

Saadia Gaon: The Book of Psalms as a Second Pentateuch

I. The Rhetorical Thesis: Commandment and admonition phrased as prayer and petition

Although Saadia Gaon was not the first commentator on the Book of Psalms, all subsequent Jewish exegetes of that book are in a sense his descendants.¹ His view that the 150 psalms comprise a sort of second Pentateuch, revealed to David, was not based on rabbinic sources, nor was it accepted by later commentators; nevertheless, its echoes continue to resound in their writings. Abraham Ibn Ezra, for example, in his two introductions to Psalms, disputes at length several of the Gaon's original ideas about the nature of the Book of Psalms, without, however, explicitly attributing them to him.² A thorough study of Saadia's view is thus important not only for its own sake, but also in order to appreciate the reasons for its total rejection by his successors.

We have two introductions by Saadia to the Book of Psalms.³ One is extremely short (pp. 51–53 in the Kafih edition), the other some eleven times as long (ibid., pp. 17–50). Both present the same basic conception of the Book of Psalms; but the long introduction develops the argument and proofs in much greater detail and appends a translation of the first four psalms, accompanied by a full-fledged commentary on each of them as an example of the exegetical method derived from that conception (see Saadia's statement of purpose: ibid., p. 50). In my opinion, the short introduction is probably Saadia's preface to the *Tafsir* on Psalms, while the longer one belongs with the long commentary he wrote later (this chronological order is suggested by the fact that the long commentary often refers to the *Tafsir* and has no independent existence apart from it). I find this assumption persuasive, even though the rather confused picture offered by the manuscripts fails to support it. Only two manuscripts of the long

commentary are extant. Both introductions are found in the Munich MS (Hebrew #122 = Arabic #236); it is the short one, however, that is prefaced to the body of the commentary, preceded by the long introduction, in the handwriting of another scribe.⁴ Nor can the Yemenite MS designated Q in the Kafih edition demonstrate any link between the long introduction and the long commentary, since it contains only the short introduction. Neither introduction is found in MS Oxford-Bodleian 2484 and the two Yemenite manuscripts designated M and V in Kafih's edition, which include only the *Tafsir*.⁵ In any case, the short introduction apparently antedates the long one, and Saadiah's astonishing conception of the Book of Psalms is clearly and forthrightly expressed in both.

Saadiah begins his short introduction by stating his basic thesis, which expands and develops the rabbinic principle that "the Torah speaks in human terms" (BT Berakot 31b): Since ethical literature requires many and varied means of expression, the Lord in his wisdom saw to it that the prophetic literature, which was also intended to guide and edify man, is phrased in a variety of styles and idioms. To illustrate his thesis Saadiah enumerates ten rhetorical devices normally employed by human speakers to persuade others to follow the just path. Some of these devices are specific and direct: commandment and prohibition, encouragement and threat, parables and tales (about exemplary heroes and villains, and their respective reward and punishment). Others are general turns of style recommended by their indirect appeal and subtlety: a phrasing appropriate to overt guidance—the direct address of master to servant—may be supplemented with the sophisticated distancing achieved by referring to the readers or audience in the third person or by transforming the master's authoritative pronouncements into the humble entreaty of the servant. Since these devices are so widespread, Saadiah sees no need to give examples of them from daily usage and proceeds immediately to cite from the Book of Psalms two or three instances of each. Only after presenting this mass of examples does he explain his purpose:

. . . to keep the reader of this book from discriminating among its contents and understanding what is placed in the mouth of the servant as his own speech and not that of his master; that is, the reader should not think that 'have mercy upon me,' 'succor me,' 'save me,' and the like are the words of the servant rather than part of the prophet's vision from the Lord; nor should he think that 'they will praise' and 'they will sing' are really in the third person instead of direct address; nor anything that might be construed opposite to the Lord's intention. We must realize that all of these were phrased by the Lord in the various forms of speech employed by his creatures. (Saadiah, *Psalms*, p. 53)

Thus the rhetorical analysis is intended to ground his view of Psalms as a prophetic work of religious guidance on a firm theoretical foundation by preventing two prevalent errors: (1) seeing the multiplicity of verbal and grammatical forms as evidence of multiple topics and speakers; (2) understanding indirect forms of address literally. Only a simplistic rhetorical theory considers form and content to be necessarily identical, so that a psalm worded as a man's address to his Maker must be interpreted as a request or as praise, or that third-person speech is inappropriate in the Lord's direct injunction to his creatures that they obey him. For Saadiah, Moses' song in Deut. 32:1–42 is incontrovertible proof that variation of form and changes of speaker do not negate the unity of a work. Although the song is explicitly described as the words of the Lord—"in order that this poem may be My witness against the people of Israel" (Deut. 31:19)—we find, alongside the Lord's direct address to his people ("see, then, that I, I am He" [Deut. 32:39]), that "it is stated partly in the voice of his prophet, as if he [Moses] were speaking to his people in the name of his master" (e.g., "For the name of the Lord I proclaim, Give glory to our God" [v. 3]). This song also intersperses direct address (vv. 7 and 18) with the third person (vv. 21 and 36). Consequently Saadiah can take this as the model for his far-reaching exegetical approach to the Book of Psalms:

We must understand the prophet's words in this book, such as 'have mercy upon me,' as [spoken by] the Lord—"I will have mercy upon my servant"—and [understand] 'heed my prayer' as 'I will hear your prayer,' . . . and similarly everything in this book. All is the word of the Lord and nothing is human discourse, as the faithful transmitters of our tradition have attested. (Saadiah, *Psalms*, p. 53)

Since the multiplicity of rhetorical forms can be interpreted either literally (as reflecting a multiplicity of topics and speakers) or as a stylistic device (indirect and variegated expressions of a single subject by a single speaker), some sort of external evidence is needed to permit a choice between the two options. For Moses' song in Deuteronomy Saadiah could bring the explicit testimony of the text itself, found in the narrative framework in which the poem is set (Deut. 31:19). In the absence of any explicit internal proof of the topical and rhetorical unity of the Book of Psalms, Saadiah must depend on the faithful testimony of the "transmitters of our tradition"—without, however, specifying the rabbinic statement to which he is alluding. It is all but impossible to penetrate the veil of indefiniteness that envelops this statement; many rabbinic statements deal with the issue of the authorship of Psalms (most attribute the book to "ten elders,")⁶ but there seems to be no direct Talmudic support for his assertion of the

rhetorical unity of the book ("All is the word of the Lord").⁷ The long introduction is of no assistance on this point, since there Saadiah follows a different line of argument, as we shall see (pp. 13 ff.). In my opinion, Saadiah is not referring to some explicit rabbinic passage that could be quoted to prove his contention, but to the common Talmudic practice of introducing prooftexts from anywhere in Psalms with "as it is said" and "as it is written," ignoring the specific context and making no distinction among speakers and styles.

