

# **Unifying Culture Through Language: An Analysis of the Emergence of Classical Judeo-Arabic Writing in Saadia Gaon's Work**

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## **Abstract**

Saadia Gaon's (882-942) *Tafsir* is considered to be a turning point in the history of not only Judeo-Arabic written production, but also medieval Judeo-Arabic culture. Through his translation of the bible into Arabic written in Hebrew characters, Saadia made this text and other works of philosophy, biblical interpretation, synagogue liturgy, and linguistics accessible to a wider audience and standardized a mode of communication among Jews throughout the medieval Islamic world. This paper compares twelfth-century Cairo Geniza fragments of Saadia's *Tafsir* and *Siddur*, analyzing the visual interplay of Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic in these sources. The paper utilizes a descriptive and analytical method, where data collection primarily relies on literature, especially Saadia Gaon's work. Changes in color, hand, damage, marginal notes, and presence or absence of writing on the verso side of the fragment shed light on the application of Saadia's work by Jews in the medieval Mediterranean. I ultimately conclude that while production of anti-Karaite polemic may have partially motivated Saadia to write in Judeo-Arabic, the desire to standardize a uniformly understood language rooted in

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Classical Arabic orthography more comprehensively explains the revolutionary effect of Saadia's work and its immediate tenth-century adaptations outside the Rabbanite Jewish community.

**Keywords:** Language, Classical Judeo-Arabic, Saadia Gaon, Geniza Fragments, Hebrew.

### Abstrak

Tafsir karya Saadia Gaon (882-942) dianggap sebagai titik balik dalam sejarah bukan sekadar sebagai karya tulisan bahasa Arab-Yahudi, tetapi juga budaya Arab-Yahudi abad pertengahan. Melalui terjemahannya dari Alkitab ke bahasa Arab yang ditulis dengan huruf Ibrani, Saadia menghasilkan karya-karya lain seperti; filsafat, interpretasi Alkitab, liturgi sinagoge, dan linguistik yang dapat diakses lebih luas oleh audiens dan menyusun standardisasi mode komunikasi antara kaum Yahudi di seluruh dunia Islam abad pertengahan. Makalah ini membandingkan fragmen Tafsir dan Siddur Saadia dari abad kedua belas yang berasal dari Geniza Kairo, dengan menganalisis interaksi visual antara bahasa Ibrani dan Arab-Yahudi dalam sumber-sumber tersebut. Makalah ini menggunakan metode deskriptif dan analisis, dengan pengumpulan data mengandalkan metode kepustakaan (literatur), terutama karya-karya Saadia Gaon. Perubahan warna, gaya tulisan, kerusakan, catatan marginal, dan keberadaan atau ketiadaan tulisan di sisi verso fragmen memberikan gambaran tentang penggunaan karya Saadia oleh kaum Yahudi di wilayah Mediterania abad pertengahan. Akhirnya, penulis menyimpulkan bahwa meskipun kemungkinan adanya pengaruh polemik anti-Karait yang mendorong Saadia untuk menulis dalam bahasa Arab-Yahudi, namun dorongan yang lebih mendalam adalah keinginannya untuk memperkenalkan standar bahasa yang dapat dipahami secara seragam berdasarkan ejaan bahasa Arab Klasik. Inilah yang lebih menyeluruh menjelaskan efek revolusioner dari karya Saadia dan adaptasinya di luar komunitas Yahudi Rabbanite pada abad kesepuluh.

**Kata Kunci:** Bahasa, Yudeo-Arab Klasik, Saadia Gaon, Fragmen Geniza, Ibrani.

## Introduction

Language is a critical marker of cultural difference, embedded in human nature from the earliest stages of childhood. In both spoken and written form, members of one culture communicate with one another in a manner that is incomprehensible to those outside the group. Judeo-Arabic, the primary language of Jewish texts from the medieval Islamic world, constructed only a partial boundary of intelligibility or lack thereof for those outside the Jewish community.<sup>1</sup> While Judeo-Arabic had similar vocabulary and grammar to Classical and Middle Arabic as well as local Arabic dialects in oral form, its Hebrew characters ensured that Judeo-Arabic texts were incomprehensible to non-Jews. Furthermore, the Hebrew characters themselves marked all Judeo-Arabic texts with an identifiable Jewish character.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout a diaspora stretching across the Mediterranean and reaching the eastern limits of the Islamic domain, spoken Judeo-Arabic took diverse forms and reflected the dialects of local Muslim populations on Jewish communities.<sup>3</sup> Early written Judeo-Arabic, therefore, had a variety of conventions related to differences in spoken dialects among Jewish populations, with letters corresponding to the sound they best matched. In the early Middle Ages, Rabbi Saadia Gaon (882-942) crafted a translation of the Hebrew Bible into Judeo-Arabic, known as *Tafsir RaSaG* (Rav Saadia Gaon), thereby formalizing Judeo-Arabic by modeling it after Classical Arabic structures and creating a standard to be adopted by the Rabbanite Jews living under Islam, but penetrating other communities as well.<sup>4</sup> This particular text circulated widely and

<sup>1</sup> Raymond Schiendlin, "Merchants and Intellectuals, Rabbis and Poets" in *Cultures of the Jews: A New History* ed. David Biale (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 330.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Hary, *Multiglossia in Judeo-Arabic* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 72.

<sup>3</sup> Ella Shohat, "The Invention of Judeo-Arabic: Nation, Partition and the Linguistic Imaginary," *Interventions* 19:2 (2017), 155; Joseph Tobi, "Written Judeo-Arabic: Colloquial versus Middle Arabic" in *Middle Arabic and Mixed Arabic*, ed. Liesbeth Zack and Arie Schippers (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 267.

