leipzig (1879), §11, pp. 12-13 and the note (\*) p. 13.

15 For a detailed discussion on this issue, see E. Goldenberg, «'Iyyunim ba-'Egron la-Rav Saadya Ga'on», *Lšonenu* XXXVII (1973), pp. 285-288.

16 It is worthwhile pointing out that the seventh chapter of *Elegance* was not at the disposal of Mrs. Goldenberg when she wrote her article (see above n. 15).

17 On this understanding of the root in the Hebrew grammar of the Middle Ages see, for example, G. Goldenberg, «'Al ha-šohen he-ḥalaq we-ha-šoreš ha-'ivri», *Lšonenu* XLIV (1980), pp. 287-288.

18 *JQR* XLII (1951-1952), pp. 283-317.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 292, line 6.

p. 445, n. 13), this is the end of the discussion of the *šewa* sign. Dotan adds (*ibid.*, *ibid.*), that it appears that Rabbi Saadia Gaon had previously commented on the pronunciation of the *waw* in the name of the sign  $\aleph\psi$  by the Jews living in Palestine as a fricative *bet* so that when those living in Babylonia, who correctly pronounce the *waw* as a semi-vowel (w), heard this pronunciation, they thought the word contained a tenuis *bet* in the name and thus mistakenly pronounced it 'רַבֿשׁ' and apparently also wrote it that way. From this Dotan concludes that the original spelling was with a *waw* and the spelling with a *bet* originated in Babylonia.<sup>20</sup> Rabbi Saadia Gaon would thus have pronounced it *šwa*, using that spelling ( $\aleph\psi$ ) in all his writings.

8) After Rabbi Saadia Gaon came such important tenth century grammarians as Yehudah Ibn Qurayš, David ben Abraham Al-Fāsī, Menaḥem ben Saruq, Dunaš Ben Lavraṭ, the disciples of Menaḥem and a disciple of Dunaš, and Yehudah Ḥayyūj. It is important to note that all, except for Ḥayyūj, were either actual lexicographers or at least their approach to language was either lexicographic or exegetic. Dotan has managed to prove that of all those who dealt with Hebrew grammar after Rabbi Saadia Gaon, only one man had seen Saadia Gaon's book. That was the grammarian Adonia who wrote his responses on Saadia Gaon's composition.<sup>21</sup> Dotan, in his discussion and analysis of these responses, also discusses most of the difficult material Adonia mentions. Thus, today Dotan's book is the most informed source for an understanding of important aspects of the linguistic theory reflected in these comments.

To conclude: Professor Dotan's study serves as an exemplary edition of a scientific treatise in Jewish studies in particular and of a scientific work in general. The study contains a detailed and comprehensive treatment of the first book of gram-

20 Dotan notes (Elegance, I, p. 445, n. 13) that as to the pronunciation of the *waw* as a tenuis bet in Palestine during that period, there is testimony from other sources, for example in the lexicon of David Ben Abraham Al-Fāsī (S. L. Skoss, *The Hebrew-Arabic Dictionary of the Bible Known as Kitāb Jāmi' Al-Alfāz [Agron] of David ben Abraham Al-Fāsī*, II, New Haven [1945], p. 451).

21 On Adonya and the problem of the identity of the author of the responses on Rav Saadya Gaon see R. Ḥazon, *Be'ayat zehut ha-mḥabber šel ha-tšuvot 'al Rav Saadya Gaon ve-'al Menaḥem*, M. A. thesis, Tel-Aviv University (1995).

mar written in the Hebrew language. Therefore, it is important for an understanding both of the grammatical theory of Rabbi Saadia Gaon and of the history of the development of Hebrew grammar during the Middle Ages. As is known, Rabbi Saadia Gaon was also an exegete, and there is no doubt that this work also makes a valuable contribution to an understanding of the exegetic method of Rabbi Saadia Gaon.

It is to be hoped that additional manuscripts of Rabbi Saadia Gaon's treatise will be discovered and that Professor Dotan will be able to complete the picture and present us with the entire work.