We have traced Saadiah's argument in the short introduction in some detail and quoted him extensively both because this is the only way to come to an understanding of his unique approach and the unusual method it requires and because on at least one major issue the short introduction is clearer and more comprehensible than the long introduction. This enables us now to be relatively brief in our exposition of the long introduction, concentrating primarily upon whatever was added to or modified from its predecessor. The first part of this introduction (Saadiah, *Psalms*, pp. 17-24) is again devoted to examining the rhetorical modes employed in Psalms, but in much greater detail than the parallel passage in the short introduction. Akin to the richness and variety of persuasive devices found in human language, the divine language of Scripture relies on five basic forms of speech: direct address, interrogation (in divine speech only rhetorical or ostensible questions are possible!), narrative, commandment and admonition, and prayer and petition (these too cannot be taken literally when spoken by God!). These five elementary forms yield eighteen rhetorical modes (as opposed to the ten enumerated in the short introduction); a scriptural occurrence of each is demonstrated by a quotation from the Pentateuch (for most) and from Psalms (almost always). These eighteen modes constitute "the totality of edification" (p. 22), since the frequent variation and changes of speaker guarantee that the "reader will be edified by all of them and not become impatient" (p. 23). What is the aim of edification served by the Book of Psalms? Saadiah answers by means of an analogy to Scripture as a whole: "Since the declared purpose of all of Scripture is commandment and admonition, and the other sixteen modes of speech are merely ancillary to them, so too this book, which is part of Scripture, also has no purpose other than commandment and admonition, and requires the other sixteen modes only to strengthen and reinforce them" (ibid.). Saadiah then attempts to prove that this basic principle, which posits a very narrow common basis for all the biblical books, is tenable from the rhetorical point of view. In order to do this he shows how narrative, direct address, and prayer (for some reason he omits interrogation) are actually used to persuade people to obey divine commandments and warnings. Given the frequency and importance of prayer in the Book of Psalms, what Saadiah says

here about prayer would seem to be the essential point; the discussion of the other rhetorical forms is included chiefly to provide analogies that will buttress the legitimacy of this transformation: "Thus [the Lord] found it necessary to set down for them supplications and prayers and entreaties, in order to remind them of their frailty and powerlessness and of their dependence upon him, so that they would submit and abase themselves before him and accept his commandments and admonitions" (p. 24).

II. *The Polemical Motive: An attack on the Karaite order of prayer and support for the Rabbanite prayerbook*

The purpose of Saadiyah's disquisition on rhetorical devices is to ground his firm denial that the Book of Psalms has any literary uniqueness within the biblical canon. He is somewhat more forthcoming in presenting his motivation for this denial in the long introduction. Since the correct interpretation of the passage in question remains a subject of controversy, the Arabic original of the major cruxes is given below:

What has brought me to include these matters in the introduction to this book and explain that all of them aim at commandment and prohibition is that I have seen a few of our nation who imagine (*jatawahhamun*) that this book was uttered by David the prophet on his own (*min tilka nafsihi*). It seems to me that the cause of this delusion (*?elmuwahhim*) is that they find many prayers in it. This has caused them not to attribute it to the Lord, since it is the speech of men (*kalamu 'n-nas*); in particular they came to do so because they use it in their prayers. Therefore I have seen fit to reveal the entire meaning of this book: I say that it is divine speech, what the master says to his servant, commanding him and warning him and encouraging him and threatening him and describing to him his exalted glory, and reminding him that he is weak before him and dependent upon him. (p. 24)

According to Rivlin ("Prefaces," pp. 384–85) the thrust of this passage is that Saadiyah wanted to "uproot the idea that the Book of Psalms is not of divine origin." Rivlin does not identify those "few of our nation" who believed this; evidently he assumes it refers to the various heretical Jewish sects that proliferated during Saadiyah's time.⁸ Kafih (note 92) apparently believes that Saadiyah had the Sages in mind, since his note to the phrase "uttered by David the prophet on his own" refers the reader to BT Baba Batra 14a–15b. Rivlin's tacit attribution must be challenged, because, in Saadiyah's summary of the opposing view, David is explicitly called "the prophet." Kafih's view is also hard to accept, since it would require us to

understand the words “I have seen a few of our nation” as referring to the Talmudic Sages; even harder to accept would be the estrangement from them implied by “because they use [psalms] in *their* prayers,” which Kafih admittedly notes is unclear (note 93). Zucker (“Notes,” p. 225) asserts that the text here is corrupt, since *ʔelfiʔlu ʔilaihi* is a “nonexistent expression”; he suggests the reading *ʔelmajlu ʔilaihi*, i.e., “and that is what caused them to address him [with it] in their prayers.” This fits in well with Zucker’s novel explanation of the entire passage:

The Gaon transferred the Book of Psalms from the sphere of prayer to that of commandments and admonitions, which entangled him in various problems and difficulties. He even disagrees with the rabbinic view (Zucker’s note: since according to the Sages the Book of Psalms was written by ten elders, . . . whereas Saadiah, following his approach, proves [later in the introduction] that the entire Book of Psalms was written by David) and derives a *halakhah* concerning the Levites’ chanting of psalms in the Temple that has no known source in the rabbinic literature (in a note Zucker explains that Saadiah’s assertion that only the singers named in the superscription of a given psalm were allowed to chant it in the Temple has no basis in rabbinic law). He did all this in order to refute the Karaite view that the Book of Psalms is Israel’s prayerbook and there is no need for the prayers ordained by the Sages. (p. 225)