<sup>4</sup> Meira Polliack, "The Medieval Karaite Tradition of Translating the Hebrew Bible into Arabic: Its Sources, Characteristics and Historical

ushered in a new era known to scholars as the Classical Period of Judeo-Arabic.<sup>5</sup>

Micha Perry claims that, in the context of Christian Europe, “the use of Hebrew was a conscious choice that served as an identity marker.”<sup>6</sup> Written Judeo-Arabic functioned similarly for the Jews of the Islamic world, with the critical difference being that the language itself was fully a product of the Jewish-Muslim symbiosis identified by Shlomo Dov Goitein.<sup>7</sup> In this paper, I argue that the emergence of Classical Judeo-Arabic exemplified in Saadia’s *Tafsir*, which literally translates to interpretation, acted as a mechanism toward the standardization of literary Judeo-Arabic among Jewish communities throughout the Islamic world. I then turn to examples of Geniza fragments that illustrate the flexibility of Judeo-Arabic writing by placing it alongside Hebrew texts such as the Bible and liturgy.

## Preservation and Reputation

Much of the information known to scholars about Saadia Gaon and his times comes from the Cairo Geniza. The Cairo Geniza is a room in Cairo’s Ben-Ezra Synagogue that collected documents of all varieties, primarily in the languages of Hebrew, Arabic, and Judeo-Arabic, from the Middle Ages through the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Most of the material is focused on the medieval period, and Geniza collections include many well-preserved works from the eleventh through thirteenth centuries in particular.<sup>9</sup> Geniza fragments connected to the personality, works, and life of Saadia Gaon are especially noteworthy because they shed light on the influence of an important figure to the history and interconnectivity of the Jews who

Background,” 17; Joshua Blau, *The Emergence and Linguistic Background of Judeo-Arabic: A Study of the Origins of Middle Arabic* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute), 40.

<sup>5</sup> Hary, 76.

<sup>6</sup> Micha Perry, “A Cultural History of Bilingual Charters from Catalonia: Language and Identity,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 111:2 (2021), 185.

<sup>7</sup> Shlomo Dov Goitein, *Jews and Arabs: Their Contacts Through the Ages* (New York: Schocken Books, 1955), 132.

<sup>8</sup> Shlomo Dov Goitein, “The Documents of the Cairo Geniza as a Source for Mediterranean Social History,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 80:2 (1960), 91.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

inhabited the medieval Islamic world. By the thirteenth century, Judeo-Arabic had become a cultural tool that visually separated Jewish writing, via the Hebrew script, from Muslim Arabic writing despite their close linguistic proximity.<sup>10</sup>

The fact that much of Saadia's work is either lost or pieced together from fragments that were intended to be discarded might indicate that he was not actually as influential as the high volume of scholarly literature about him suggests. If his works were so widespread and influential, one might argue, why are many of them not preserved in tenth-century manuscript form? The extant tenth-century versions of Saadia's bible translation use Arabic letters and come from the Christian context of St. Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai, leading some to believe, inaccurately, Joshua Blau argues, that Saadia's text was originally produced in Arabic characters.<sup>11</sup> Tamar Zewi dates the earliest extant Hebrew-character manuscript of Saadia's translation to 1009, but most were copied centuries later in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries by European antiquarians interested in medieval manuscripts.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, less prominent writings like *Kutub al-Lugha*, Saadia's grammatical treatise, were only known until the mid-twentieth century through references and citations in other works before scholars pieced together a more complete version based on fragments found in the Geniza.<sup>13</sup>

However, the challenge of locating original manuscripts only tells part of the story. During his own lifetime, Saadia acquired enemies in both the Rabbanite and Karaite communities who voiced

<sup>10</sup> Joshua Blau, "Medieval Judeo-Arabic" in *Jewish Languages: Theme and Variations: Proceedings of Regional Conferences of the Association for Jewish Studies Held at the University of Michigan and New York University in March-April 1975* ed. Herbert Paper (Cambridge: Association for Jewish Studies, 1978), 125.

<sup>11</sup> Joshua Blau, "Was R. Saadia Gaon's Arabic Translation of the Pentateuch Meant for Muslims Too?" in *Modern Jewish Scholarship in Hungary: The Science of Judaism between East and West*, ed. Tamás Turan and Carsten Wilke (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 71.

<sup>12</sup> Tamar Zewi, *The Samaritan Version of Saadya Gaon's Translation of the Pentateuch* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 14.

<sup>13</sup> Solomon Skoss, *Saadia Gaon, the Earliest Hebrew Grammarian* (Philadelphia: Dropsie College Press, 1955), 2.

opposition to his works and political ideas.<sup>14</sup> He was not afraid of introducing new methodologies and did not shy away from public disagreements with powerful figures intent on maintaining the status quo.<sup>15</sup> Saadia's insistence on a different candidate for the position of exilarch, the political head of the Jewish community in Baghdad, even earned him a suspension of his duties as the Gaon of Sura for 6-7 years before being reinstated.<sup>16</sup> This episode demonstrates that his publications earned the attention of the most powerful leader in all of Rabbanite Judaism.

Abraham Ibn Ezra (1092-1167), a respected early twelfth-century Iberian Jewish poet and intellectual considered Saadia to be "the leading orator in all places."<sup>17</sup> Ibn Ezra's oft-cited comment implies a sense of respect for Saadia as a vocal leader. Maimonides (1138-1204), who lived later in the twelfth century, sung Saadia's praises as well: "The Torah would have been nearly forgotten if it were not for [Saadia], peace be upon him, because he discovered what had been hidden and strengthened that which was diluted, and announced it in his speech [lashon] and his writing and his pen."<sup>18</sup> The Hebrew translation uses the word lashon, which carries a double meaning of language and speech. Therefore, Maimonides cleverly alludes to Saadia's linguistic innovations targeting the Jewish public as well as highlighting his charisma as an orator. Ibn Ezra and Maimonides both draw attention to the orally transmitted element of Saadia's influence on interconnected medieval Jewry, a tradition unavailable to modern scholars but enormously important during Saadia's tenure as gaon.<sup>19</sup> Maimonides goes further, emphasizing Saadia's commentary on the Hebrew bible and praising his

<sup>14</sup> Robert Brody, *Sa'adyah Gaon* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 26.