Accordingly, the “few of our nation” to whom Saadiah refers are the Karaites,⁹ whose failure¹⁰ to comprehend the true literary nature of the Psalms “caused them to address him (with it) in their prayers,” that is to say, to make the Book of Psalms the keystone of their prayerbook. Zucker substantiates this explanation of Saadiah’s concerted attempt to prove that the Book of Psalms is not a book of prayers with two quotations from Saadiah’s other works that repeat the same arguments about the distance between the words of the servant and those of the master and about how prayer and entreaty are really commandment and admonition. The first is the sharply polemical passage on prayer in his anti-Karaite work *ʔEšša Mešali*, epitomized in: “[See] how the servant returns to his Maker / the words of commandment that come from his Lord.”¹¹ The second is Saadiah’s statement in the introduction to his *Siddur*: “Even those places in the Bible that sound like prayer cannot (truly) be prayer, since they are juxtaposed with commandments, admonitions, promises, and threats.”¹²

Zucker does not explain the logical connection between the dispute with the Karaites over how the obligation to pray should be fulfilled—through the prayers composed by David or the non-biblical liturgy of the Rabbanite prayerbook—and whether the Book of Psalms “was uttered by David the prophet on his own,” or was “Divine speech—what the Master

says to His servant." Shunari (who accepts both Zucker's emendations and his theory of Saadiyah's anti-Karaite motive) consequently returns to Rivlin's idea that in his introduction Saadiyah is also combatting the notion that the Book of Psalms is not a prophetic work (*Methods*, pp. 18–19). It is hardly plausible, however, to ascribe an attack on the holiness of the book to the Karaites. First, there is no direct evidence of such a Karaite position, and the Karaite commentaries on Psalms adopt precisely the contrary.¹³ Second, it is only reasonable that those who see the psalms as prayers incumbent on all generations would insist more forcefully on the prophetic nature of these biblical prayers! One must conclude that Saadiyah and the Karaites saw eye to eye about the prophetic status of the psalms; the disagreement was about their *literary* nature and the *halakhic* implications thereof: are they truly prayers (in which case no text is more apt for use in our liturgy), or are they rather commandments and admonition mainly expressed in the rhetorical guise of prayer (and therefore must not be misused for worship)? Indeed, everything by Saadiyah that has come down to us on the subject (in his two introductions to Psalms, in *ʿEšša Mešali*, and in his two introductions to the *Siddur*) focuses on the rhetorical contrast between "the words of the Master" (i.e., commandment and admonition) and "the words of the servant" (i.e., prayer and supplication), and not on that between the word of the Lord (i.e., prophecy) and human discourse (not inspired by revelation). An exception to this is the passage from the long introduction cited above, at whose core are the words *had ʿl-kitab Daudu ʿn-nabiyu ʿalahu min tilka nafsihi*, rendered by Kafih as: "This book was uttered by David the prophet on his own."

At first sight these words could be translated literally: "This book was said by David the prophet concerning himself." This would have them refer to the rhetorical plane, and fit in well with Saadiyah's other pronouncements on the subject. However, as Ben-Shammai has shown ("Review," p. 402), the idiomatic use of *min tilka nafsihi* both in the Koran (10:15) and in Saadiyah's own works (*Beliefs*, 3:4, p. 150 [Kafih ed., p. 126, lines 25–26]; 5:8, p. 232 [ibid., p. 191, lines 8–9]) supports Kafih's rendering, "on his own," rather than inspired by divine revelation. (To this we should add Saadiyah's translation of "not of my own devising" [Num. 16:28] in the *Tafsir*: *walajsa min tilka nafsi*, quoted by Razhabi, *Dictionary*, p. 25.) How, though, can Saadiyah attribute to the Karaites a view that derogates the psalms from prophetic utterance to human speech? Ben-Shammai (ibid., pp. 402–403) suggests that Saadiyah, faithful to his position that the Book of Psalms is a complete prophecy revealed to David word for word, was taking issue with a hypothetical Karaite view that the psalms were created merely under the influence of "the holy spirit," in the sense of "an inspiration under whose influence a person seems to speak of his own accord."

The difficulty with this answer is that the available evidence indicates that Karaite views of "the holy spirit" are close to those of the Sages and rather remote from what Saadiah attributes to them (for Salmon ben Yeruham see below, p. 63; and for Yefet ben 'Ali, pp. 80–82). Perhaps we should assume that Saadiah projected on the Karaites a view of his own, not held by their scholars, namely, that prayer is not authentic unless the worshipper utters it *min tilka nafsihi* (of his own initiative), as Hosea said (14:3): "Provide yourself with words and return to the Lord . . ." (see note 12 above). Saadiah accordingly differentiates between the ostensible prayers of Moses and David, which are in fact pure prophecies, and Rabbanite prayer, which is indeed human speech that truly expresses the worshipper's standing before his heavenly Master (although not an individual supplication, since it is couched in terms set by the elders and prophets, as explained below, pp. 10–11). Thus from the fact that the Karaites use the psalms in their worship he concludes not only that they are guilty of a rhetorical error (failing to understand that these are really "the words of the Master"), but also that they ignore the prophetic nature of the psalms in order to render them fit for utterance by a worshipper.¹⁴ The truth is that the Karaites had no trouble bridging the gap between the liturgical nature of the psalms and their prophetic status because they had adopted the Rabbanite conception of the dual nature of prophetic prayer: the prophet addresses the Lord, even while it is the Holy Spirit that shapes his words.¹⁵

We will find it difficult to understand why Saadiah had to resort to such a radical argument about the nature of the Book of Psalms if we fail to comprehend the full effect of Karaite polemics on the subject of prayer. Let us begin with a Genizah fragment from the Hebrew commentary on Leviticus by the Karaite Daniel al-Kumissi, who lived in Jerusalem at the end of the ninth and beginning of the tenth century. In his commentary on 16:31 he asks pointedly why the Lord does not respond to the prayers and fasts of his people Israel and save the sons of his beloved Jacob, given that they no longer worship idols. He answers:

This is due to the perversion of the commandments given us and to the wicked laws taught by the misleading shepherds. . . . Worse than all of this is that even when Israel gathers on fast days and on the Day of Atonement they have placed in their mouths many words, liturgies in which there is no delight, instead of songs from Psalms, or "I will recount the kind acts of the Lord," and "O Lord, You are my God and I will extol You. I will praise Your name," from Isaiah (63:7, 25:1); Daniel's prayer, "O Lord, great and awesome God" (9:4); and Nehemiah's "Bless the Lord your God who is from eternity to eternity" (9:5–6). [The Rabbanites] say none of this.¹⁶