<sup>15</sup> Brody, 28.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Skoss, 1.

<sup>18</sup> Maimonides, "Iggeret Teiman" in *Iggerot HaRambam* ed. Yitzhak Shilat (Jerusalem: Yeshivat Brachat Moshe, 1987).

<sup>19</sup> Robert Brody, "Sifrut ha-Geonim ve-ha-Tekst ha-Talmudi" [The Literature of the Geonim and the Talmudic Text], *Mehqerei Talmud* [Talmudic Studies], vol. 1, ed. Yaakov Sussman and David Rosenthal (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1990), 242-243.

reinvigoration of the biblical tradition to benefit Rabbanite Judaism. Maimonides considered advancing the common people's understanding of the Torah's commandments to be a worthy cause, so he recognizes Saadia's translation of the Bible into Judeo-Arabic as an important positive step that benefited the community for several generations.

Saadia's motivation for refashioning Judeo-Arabic is an important question for scholars to consider. In "Jews and the Islamic World: Transitions from Rabbinic to Medieval Contexts," Marina Rustow puts forth the argument that Saadia employed a "strategy of taking from his opponents what was best and most effective."<sup>20</sup> According to Rustow, Saadia adapted Judeo-Arabic and some of the literary genres in which he wrote from the Karaites in a successful effort to subvert their systems and use them to benefit Rabbanite Judaism in a way that parallels Judeo-Arabic's subversion of Arabic, a symbol of Islam and its cultural dominance. She bases her argument on the fact that Judeo-Arabic facilitated a major boom in Jewish literary production throughout the Islamic world.<sup>21</sup> Rustow's views enhance an understanding of the reasoning behind some of Saadia's choices, but they also leave questions open for exploration, such as explaining his use of Judeo-Arabic in genres outside anti-Karaite polemics. By further examining primary source traces of Saadia's work, such as Geniza fragments JTS ENA 69.12 and TS AS 71.68 as well as remnants of his siddur (prayer book), I will demonstrate the great extent to which Saadia's adaptation and standardization of Judeo-Arabic manifested itself in the written culture of medieval Mediterranean Jewish society.

### Saadia Gaon, A Man of Many Genres

Saadia Ben Joseph al-Fayyumi was born in the Fayyum district of Egypt in 882 CE. He displayed intellectual ability and curiosity from an early age and set out for Palestine in pursuit of his studies. He acquainted himself with the Palestinian leadership,

<sup>20</sup> Marina Rustow, "Jews and the Islamic World: Transitions from Rabbinic to Medieval Contexts," in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Jewish Studies* ed. Dean Philip Bell (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 101.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

which was considered authoritative among Rabbanite Jews during this period. However, when a dispute over the calendar involving the timing of holidays broke out, Saadia earned a reputation by playing an instrumental role that guided the Babylonian academies to victory over the Palestinian authorities. Sacha Stern's analysis of the controversy pointedly questions why Saadia sided with the Babylonians when he had spent much more time among the Palestinians, suggesting that perhaps a falling-out with the Palestinian leaders prompted Saadia to readily side with the Babylonians and move to Babylonia himself.<sup>22</sup> Soon thereafter he was appointed Gaon of Sura, one of the prestigious yeshivot of Babylonia, where he remained for the rest of his life, except for a few years he spent in exile due to his squabble with Exilarch David ben Zakkai (d. 940). As Gaon, Saadia employed innovative mechanisms to galvanize and reinvent traditional approaches to Jewish learning and practice. His contributions to the study of Jewish texts and his introduction of Judeo-Arabic to the milieu of formal Jewish education shaped Jewish intellectual life for the ensuing centuries and ensured that he lived on through references and citations for centuries after his death throughout the Islamic lands.<sup>23</sup>

Benjamin Hary considers two forms of Judeo-Arabic that predate Saadia's lifetime: Pre-Islamic Judeo-Arabic and Early Judeo-Arabic. Pre-Islamic Judeo-Arabic did not leave behind any literature, so Hary primarily considers it to be a spoken dialect that was very similar to the Arabic being spoken in the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>24</sup> Papyrus letters provide evidence of a second period, or Early Period, of Judeo-Arabic. Blau and Hopkins characterize this period as developing a phonetic system of orthography such that the Hebrew letter that sounds the closest to the Arabic letter is chosen in spelling Arabic words.<sup>25</sup> For example, an Arabic word with the letter ء might be written with the Hebrew ת rather than ئ as it would appear in

<sup>22</sup> Sacha Stern, *The Jewish Calendar Controversy of 921/922 CE* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 14.

<sup>23</sup> For a more detailed biography of Saadia Gaon's life and works, see: Robert Brody, *Sa'adyah Gaon* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013).

<sup>24</sup> Hary, 75.

<sup>25</sup> Blau and Hopkins, "On Early Judeo-Arabic Orthography," *Zeitschrift für Arabische Linguistik* 12 (1984), 12.

Classical Judeo-Arabic.<sup>26</sup> Crucially, Early Judeo-Arabic does not create equivalencies between Hebrew and Arabic letters that are derived from the same Semitic origin. Indeed, Blau and Hopkins articulate that the influence of Classical Arabic spelling, consistent in the works of Saadia and later Judeo-Arabic authors, is completely absent from works dating to the Early Period.<sup>27</sup> They conclude that because Hebrew and Aramaic were the “linguistic vehicles of Jewish culture,” scribes used the written forms of Hebrew and Aramaic to phonetically represent the spoken Arabic dialect.<sup>28</sup> Judeo-Arabic from the Classical Period, beginning with Saadia Gaon, introduced Classical Arabic’s orthographic system, which re-oriented Judeo-Arabic’s relationship to proper Arabic and made Arabic spelling and grammar, in addition to vocabulary, necessary skills in order for one to write in Judeo-Arabic.

Saadia’s writings covered a diverse array of topics, enabling him to wield heavy influence over the linguistic direction of the medieval Jewish community. While his translation of the bible is his seminal contribution, Saadia’s Book of Beliefs and Opinions is an instrumental work of Jewish philosophy that laid the foundations for later generations, especially Maimonides and his disciple, Samuel Ibn Tibbon, to merge Aristotelian rationalism with canonical Jewish texts and proofs of God’s existence.<sup>29</sup> *Kutub Al-Lugha*, the “Book of the Language,” testifies to Saadia’s interest in grammar, especially Hebrew grammar, and his capacity to write about the Hebrew language in Judeo-Arabic. Saadia also helped develop a new category of study for Rabbanite intellectuals, that of biblical exegesis.<sup>30</sup> Before Saadia’s time, Rabbanite intellectuals focused heavily on analyzing Talmudic material and dealt far less with the biblical texts, the sole focus of the Karaites, who were known for being superior biblical scholars. Saadia’s concern over Karaite

<sup>26</sup> For example, the Arabic *الذى* would appear as *אלְذִי* instead of *אלְדִי* in early Judeo-Arabic; Hary, 83.

<sup>27</sup> Blau and Hopkins, 12.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>29</sup> Bernard Septimus, *Hispano-Jewish Culture in Transition: The Career and Controversies of Ramah* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 61.

<sup>30</sup> Brody, *Sa’adyah Gaon*, 30.

influence and dominance likely inspired him to engage in biblical exegesis as a way of taking back agency for Rabbanites with regard to the Bible. Saadia was also a prolific poet, and composed a number of piyyutim, liturgical poems, in Hebrew.<sup>31</sup> Saadia and other authors wrote Piyyutim for use in liturgical contexts, which motivated them to write in Hebrew while writing all other genres in Judeo-Arabic. However, his poems evidence a strong command of the Hebrew language for creative composition in addition to reading knowledge for biblical texts. The practice of writing poetry in Hebrew situates Saadia's Judeo-Arabic writings within his broad corpus and highlights the distinction of different languages mapping onto specific genres of literature.

While Saadia's versatility helped establish himself as the foremost Jewish intellectual of his day, his *Tafsir*, or translation of the Bible into Judeo-Arabic, influenced the global Jewish community most extensively. This work rendered the central text of Judaism into the vernacular spoken language and has earned comparisons to the Septuagint and Onqelos' Targum of the Bible into Aramaic, maximizing the accessibility of the biblical text.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, this particular text changed the very nature of Judeo-Arabic. Whereas the pre-Saadianic Judeo-Arabic orthography (spelling system) used Hebrew letters that corresponded most accurately with the sound of the Arabic word, Saadia adopted a system in which the chosen Hebrew letters corresponded with the correct Arabic spelling of the word.<sup>33</sup> This made the language system much more formalized because words were rooted in a pre-existing structure and took advantage of the fact that Hebrew letters corresponded to Arabic equivalents, adding a logical element to Judeo-Arabic orthography. This shift permeated other genres of writing and became the standard for the remainder of the classical period of Judeo-Arabic.

The case study of Saadia Gaon illuminates the confluence of a prolific individual, the cultural context in which he lived, and the

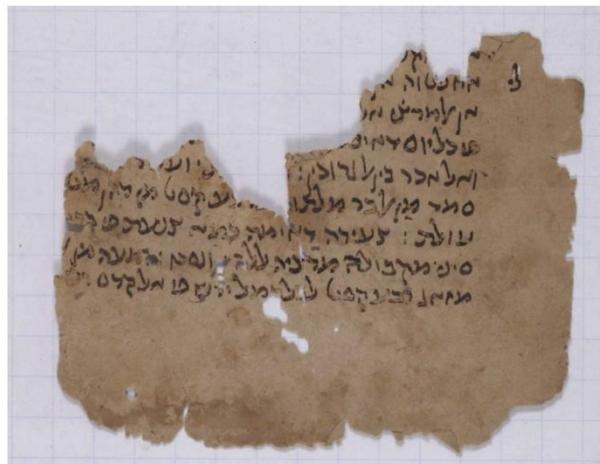
<sup>31</sup> Brody, 112.

<sup>32</sup> Isaac Kalimi, *Fighting Over the Bible: Jewish Interpretation, Sectarianism, and Polemic from Temple to Talmud and Beyond* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 235

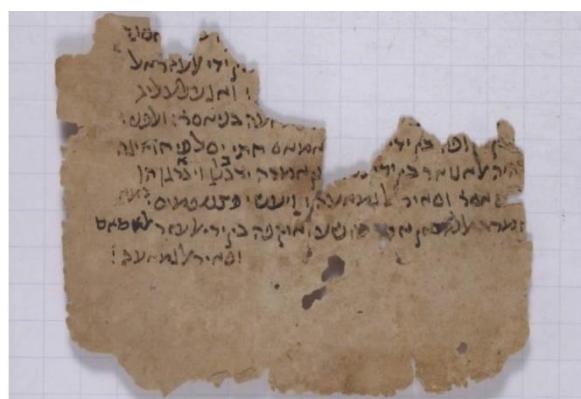
<sup>33</sup> Blau and Hopkins, 13.

physical qualities of the written texts that he left behind. The paper remains, in digital form as available to the public through the Friedberg Jewish Manuscript Society, shed insight into the reception Saadia's texts received and permit the reconstruction of the cultural impact of Classical Judeo-Arabic on Mediterranean Jewish life.