This "perversion of the commandments," which delays the redemption of Israel, manifests itself in the realm of prayer by the Rabbanites' abandonment of the mandated biblical prayers¹⁷ and their replacement by non-prophetic *piyyuṭim*¹⁸ in which God takes no delight. This grave indictment evidently impugns not only *piyyuṭim* in the narrow sense, but also the entire prescribed rite of the Rabbanite prayerbook. As Jacob al-Kirkisani, Saadiyah's Karaite contemporary and main polemical adversary, wrote in his Arabic *Book of the Luminaries and Watchtowers*:

One [of the rabbis' mistakes] is that they stopped praying from the Book of Psalms and made [their prayers] from what they themselves composed. This contradicts Scripture: "To give praise to the Lord as David had ordained" (Ezra 3:10). Moreover, they themselves say, at the beginning of their prayers: "who chose David His servant and found pleasure in his holy songs."¹⁹

Elsewhere in his book Kirkisani supplements these scriptural texts and the conclusion of the *baruk še-amar* benediction of the Rabbanite *siddur* (in the Palestinian rite, as shown by Genizah fragments published by Scheiber and Asaph)²⁰ with rational, historical, and psychological arguments:

That prayer [ought to consist of] the Psalms and the words of David, would be almost a logical imperative, even were there no [scriptural] proofs thereof. None of our people disputes this, except for the rabbis. But they, after admitting its necessity, reneged and denied it. It is known that they admitted because, as mentioned at the beginning of our book, they say, at the beginning of their prayers, "who chose David His servant and found pleasure in his holy songs," etc. Similarly, they begin their prayer called *š'moneh 'ešreh* with David's words, "Lord, open my lips" (Ps. 51:17) and conclude with his words, "May the words of my mouth find favor" (Ps. 19:15). Their denial seems to be caused by their hatred and disdain for those who pray in this way, carried to the point, it has been said, that once upon a time they considered removing the Book of Psalms from the canon.²¹

In this fashion Kirkisani attempted to reinforce the historical *ḥigmas* (i.e., the general consensus of the faithful, which was considered a most reliable proof)²² by means of the exaggerated suspicion that the Rabbanite prayerbook owed its very existence exclusively to the vehement hatred of its authors for the Karaites. This wild accusation seems not to have ruffled any feathers among the Rabbanites, who probably did not even deign to respond to or refute it. They could not display similar equanimity in the face of the claim that non-scriptural prayer is illegitimate, which parallels the Karaite

attack upon the status of the Oral Law. In fact, several lines after the passage quoted above Kirkisani considers at some length six scriptural proofs offered by a Rabbanite author to confute the Karaite belief that the Book of Psalms satisfies every need for prayer for every generation:²³

One of the Rabbanite polemicists has expressed his view on this issue and answered those who claim that prayer must be drawn [exclusively] from the Book of Psalms by citing the verse: "So that they may offer pleasing sacrifices to the God of heaven and pray for the lives of the king and his sons" (Ezra 6:10). What prayer, he asked, can be drawn from Psalms concerning King Darius and his sons? He adduced another proof from the verse: "any prayer or supplication which shall be offered by any man" (1 Kings 8:38); if prayer is to be taken only from the Psalms, what is the meaning of "by any man"? True enough, "shall be" is in the future and not in the past tense. Another proof is that the text reads "by any man" [and not]²⁴—"by any of the children of Israel": although the Jews know the Book of Psalms and can pray from it, he demanded, how can other people, to whom "by any man" refers, do so? And those that came from a distant land to pray in the Temple, how did they know the Psalms to pray from them? He said: Another proof derives from the words of David—"Who can tell the mighty acts of the Lord, proclaim all His praises?" (Ps. 106:2), while elsewhere [David] said, "I will add to all the praises of You" (Ps. 71:14): if it is impossible to proclaim all the praises of the Lord, how can one add to them? What is meant by this is: I will add to the praise by which the righteous men of yore praised you, like Adam, Enoch, Noah, Shem, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, and all the righteous men. This is the meaning of "I will add to all the praises of You." He said: Another proof from Scripture is, "in assemblies bless God, the Lord, from the fountain of Israel" (Ps. 68:27[26]). By this he meant the sages of Israel who composed and disseminated many praises and glorifications of the Lord, like [the *paytanim*] Yannai and Eleazar and Phineas and their like. He said: this is the meaning of the verse, "this nation I formed for Myself, that they might declare My praise" (Isa. 43:21), i.e., from the wisdom of your hearts!

We have quoted this passage at length not only because of its intrinsic importance, but also because it is generally assumed that the Rabbanite polemicist in question is Saadiah. This was surmised by Harkavy (the first to publish the passage),²⁵ Poznanski agreed with him that the arguments were evidently taken from Saadiah's lost polemic against Anan.²⁶

This endeavor to bring scriptural proofs that the Book of Psalms is inadequate to fulfill all facets of the obligation of prayer and also that liturgical composition began before David and will continue after him seems to parallel Saadiah's well-known assertion that the terseness of Scripture

proves that it was complemented *ab initio* by the Oral Law.²⁷ The truth, however, is that Saadia was much more radical than this adversary of the Karaites. He was not interested simply in finding justifications for supplementing biblical prayer with liturgical poetry, an issue on which the Karaites eventually agreed with him, just as they recognized that their own "oral tradition," the *sevel ha-y^eruššah*, as complementing the Pentateuch.²⁸ Rather, Saadia staged a frontal assault against the very charge of perversion, according to which Rabbanite prayer had usurped the place of scriptural prayer. To this indictment he had a clear answer: the psalms were never intended to serve as a prayerbook for Israel, while the liturgy handed down by the Sages (meaning primarily the *‘Amidah*) is not only of ancient origin, but was even ordained by the prophets! This unyielding position is clearly expressed in the introduction to his *Siddur*:

Since the Jews' prayers and benedictions to the Lord are not formulated in Scripture, just as many of the laws and commandments are not explicated therein, He Who ordained them made us dependent upon the tradition enunciated by His prophets. Those passages in Scripture that sound like prayer cannot be prayer (in truth), since they are juxtaposed with commandments, admonitions, promises, and threats in every chapter, and reason dictates that none of these can be incorporated into prayer, as we have explained in the *Proof for Prayer*.²⁹ In both prayers and benedictions they depended on the tradition handed down by the prophets of the Lord. They had two rituals, one for the era of the monarchy and the other for the Exile.³⁰ (*Siddur*, p. 10)

In this way Saadia enveloped the perversion argument on both flanks: the prayers we recite are not our own innovation, since, like the Oral Law, they have been handed down to us in a reliable tradition going back to the prophets;³¹ by contrast, the psalms, which the Karaites employ in their prayer, were never intended to be used in that way, as their style makes clear. Hence Saadia, who viewed the Book of Psalms as God's word to man, could never have entered into a dispute about the exclusive liturgical status of the psalms; nor could he have accepted the proofs of Kirkisani's adversary, namely, that from three verses in the Book of Psalms one could deduce that David added to the prayers of the ancients and anticipated that others in the future would write new *piyyuṭim* to be recited along with his poems.³²

III. *The Ritual Thesis: The five-fold condition*

The radical claim that, since the psalms are not truly prayers, the Book of Psalms is actually a manual of theological and moral guidance required both a rhetorical theory of extreme complexity, to explain the frequency with

which the servant addresses his master in a book said to comprise only the master's words to his servant, as well as an innovative theory of ritual, which could explain away the personal references and musical instructions in the headings of many psalms. For what do biographical notes, such as "when he fled from Absalom his son" (3:1), and performance instructions, such as "for the leader; on the *šeminî*" (12:1) have to do with a "book of guidance"? Although Saadiah ignores these problems in the short introduction, most of the long introduction is devoted to developing two theories intended to resolve them.

If the Book of Psalms is not an anthology of prayers composed by David and other prophetic poets, the question arises as to why it was given to Israel precisely under his reign. Saadiah attempts to give a reasonable explanation for the date of its revelation while stressing the excellence of Psalms, by virtue of its similarity to the Pentateuch. Just as the Torah was not given until "*mankind* attained its most perfect number, which His wisdom ordained should be maintained forever" (p. 25), "so too the Lord did not give this complete and perfect book until the *nation* attained its most perfect number, its breadth of knowledge, wealth, heroes, and the like" (p. 26). He proves the first part of the equation (Earth's population reached its optimal level during Moses' time) through the assertion that the longevity of the first generations was intended to allow the rapid proliferation of mankind; the institution since Moses' time of an upper limit of 120 years indicates that this process of proliferation was completed then. That the Israelite population achieved "its most perfect number" in David's time he finds in the results of David's census: "All Israel comprised 1,100,000 ready to draw the sword" (1 Chron. 21:5).³³ From the multiplicity of prophetic bands during Samuel's judgeship he deduces that scientific knowledge flourished in that age: "In every corner you would find them learning and contemplating" (p. 26). Saadiah adduces two proofs of David's impressive military success: the large numbers of those who surrendered to Israel, on the one hand, and the long lists of Israelite heroes, on the other. The multi-faceted perfection of this period culminated in Solomon's construction of the Temple, where the psalms assumed a dual role: the Levites encouraged the laborers by serenading them with the psalms that begin *lam-našṣeah* (as proven by the use of the verb *l'-našṣeah* in 1 Chron. 23:4 and in Ezra 3:8, which allude to the Levites' role in the construction of the First and Second Temples); and when the Temple was completed, the Levitical watches sang day and night the special psalms assigned to them (as related by 1 Chron. 9:33).

The appropriateness of the timing is augmented by the stature of the prophet who received the book: "It was given to the most excellent of kings, David the prophet, may he rest in peace, who was chosen, as it is

written of him: 'I have found David, my servant; [with my holy oil I anointed him]' (Ps. 89:21[20])' (p. 27). The spirit of the Lord rested upon him from the day he was anointed (proven by 1 Sam. 16:13); he received the psalms in installments starting then. The biographical and geographical information found in the headings of some psalms should not astonish us, for they resemble "the journeys of the Children of Israel, which the Lord recorded in the Pentateuch for their sake, as it is said: 'these were the marches' (Num. 33:1), as well as the incidents that occurred at each encampment" (p. 27). This analogy may not convince, but it is nonetheless an impressive attempt. Moreover, it reinforces the similarity between the Psalms of David and the Torah of Moses.

Are all the psalms by David, though? The concept of the Book of Psalms as a "book of guidance" can, perhaps, be reconciled *a posteriori* with its attribution to several (prophetic) authors; but it is clear that allowing multiple authorship weakens such a monolithic conception, since it permits questioning the literary unity of the book. Thus Saadia could have taken a minimalist approach and merely demonstrated that the "ten elders" named in the headings were all prophets.³⁴ As was his wont, however, he preferred to go all the way and prove that "the whole book is prophecy uttered by David" (p. 28). His first argument is that on this matter an *'igma'* (consensus) exists: "The entire nation is unanimous in calling [Psalms] 'the Songs of David'" (ibid.). The appellation "Songs of David" (given in Hebrew even in Saadia's Arabic text) derives, of course, from the second part of the *baruk še-'amar* benediction, which in Saadia's *siddur* (p. 32), as in our own, introduces the group of psalms included at the beginning of the morning service. This liturgical reference to the "Songs of David" had such weight for Saadia that he quite ignored, here and throughout his two introductions, the Talmudic statement that ten elders wrote the psalms collected by David in the Book of Psalms—a statement that seems to contradict his claim of a consensus regarding the authorship issue.³⁵

The second proof supplements the first: Scripture itself attributes the psalms, generally and with no comment (according to his interpretation, of course) to David (see Neh. 12:24; 2 Chron. 7:6 and 8:14). The third proof is more complex: while the internal evidence might lead one to infer that the book includes prophecies by several persons (such as Asaph, Heman, and Moses), another datum entails the conclusion that "there is nothing that is not by David" (p. 28)—namely, that the superscriptions of several psalms mention two names, like "*la-m'naṣṣeah* to Jeduthun, a psalm of David" (39:1). Since "the Lord does not usually send two prophets on one mission, even though the Torah says, 'the Lord spoke unto Moses and Aaron, saying' (Lev. 11:1 and nine other loci), the clear truth [or, reading