### Fragments of Saadia's Biblical Translation



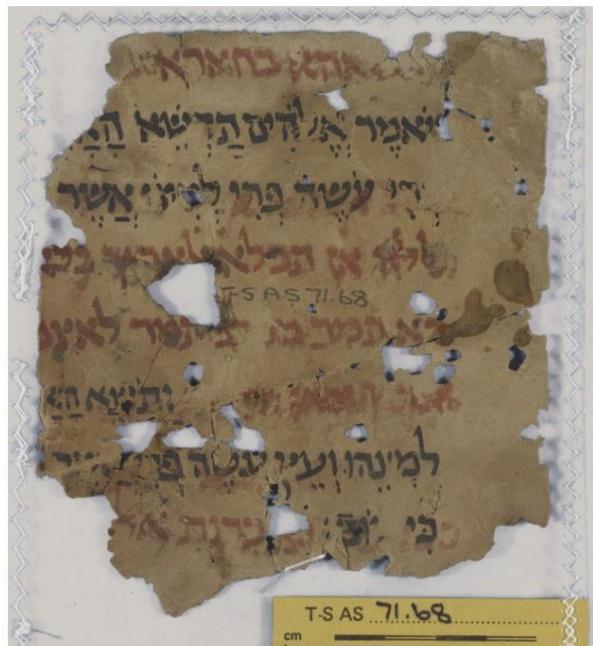
**Fig 1.** JTS ENA NS 69.12, recto. This fragment includes Numbers 27-28 from Saadia Gaon's Judeo-Arabic bible.<sup>34</sup>



**Fig 2.** JTS ENA NS 69.12, verso.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America ENA NS 69.12 (recto).



**Fig 3.** TS AS 71.68, recto. This damaged fragment depicts both the original Hebrew text (black) and Saadia's Judeo-Arabic translation (red) to Genesis 1:10-12.<sup>36</sup>

Saadia's bible translation ranks among the most important texts produced during the early Middle Ages. The many fragments located in Cairo Geniza collections, which include works from all around the Mediterranean, testifies to the widespread usage of Saadia's translation among medieval Jewish communities. A comparison of two such fragments will attest to a diversity of forms in which the text existed and the influence of these differences on those who used the text.

Two fragments apt for comparison are JTS ENA NS 69.12 and TS AS 71.68. The different forms of the letters on display in each text evidence a high degree of scribal agency. In addition, the physical

<sup>35</sup> New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America ENA NS 69.12 (verso)

<sup>36</sup> Cambridge University Library Taylor-Schechter Arabic Series 71.68 (recto).

state of preservation and the materials that were used to produce the texts of which these fragments were once a part speaks to the conditions, needs, and goals of the individuals who produced them. These fragments are firsthand examples of the use of Judeo-Arabic in a religious context. Religious practice and ritual comprised an important aspect of one's identity during this period, constructing a societal division whereby engaging in certain rituals and not practicing others defined one as a member of a particular community. Texts such as these fragments were essential to facilitating such rituals, linking a physical object to the outward expression of communal identity.

JTS ENA NS 69.12 consists of the bottom portion of a paper page with Judeo-Arabic writing.<sup>37</sup> The recto side (shown in Fig. 1) and the verso side (Fig. 2) both contain writing. Damage is most prominent in the middle of the page, where a tear cut through the text and left holes behind. Some of the words appear in full, with no damage to the ink whatsoever. In other places, the ink in the center of the stroke has been removed but the outline and shape of the letters themselves are fully clear and legible. A lamed with a single dot in the upper right margin of the fragment indicates a hapax legomenon, a word that is only used once in the entirety of the biblical text. The scribe who penned the volume of which this fragment was a part used a consistent, legible script. The lines start at a consistent place on the right side of the page, but they are not justified to end at the same level of indentation on the left side, based on how the ends of the lines appear on the verso side of the fragment. As the scribe's pen moved from the right side of the page to the left, the thickness of the strokes decreased, evidencing the reloading of ink at the end of the lines. This is more evident on the verso side than the recto side, but the penultimate line on the verso side indicates that the scribe replenished his ink prior to the line's final word. The verso side contains an ink spillage at the bottom of the page, but the recto side appears free of impurities.

Amir Ashur and Tamar Zewi identify JTS ENA NS 69.12's scribe as Mevorakh b. Nathan, who was active in Fustat from 1150-

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<sup>37</sup> JTSA ENA NS 69.12.

1180.<sup>38</sup> Saadia Gaon died in 942, so this particular version of his work dates to approximately 200 years after the end of his life. The professional nature of Mevorakh's work is evident in the consistency of the letters and the even spacing between the lines and of the right margin. Therefore, somebody commissioned Mevorakh to produce this work, indicating a substantial value placed on Saadia's text. Ashur and Zewi claim that the orthography and dotting patterns are consistent with other early fragments and manuscripts of Saadia's Judeo-Arabic translation, implying uniformity among productions of the work.<sup>39</sup> Scribal agency merges with established norms of Saadia's biblical translation to create a window into the life and use of a medieval Judeo-Arabic text.