with Zucker, the accepted truth] is that Moses alone was entrusted with this commandment, and Aaron merely heard [it] from him" (ibid.). Saadiah holds that we cannot understand this verse and others like it literally, since according to scripture only Moses' prophecy was direct revelation, in contrast to the indirect revelation received by all other prophets, including Aaron (Exod. 33:11; Num. 12:1-8). Consequently they must be interpreted via the technique of *ta'wil*: The Lord spoke to Moses, and he transmitted the message to Aaron.³⁶ Moses' prophecy was of such high degree that Aaron, who heard it from him, was himself accounted a prophet; since, however, "David was spoken to through an angelic intermediary, one who heard [the prophecy] from [David] was inferior to a prophet, with regard to what he heard, and was like all the masses" (p. 29). The implication is that when the superscription of a psalm mentions a second name alongside David's, that other person must be a musician; even when David is not mentioned at all, the two names in a heading (e.g., Jeduthun and Asaph in Ps. 77:1) both indicate performers; and, to carry the implication yet further, even when David is not mentioned and some other name appears, it too denotes the performer of the psalm in question. Saadiah adheres so firmly to this method that he even manages to demonstrate that "A prayer of Moses, the man of God" (90:1) is a prophecy by David and no one else: in Scripture we find that the later descendants are designated by the name of an important ancestor (e.g., "but Aaron and his sons made offerings" [1 Chron. 6:34(49)] clearly refers to priests serving in David's time); here too the "Prayer of Moses" "is a song presented to Moses' descendants who were contemporary with David to sing" (ibid.).³⁷ Since Solomon, unlike Moses and his descendants, was not a Levite, he could not be a singer in the Temple; Saadiah was thus compelled to deal with the two psalms whose superscriptions mention him (72 and 127) in a different way: the prefix *lamed* in *li-s'lomoh* means neither "by" nor "for," but rather "about": Solomon is not the author of the psalms, nor their performer, but their subject—"a prophecy concerning Solomon and what will happen to him. That is why the verse 'End of the prayers of David son of Jesse' (72:20) was appended to this psalm³⁸—to tell us that this is a prophecy of David's" (p. 30).

The feebleness of the third proof is so conspicuous that we must assume that Saadiah did not view it as a freestanding argument, but merely as an explanation of the apparent contradiction between the headings and the external testimony that all the psalms are "the songs of David." The general principle that two prophets are not entrusted with the same mission is certainly insufficient proof that the anonymous psalms are David's; it is, however, possible to assert that, just as a name mentioned alongside David's designates the performer rather than the poet, so too the other names

that appear in the headings (except for David and Solomon) are those of Levite choristers. Anyone who accepts the validity of the two first proofs must find this conclusion not only possible but in fact unavoidable; the only remaining question is why David gave his prophecies to singers. Saadia answers that in addition to being chapters in a "book of guidance" to be read and studied, the psalms had an important function in the Temple service. This was not, as is mistakenly believed, *liturgical*—an impossibility, since they express God's words to man rather than being man's appeal to his God—but *ritual*. For Saadia, the use of the psalms as sacred poetry, limited by their very nature to the Temple, is conclusively demonstrated by the ritual instructions given in the superscriptions, which have no meaning for prayer in general. Thus he draws a sharp distinction between two aspects of the Book of Psalms, and, correspondingly, between *reading* the psalms and *chanting* them. As a "book of guidance" "it is read everywhere, at all times, by all people and of every age" (p. 27); as sacred poetry, however, "we have called it *kitabu 't-tasbiḥ* [the Book of Praise] since it is a special song, for particular individuals, in a particular place, with particular instruments, and particular melodies" (*ibid.*).³⁹

Saadia now launches a detailed demonstration that these five conditions (the personal, musical, instrumental, temporal, and local), which in his view strictly regulated the performance of the psalms in the Temple, is anchored in both Scripture and logic. Before considering the proofs we should mention that this argument later convinced even the critical mind of Abraham Ibn Ezra, who, while totally rejecting all of Saadia's other hypotheses about the Book of Psalms, adopted these five conditions and presented them in a more moderate form in the introduction to the First Recension of his commentary.

The first condition—the *personal*—asserts that "every psalm that is designated to [specific] Levites, they are obligated to recite it; all others are forbidden to recite it except for reading" (p. 30). Saadia brings passages from 1 Chronicles to prove that all those named in the heading were Levites and that the assignment of certain psalms to them was on a familial rather than an individual basis, encompassing their brothers (e.g., "Asaph and his brothers"—1 Chron. 16:7), and descendants (e.g., "the sons of Jeduthun"—1 Chron. 25:3). Not only is he able to identify the descendants of Moses—to whom, in his opinion, Psalm 90 was entrusted—with the family of Rehaviah son of Eliezer son of Moses (1 Chron. 23:15–17); he goes further and glosses even common nouns with a preceding definite article—*la-ben* (Ps. 9:1) and *ha-gittit* (8:1; 81:1; 84:1)—as the names of two Levites mentioned in 1 Chron. 15:18: Ben and Obed-Edom the Gittite.⁴⁰ These identifications are the underpinning for his fundamental assertion that these familial assignments are strictly exclusive, i.e., "that

Obed-Edom is forbidden to recite Asaph's text, and Heman to say that of Ben" (p. 31). Saadiah derives this restriction, of which I have found no echo in the halakhic literature,⁴¹ by means of an impressive juxtaposition of similar scriptural texts. The Torah states about the Levites' tasks: "Each one was given responsibility for his service and portage [*at the command of the Lord through Moses*]" (Num. 4:49); in 2 Chronicles, concerning their singing, we read: "The Asaphite singers were at their stations, [*by command of David*]" (35:15); and also: "[*Following the prescription of his father David, he set up the divisions of the priests for their duties,*] and the Levites for their watches, to praise . . ." (8:14).⁴²

In the Munich MS the second half of the second condition—the *melodic* one—and the beginning of the third are missing. Fortunately, most of the lacuna can be supplied from a Genizah fragment published by H. Avenary,⁴³ so that Saadiah's discussion of the melodic condition has reached us almost intact. It enumerates the six performance instructions he identified in the headings (excluding the instrumental instructions, discussed separately under the third condition) and explains them in terms of contemporary Arabic musical theory. Avenary, as a musicologist, dealt almost exclusively with the instrumental aspects, so I am compelled to tread in a realm where I have no expertise in order to understand Saadiah's arguments about the second condition.