TS AS 71.68 also comes from Saadia's Bible translation, but it has many identifiable differences that make it a productive comparison with JTS ENA NS 69.12. Unlike JTS ENA NS 69.12, TS AS 71.68 includes the original Hebrew text complete with masoretic vowelizing.<sup>40</sup> The Hebrew text is composed of dark letters that resemble traditional renditions of biblical scrolls. The Judeo-Arabic appears in red ink, visually differentiating the translation from the original. It appears that the scribe wrote out the entire verse in Hebrew followed by its Judeo-Arabic translation, such that the switches do not appear in correlation with new lines, but rather the text switches from one to the other in the middle of the line. While the black Hebrew text is completely legible where the paper is intact, portions of the red Judeo-Arabic have smudged to the point that the letters are no longer distinguishable in the antepenultimate line from the bottom. The right side of the fragment contains evidence of a spill that left a permanent mark on the page, and the overall condition is more degraded than that of JTS ENA NS 69.12. Holes appear throughout the fragment, mostly concentrated in the lower portion. Finally, the verso side of TS AS 71.68 is completely blank.

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<sup>38</sup> Amir Ashur and Tamar Zewi, "A Geniza Fragment of Saadya Gaon's Bible Translation Copied by Mevorakh b. Nathan in the Twelfth Century," *Astarté* 2 (2019), 115.

<sup>39</sup> Ashur and Zewi, 118.

<sup>40</sup> TS AS 71.68.

The most substantial and visible difference, which existed at the time of each work's production, between the two fragments is the inclusion of the Hebrew text and the change of color for the Arabic text in TS AS 71.68, as well as the more traditional shape of the Hebrew letters. Coloring Judeo-Arabic in red highlights its presence on the page and marks it as different to the reader, even for a viewer who is not acquainted with the Hebrew alphabet. The Judeo-Arabic text is also unwoveled, another point of contrast, with the assumption being that a reader could pronounce the Arabic words. The fact that vowels were necessary for the Hebrew suggests, then, that readers needed help pronouncing the Hebrew words correctly.

TS AS 71.68's lack of text on the verso side, in contrast to JTS ENA NS 69.12, requires explanation. This feature appears to indicate that the fragment comes from a scroll, rather than a codex. The fragment is only 10 cm wide, although it surely extended beyond its current dimensions because the end of the fragment cuts off letters and words. A relationship exists between the lack of text on the verso side and the inclusion of the Hebrew text because scrolls, intended for use in the synagogue, would need the Hebrew available for recitation. Meanwhile a codex, like JTS ENA NS 69.12, was likely used in an intellectual setting where the Judeo-Arabic meaning of the text was most relevant.

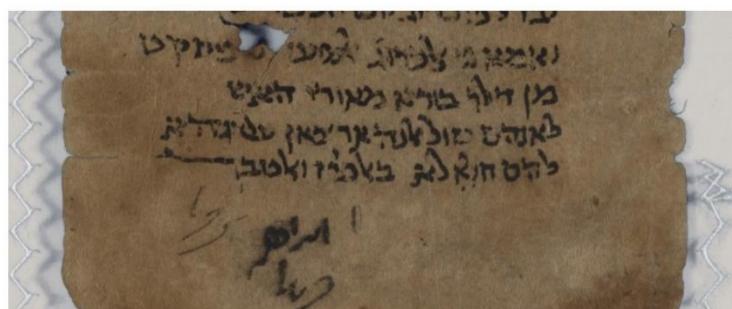
Each of these fragments contain Judeo-Arabic, but the Judeo-Arabic plays a very different role. In JTS ENA NS 69.12, Judeo-Arabic is the main focal point and is the only means to acquire the information on the page. For TS AS 71.68, on the other hand, Judeo-Arabic serves the purpose of facilitating the reading of the text, but the scribe centered the Hebrew text as the primary means of communication. Judeo-Arabic becomes an aid to the Hebrew, evident in the red ink's lesser degree of contrast on the paper than the black ink. On the other hand, the presence of Judeo-Arabic increases the accessibility of the text to those who only understand Arabic, especially for the purpose of reading the text aloud. Moreover, the Judeo-Arabic text provides cultural context for the fragment. Judeo-Arabic identifies this piece of paper as belonging distinctly to the Jewish communities of the Arabic speaking world, as defined by the range of communities that adopted Saadia Gaon's text as their

authoritative Arabic translation of the Bible. Therefore, it ascribes cultural meaning to a piece of paper linking an object to the intentions and lives of the people who produced and used it, evident by the specific translation of the bible that the scribe selected.

### Saadia's Siddur



**Fig 4.** TS AR 18(2).2, recto. Saadia Gaon's Siddur. The page is preserved almost in its entirety with text on both the recto and verso sides. The first word of the third line is Judeo-Arabic while the rest of the text is Hebrew.<sup>41</sup>



**Fig 5.** TS AR 18(2).17, verso. This version of Saadia's siddur also contains Hebrew liturgy and Judeo-Arabic instructions, but the shape of the letters is uniform throughout.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Cambridge University Library Taylor-Schechter Collection, Arabic 18(2).2 (recto).

<sup>42</sup> Cambridge University Library Taylor-Schechter Arabic 18(2).17 (verso).

In the fragments of Saadia's translation of the bible, Judeo-Arabic functioned as both the sole text on the page as well as to translate Hebrew text and differentiated by a distinct color and lack of vowels, which are absent from Judeo-Arabic in general. Saadia Gaon's siddur, or prayer book, finds yet another use for Judeo-Arabic specific to the function of the prayer book and its intended use. While the bulk of the text, the liturgy, is in Hebrew, the instructions are provided in Judeo-Arabic. The two languages also appear differently on the page in TS Ar 18(2).<sup>43</sup> The Hebrew text is small and slanted, while the Judeo-Arabic letters are larger and stand upright. This distinction, like the red ink in TS AS 71.68, separates the Judeo-Arabic letters from the Hebrew ones when they would otherwise blend in.<sup>44</sup> For example, the first word in the third line of the above image is a Judeo-Arabic instruction while all of the other lines are presented in Hebrew. Hebrew liturgy is a hallmark of the Jewish prayer service, and Saadia had no intention of substituting or translating it, demonstrating a consistent logic with his composition of piyyutim in Hebrew. Changing the style of lettering for the Judeo-Arabic instruction acknowledges the difference between the language and the categories of information that each represents on the page. This distinction helps the reader differentiate between liturgy and instruction, enabling a smoother prayer service with engaged participation from the Judeo-Arabic reader.