It was clear to Saadiah that the six instructions do not refer to a single aspect of musical performance, and that only two can be explicated simply as the names of melodies (or modes). Consequently, he could not maintain his claim that the singing of the psalms in the Temple was restricted to "particular melodies/modes (*'alḥan*)" (p. 27) unless he could categorize the musical instructions and demonstrate that they all serve as designations of melodies/modes. To this end he divides them into three pairs, relating to three different aspects: a single *laḥn* or a medley of several; high or low pitch; and the names of two of the *'alḥan*. Musicologists who have discussed the section on music at the end of the tenth treatise of *Beliefs and Opinions* conclude that Saadiah used the Arabic term *laḥn*—whose usual meaning is a melody or melodic mode—to designate a rhythmic mode (Arabic *'iḳā'*; in later Arabic music *maḳām*; Indian *raga*).⁴⁴ While the consensus is that the discussion in *Beliefs and Opinions* refers to rhythmic modes, it is rather difficult to know how we should render *laḥn* as used here in the exposition of the second condition. For now we shall circumvent the problem by not translating *laḥn*, keeping in mind its dual meaning.

The discussion of the melodic condition starts by explaining *'al n'eginat* (Ps. 61:1) as an instruction that the psalm be sung "entirely in one *laḥn*, which should not be changed" (p. 31). The plural directive *bi-n'eginot* (ibid. 4:1; 6:1; 54:1; 55:1; 67:1; 76:1) he explains as having the contrary meaning:

“it is to be said with many different *ʿalḥan*” (ibid.).⁴⁵ I have emphasized the word “entirely,” since I believe it shows that Saadia’s meaning was that in any given performance of the psalm one *laḥn* must be used from beginning to end, not that every performance had to use the same *laḥn*. Accordingly, the meaning of the opposite instruction *bi-nʿginot* is that the Levites should change the *laḥn* in the middle of the performance.⁴⁶ Such a change is conceivable with regard to both the melody and the rhythmic mode; however, according to Prof. Amnon Shiloach (oral communication), there is no historical evidence for the former possibility, while Saadia himself praises the blending of various rhythmic modes as the quintessence of musical excellence (*Beliefs*, 10:18; p. 402). Moreover, in *The Epistle on Music of the Ihwan al-Safaʿ*, an entire chapter is devoted to “mutations,” i.e., the artistic transition from one rhythmic mode to another.⁴⁷

The next two performance instructions are also presented as a pair of contraries, referring to the relative pitch of the notes, a topic also anchored in Arabic musical theory (see *Epistle*, p. 23). Saadia explains *šir ha-maʿalot* (Pss. 120–134) as designating a “high-pitched *laḥn*” (relying on the use of the root *ʿlh* in the sense of raising the voice in I Sam. 5:12; Jer. 14:2, and of the noun *maššaʿ* (literally: something raised) in I Chron. 15:22 to describe Chenaniahu’s high-pitched singing). *ʿAl ʿalamot* (Ps. 46:1) is explained as the opposite of the former, i.e., an instruction to sing “in a small quiet voice.” The philological connection of *ʿalamot* with lowering the voice, missing from the Munich MS as well as the Genizah fragment, is preserved in the body of the commentary (on Ps. 9:1): “One of the eight *ʿalḥan* was called *ʿalamot*; since it is thin and quiet, derived from *neʿelam* (hidden).”⁴⁸ Note that in this case Saadia is not content with explicating the term as an instruction for musical performance (as he did concerning *nʿginat/nʿginot*); he rather asserts that this characteristic is so essential to the *laḥn* that it is actually named *ʿalamot* after it. This apparently applies to its opposite *maʿalot* as well. In this way he managed to identify two of the *ʿalḥan* used in the Temple. His assertion is not so far-fetched if we recall that the eight Arabic modes have names like “light” (*hafif*) and “heavy” (*taḳil*)⁴⁹ and that Saadia was convinced that sacred poetry was based on just eight *ʿalḥan*. This he deduced from the third pair of performance instructions, discussed in the beginning of the Genizah fragment.

The beginning of the first sentence in the Genizah fragment, which discusses the designation *šušan/šošananim* (Ps. 45:1; 60:1; 69:1; 80:1), is missing. We can fill in the gap, however, from the *Tafsir* on the four headings in which it appears: “*bilāḥn julakḳab baʿs-sausan*” (in the *laḥn* called *šušan*). Evidently Saadia could not adduce a direct proof that in biblical times it was customary to call *ʿalḥan* by such picturesque names, for the passage opens with a problematic analogy from the plastic arts: the carv-

ings in the Temple were called *perah šošān* and *ma'aseh šušān* (1 Kings 7:19, 22, 26). Unlike the first two pairs, this instruction is matched, not by its opposite, but by its parallel: *‘al ha-šeminī* (Ps. 6:1; 12:1), which indicates that the psalm should be sung in the eighth *lahn*. Saadiah expands on this in his remark on the reading of Ps. 6: “*‘Al ha-šeminī* teaches us that the Levites in the Temple had eight *‘alhan*, one assigned to each group of them” (p. 61). Here no scriptural proof that *šeminī* denotes a *lahn* (rather than an instrument)⁵⁰ is offered; later in the introduction, though, in his discussion of the third condition, he infers this from 1 Chron. 15:21. There is no doubt, however, that for Saadiah the real proof was the astonishing correspondence between the number eight, found in the headings of the psalms, and the eight basic rhythmic modes of Arab musical theory,⁵¹ which he accepted as true in all places and times: “There are altogether eight distinct [rhythmic] modes (*Beliefs*, 10:18; p. 402).⁵²

It is only in light of this concordance between revealed truth and the music theory of his age that Saadiah's unequivocal assertion that no more than eight *‘alhan* were used in the Temple can be understood. We can see it as strengthening the assumption that in the “second condition” he is referring to the eight rhythmic modes (which he also describes in *Beliefs*) and not to melodies. It may also help us understand Saadiah's motive for trying to discover in the biblical text more families of Temple singers: without Ben and Obed-Edom the Gittite the headings name only six Levite families (Asaph, Ethan, Heman, Jeduthun, the sons of Korah, and [the sons] of Moses); with them, however, there are exactly eight! Although Saadiah did not emphasize this number in his discussion of the “first condition,” it seems to be the basis for the strange sentence quoted above from his commentary on Ps. 6:1: “The Levites in the Temple had eight *‘alhan*, one assigned to each group of them.” Still, it is hard to understand this sentence in its maximum application—as if each family sang only one *lahn*—since this is explicitly contradicted by the text: two *‘alhan* (*šošanīm* and *‘alamot*) are assigned to one family (the Korahides—45:1 and 46:1), while one *lahn* (*‘alamot*) is given to two families (Ben [9:1] and the Korahides [46:1]). I can only assume that Saadiah was impressed by the agreement between the number of *‘alhan* and the number of families, but did not follow through to the ultimate conclusion, since he nowhere asserts that each family was permitted to sing only the *lahn* assigned to it.

Whatever the case, the Genizah fragment continues in a minimalist vein: the fact that specific terms for *‘alhan* are mentioned in the headings proves “that the nation had *‘alhan* which they used in the Temple.” There is no gap in the passage where the word “eight” could be inserted, as proposed by the editors in their translation⁵³ (apparently because of the vagueness of the sentence). Thus it seems to me that Saadiah means no

more than that it has been shown that there were specific and defined *ʿalhan* in the Temple. They are clearly compulsory as well, as he goes on to explain: "It is clear to us [that] a psalm designated by one *lahn* [should not be said] in different [i.e., numerous] *ʿalhan*;⁵⁴ what is [to be said] in a raised voice [should not be said in a lower voice and the low] *ered* should not be said in a raised voice; thus too the other [*ʿalhan* shall not be] changed. If someone does change them he has sinned, [as] emerges from the verse 'For the ordinance was by the Lord through His prophets' (2 Chron. 29:25). This shows that they [the *ʿalhan*] are fixed thus as commanded." As in the first condition, Saadia has no clear proof that changing the modes is a sin, and must content himself with an analogy, since the above-mentioned verse which he cites refers in fact to musical instruments: "He [Hezekiah] stationed the Levites in the House of the Lord with cymbals and harps and lyres, as David and Gad the king's seer and Nathan the prophet had ordained, for the ordinance was by the Lord through his prophets." Only someone who is already convinced that the melodic condition goes hand in hand with the instrumental condition can see this verse as a proof that the *ʿalhan* are "fixed as commanded."

The first sentence of the third condition—the *instrumental*—is badly preserved in the Genizah fragment, and roughly six lines are missing from there to the continuation in MS Munich. Saadia begins the discussion by listing the instruments "with which these psalms are said." According to the reasonable reconstruction of the editors, he first listed the Hebrew names of the instruments, followed by their Arabic translations. Of all this only four Arabic names remain: "*ʿud*, *ṭunbur*, *daff*, and *ṭabl*" (which apparently correspond to *nevel*, *kinnor*, *tof*, and *mahol*). The Munich MS, resuming after the lacuna, completes the sentence, with a mention of the salutary influence of music upon the prophet Elisha. We cannot be certain, but evidently Saadia cites this incident in order to infer, from the precise words of the text—"Now then, get me a musician, and as the musician played . . ." (2 Kings 3:15)—that Elisha's request was quite specific: "He requested a player of one⁵⁵ of the modes and of one of the instruments" (p. 31). This seems to be the theoretical background for the instrumental condition. He attempts to demonstrate from Scripture the obligatory nature of this condition for the chanting of the psalms in the Temple. This is no simple task, since, according to Saadia, in the entire Book of Psalms only one heading contains an instrumental designation—*al maḥalat* (which he renders, in Ps. 53:1, as *biṭubul* "with two-headed drums," and in Ps. 88:1 as *ʿelmuṭabbilin* "drummers on two-headed drums").⁵⁶ He must rely, therefore, on the direct and indirect testimony of 1 Chronicles about the relationship between the various Levite families and certain instruments.

He again divides the evidence into three categories; here, though, the classification is by method of inference rather than by the nature of the evidence in the headings. The first category comprises those psalms whose superscription mentions only the name of a Levite, while the instrument is identified by the clear link found in Chronicles between it and the Levite family. Accordingly, cymbals should accompany the singing of all the psalms listed under the names of Asaph (50; 73–83), Ethan (89), and Heman (88), since 1 Chronicles clearly states: “And Asaph sounding cymbals (16:5)”; “the singers Heman, Asaph and Ethan to sound the bronze cymbals” (15:19).

The second category consists of those psalms that require no supplementary information, since the instrument is named in the heading. As mentioned above, this is true only of the two psalms bearing the designation *‘al maḥalat* (53, 88), which Saadiah derives from *maḥol* and identifies that instrument, as accepted in his day, with the *ṭabl*, a large two-headed drum. Why, though, does he not infer from the assignment of one of these psalms (88) to the sons of Korah that the many other psalms associated with this family (42; 44–49; 84; 87; 88) were accompanied by the *maḥol* drum? His silence on this point evidently stems from the ambiguity of the evidence about the Korahides, to be noted below.

The third category includes those psalms whose headings provide the name of a Levite family or *lahn*, while the instrument is identified by its association with the *lahn* in 1 Chronicles. From the juxtaposition of *n^evalim* and *‘al ‘alamot* (15:20) Saadiah deduces that Psalm 9 (whose superscription has *‘almut la-ben*) and Psalm 46 (“for the Korahides *‘al ‘alamot*”) should be accompanied by the *nevel* (which he identifies with the *‘ud*, the short-necked lute). He thus associates the Levite Ben with the *nevel*, and the mode *‘alamot* with the *nevel*; but once again he is silent about the instrument played by the Korahides. As we have already seen, they sang certain psalms to the accompaniment of the *maḥol* drum and others to the *nevel*, so that it is impossible to arrive at a clear-cut rule about them.

From the tripartite association of the Levite Obed-Edom, the instrument *kinnorot*, and the mode *š^eminiṭ* (1 Chron. 15:21) Saadiah next deduces that psalms whose headings specify the *lahn š^eminiṭ* (6, 12) or the family designation *ha-gittiṭ* (which he interprets as referring to Obed-Edom the Gittite) should be accompanied by the *kinnor* (which he identifies with the *ṭunbur*, the long-necked lute). We can readily understand why he refrained from inferring from the association of Asaph with the mode *šoṣannim* in Ps. 80:1 that the two other psalms whose headings mention only *šoṣannim* (60 and 69) should be played by the sons of Asaph on the cymbals: Psalm 45, also “on *šoṣannim*,” is assigned to the Korahides. But I cannot fathom why, given the juxtaposition of Asaph with *n^eginoṭ* (76:1), he did not con-