The page is in good condition overall, with a missing section in the center of the page, where the fold was, as well as a small hole in the lower left, which is featured in Fig. 4. Writing on both the recto and verso sides, as well as the spacing and fold in the center confirm that the page was part of a codex. There is no punctuation and the text almost forms a single large block, so distinguishing between sections is quite difficult, but someone raised in the culture using this type of siddur would likely have found it easy to maneuver. The role of the Judeo-Arabic in this context is to facilitate that dimension of

<sup>43</sup> TS Ar 18(2).2.

<sup>44</sup> For a detailed examination of distinctive features setting apart letters from the rest of a text, see: Laura Kendrick, *Animating the Letter: The Figurative Embodiment of Writing from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999).

the prayer service, presenting the instructional information in a more easily understandable language as well as the appearance of its letters. In doing so, Judeo-Arabic operates as a medium that connects an Arabic-speaking Jew's outside life to the Hebrew words of the liturgy.

Fig. 5 is a different iteration of Saadia Gaon's siddur, also with the liturgy in Hebrew and the instructions in Judeo-Arabic.<sup>45</sup> However, in this version, the font of all the text is uniform so one cannot easily distinguish between Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic by exclusively visual markers. This enables the Judeo-Arabic to blend in with the Hebrew, which would make it more difficult to distinguish instructions from prayers. This page has writing on both the recto and verso sides, with an interesting mark beneath the text on the verso side, as shown in Fig. 5. This mark appears to be either a note or a signature of some kind written in Arabic letters that are too faded to read accurately, but its position on a page in the middle of the siddur indicates that it is a note. The presence of hand-scrawled annotation in Arabic script next to the Hebrew text is fascinating and indicates that perhaps Arabic script was a commonly used means for immediate communication while Hebrew script was a more intentional choice to lend Jewish character to the textual object. It is also possible, since Hebrew was used primarily for reading, that individuals who could write but were not scribes, such as merchants, were more naturally inclined to use the Arabic script for a quick note because of their daily professional interactions and communication with non-Jews. With dates and identities unknown, more information is needed to fully understand the cultural context behind this particular mark on the page of TS AR 18(2).17.

### Saadia Outside the Jewish Community

Saadia's transformation of Judeo-Arabic into a system that resembled Classical Arabic permitted his bible translation to be meaningful in contexts outside the Jewish community. As mentioned previously, the earliest complete manuscripts of Saadia's biblical

<sup>45</sup> Colin Baker and Meira Polliack, *Arabic and Judeo-Arabic Manuscripts in the Cambridge Geniza Collections: Arabic Old Series (T-S Ar. 1a-54)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 71.

translation come from the Egyptian Orthodox Christian community, which Zewi distinguishes from a later edition that she identifies as a Coptic adaptation.<sup>46</sup> These manuscripts date to 939/940 and 963 respectively. The manuscripts were transliterated from Hebrew to Arabic letters in order to make them accessible to the Christian community. It is noteworthy that despite Greek being an important language for Orthodox Christianity, the standard Arabic letter system was chosen and Arabic written in Greek letters never emerged within this community as the Jews imposed their preferred alphabet onto Arabic. The penetration of this text outside the Jewish community so soon after its inception, within Saadia's lifetime even, points to a vigorous attentiveness of the Christian community to Jewish advances related to the Hebrew Bible.

Saadia's work in Hebrew-character form was accessible only to Jewish audiences and could not be read by those outside the Jewish community. This provided Jews who understood Saadia's text with the agency to render the text into a version accessible to non-Jews if they chose to do so. The fact that Saadia used the conventions of Classical Arabic in the Judeo-Arabic text facilitated the transliteration of the work into Judeo-Arabic letters; otherwise, Saadia's translation would have been of little use to those who could not read the Hebrew alphabet. In the case of the Sinai, it appears that Jews fulfilled their Christian neighbors' desire to use Saadia's Arabic translation, who may have understood it to be more reliable to the original source because it was produced by a Jewish translator. The presence of Rabbanite Jews in Egypt who used Saadia's translation enabled the passing of the text to the Christians, with Karaite Arabic translations, such as that of Yefet ben Eli, coming later in response to the association between the Tafsir and the Rabbanite movement.<sup>47</sup> This evidence contradicts Rustow's argument because it demonstrates that other groups responded to Saadia's work before

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<sup>46</sup> Zewi, 187-188.

<sup>47</sup> Meira Polliack, *The Karaite Tradition of Arabic Bible Translation: A Linguistic and Exegetical Study of Karaite Translations of the Pentateuch from the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries C.E.* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 17.

the Karaites did so, and took advantage of Saadia's Judeo-Arabic writing for non-polemical purposes.<sup>48</sup>

The presence of a Coptic adaptation manuscript from the mid-thirteenth century is further evidence of Saadia's reach beyond the boundaries of the Jewish community.<sup>49</sup> The Copts had their own language and script, which resembles the Greek alphabet much more closely than Hebrew or Arabic, but their version of Saadia's translation used Arabic letters. The use of the text in these communities is beyond the scope of this paper, but the manner of cultural transmission is highly relevant. The biblical text itself is central to Judaism as well as its offshoots and the different branches of Christianity, but not to Islam. Therefore, each of these groups was marginal to the dominant culture and connected by a shared reverence for a particular text. Through its transmission, transliteration, and popularity, Saadia's Bible translation became a symbol of shared cultural value among a variety of religious minorities, enabling them to embrace their sacred text in their most familiar language within the Islamic context.

Tamar Zewi provides a close analysis of the different iterations of translations of Saadia's bible into the Samaritan script.<sup>50</sup> The Samaritans were marginal to mainstream Judaism, but extant manuscripts of Saadia's Bible demonstrate an interest in the intellectual developments of the Rabbanite Jewish community. The Samaritans also used their own unique alphabet to express Arabic, so this transliteration might be understood as a variation on Judeo-Arabic with the goal of taking an already sub-dominant language and further altering its form so as to only be understood by a yet more marginal ingroup. The smaller population of the Samaritan community demonstrates that Saadia's text penetrated niche communities that were able to adapt the Judeo-Arabic translation into an edition that suited their needs. Unlike with the Arabic-speaking Christians of Egypt, the Samaritans created their version of the text independently, without the assistance of Rabbanite scholars

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<sup>48</sup> Rustow, 101; see above, 5.

<sup>49</sup> Zewi, 120.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

and scribes with the explicit intent of correcting Saadia's perceived errors.<sup>51</sup>

### Saadia's Polemics and Salmon ben Yeroham's Hebrew Response

The Karaites held a somewhat special relationship to Saadia among non-Rabbanite religious groups. Saadia saw the Karaites as the chief competitor to the Rabbanite movement and considered them a threat to global Jewish unity.<sup>52</sup> The Karaite-Rabbanite rivalry was often heated, and produced lengthy arguments. Marina Rustow argues that Saadia's use of Arabic for these polemical tracts was targeted at a Karaite audience to disprove their arguments.<sup>53</sup> Generally Karaites are associated with Arabic, and especially Arabic-script, material from the Cairo Geniza, so Rustow interprets Saadia's use of Judeo-Arabic as an effort to talk to them on their own terms even though he wrote in Judeo-Arabic for other purposes as well.<sup>54</sup> It is also important to note that while Rabbanites and Karaites sparred over intellectual matters, they lived together and intermarried somewhat frequently in the Islamic East.<sup>55</sup> For these reasons, Karaites should be understood in this context as part of the medieval Jewish community even if barriers existed between them and the Rabbanites.

In response to Saadia, Karaite scholar Salmon ben Yeroham (tenth century) authored a treatise that set out to defend Karaite ideology and disprove Rabbanite arguments. Salmon's work, titled *Milhamot Hashem*, consists predominantly of personal attacks against Saadia Gaon, which are supplemented by his proofs of the oral tradition's invalidity.<sup>56</sup> Curiously, the work was written in Hebrew, an inversion of the typical association of Karaites with

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Brody, 147.

<sup>53</sup> Rustow, 101; see above, p. 5.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Marina Rustow, "Karaites, Real and Imagined: Three Cases of Jewish Heresy," *Past and Present* 197:1 (2007), 42.

<sup>56</sup> Leon Nemoy, "The Milhamoth Hashem of Salmon ben Yeroham," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 28:1 (1937), 91.

Arabic and Rabbanites with Hebrew.<sup>57</sup> Salmon understood that Saadia was attempting to claim Judeo-Arabic for the Rabbanites, using the Bible translation as a tool to do so and translating verses in a way that reinforced Rabbanite interpretations. As such, Salmon's attack uses Hebrew to demonstrate the Karaites' closer and more substantive connection to the Bible in its original Hebrew form.

While polemics cannot account for the entirety of Saadia's use of Judeo-Arabic, the conflict between Rabbanite and Karaite Judaism loomed large for medieval Jewish leaders. Already in a tenuous, though protected, position in the Islamic world and comprising a small minority, it was in the interest of Jewish leaders to promote the unification of all who identified themselves as members of the Jewish people. However, each group claimed that its interpretation of the Oral Law as either divine truth or a human invention bearing no spiritual value was absolutely correct. Unlike Islam, against which writing polemics was prohibited and therefore took place only in limited and hidden forms, Rabbanites and Karaites were free to openly compose polemics against each other as much as they desired.<sup>58</sup> Within this vast literature, Saadia's choice to author his anti-Karaite polemic in Arabic and Salmon ben Yeroham's use of Hebrew to critique Saadia showcase the way that language choice interacted with boundaries that delineated communal identity during the tenth century.

## Conclusion

The project of cultural history seeks to identify the process whereby something without inherent meaning takes on significance in a specific cultural context. Saadia Gaon's successful effort to shape a language into a tool of cultural distinction represents a prime example ripe for analysis because it took an existent phenomenon within the Arabic-speaking Jewish community and imbued it with a special cultural relevance for its users, embracing a form that enabled

<sup>57</sup> Salmon ben Yeroham, *Sefer Milhamot Hashem* ed. Yoseph El-Gamil (Ramlah: Institute Tifeeret Yoseph, 2000), 54. Hebrew.

<sup>58</sup> Moshe Perlmann, "The Medieval Polemics Between Judaism and Islam" in *Religion in a Religious Age* ed. S.D. Goitein (Cambridge: Association for Jewish Studies, 1974), 121.

the text to transcend beyond the boundaries of the Jewish community itself. Saadia's body of written work upended norms of traditional Jewish literary production and ushered in what scholars now understand to be the classical period of Judeo-Arabic culture. While each of his writings contributed to the new role of Judeo-Arabic in medieval Jewish society, his translation of the Bible into Judeo-Arabic was the farthest-reaching and most influential of his works. In facilitating this translation of text, Saadia opened the door for a process of standardization of the written form of the Judeo-Arabic language to revolutionize medieval Jewish society and bring the Jewish communities of Islamic world closer to one another linguistically and culturally for the duration of the Middle Ages.

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