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Hebrew Translation

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MS Sassoon 701 contains the unique copy of an anonymous biblical commentary, entitled *Doreš rešumot*.¹ The manuscript, which is incomplete, covers only a part of Genesis and several psalms; moreover, some of the pages at the beginning, which contain the author's introduction, are missing or partially defective. The author gives his date as 4995 A.M.= 1234/5 C.E. (pp. 108–109).² Although he does not refer to his location, it is quite certain that he worked in the Christian areas of present-day Spain. The manuscript, which may be an autograph, is written in a Sephardi hand. On several occasions the author states his preference for textual readings found in Sephardi manuscripts. Moreover, his choice and use of sources, and the general spiritual tenor of the commentary, seem to fit the *geist* of Hispano-Jewry in the early thirteenth century.

The evidence indicates that the author labored over his commentary for some time; the manuscript presents only the latest and probably final version. The author frequently remarks that, after he had written his own explanation of a particular matter, he came across a book that expressed the same views or something close to them. Most often, the book in question is Abraham Ibn Ezra's "second" commentary or a text by Abraham bar Ḥiyya. In one case, the author describes a sequence of encounters with sources: after he had begun to write his commentary, first Abraham bar Ḥiyya's book on the Jewish calendar,

¹ There is an extensive description in the David S. Sassoon's excellent catalogue, *Obel Dawid* (London, 1932), vol. 1, pp. 660–663. Most of the citations of earlier writers are noted there. See also n. 3 below.

² In the Sassoon collection, manuscripts are given page numbers, just like modern printed books. In most other collections, folios rather than pages are numbered.

then the *Kuzari*, and finally a portion of Saadia's biblical commentary came to his attention.

Doreš rešumot is an important document for the history of Jewish thought. Written shortly after one of the major outbreaks of Maimonidean controversy, it displays a peculiar attitude towards the great master. Maimonides is cited several times as the author of the *Mishneh Torah* and of a commentary to the Mishnah. His *Guide of the Perplexed*, by contrast, is never mentioned by name. On numerous occasions, though, our author refers to the views of *kelal ha-ḥakamim*, which most likely means the same as *kalil ha-ḥakamim*, that is, the crown or summa of scholars; and these opinions are almost always those of the *Guide*. Evidently, then, the author of *Doreš rešumot* wanted to conceal, however thinly, his great respect for Maimonides' *Guide*. His views on creation and on the structure and workings of the universe, to the degree that these can be reconstructed into a coherent approach, are noteworthy. Though many of the details are unique to our author, some components of his system betray an affiliation with early Andalusian philosophy (e.g. Ibn Gabirol and Abraham bar Ḥiyya), as well as proto-kabbalistic (Iyyun Circle) and kabbalistic (Gerona school) trends.³

I am currently far advanced on a detailed study of this text. In this preliminary note I want to discuss another aspect of *Doreš rešumot*, namely, its author's awareness of Jewish sources not previously known to have been available in his time and place. The most significant of these is Saadia Gaon's long commentary on Genesis, from which he quotes a passage in Hebrew. He does not claim to have translated it himself, nor does he give any indication that he knows Arabic. The overlap with the extant Judeo-Arabic text guarantees the authenticity of the passage. But the full citation is no longer to be found in the original. Thanks to *Doreš rešumot*, Saadia's interesting comments on Day Two of creation can now be recovered.

The passage is found on p. 101 of the manuscript, as part of the

explanation of the "gathering of the waters" that took place on Day Two of creation. Saadia answers the objection that, when the waters were commanded to gather together, so as to uncover the land that would later be inhabited, their gathering upwards would have caused them to intrude into the sphere of the air. The basis of this worry is clearly the conception of spherical shells of earth, water, air, and fire, reaching up to a fixed distance (i.e., to the moon). Saadia assures his readers that no such intrusion would have occurred. The gathering of the waters was accompanied by an increase in the viscosity and density of water (these terms are obviously anachronistic—Saadia speaks of the water's "thickness" and "hardness"), so that the same amount of water occupied a smaller volume. Though Saadia does not say so explicitly, his explanation implies that elemental water underwent a refinement of sorts on Day Two. *Doreš rešumot* asserts, in the context of his own theory, that elemental fire and air were refined during the first days of creation; specifically, for both elements their refinement meant becoming translucent, so that the light of the sun could reach the earth. Hence Saadia's explanation may have been particularly appealing to our author, because it supported the claim that the elements possessed original qualities that were refined over the course of the six days of creation. Here is the citation from Saadia:

Our Rabbi Saadia wrote that nothing was added to the magnitude of the sphere of water when the waters that covered the land that today is uncovered were gathered into one place. For when they were first created, they [the waters] were flimsy, thin, and diffuse. When they gathered to one side, they hardened and thickened. Thus nothing was added to the magnitude

³ These themes and others are developed in my study, "Cosmology and Cosmogony in *Doresh Reshumot*, a Thirteenth Century Commentary on the Torah," *Harvard Theological Review* 97:2 (2004): 199–227.

of the sphere of water in which they were created and they did not intrude into the domain of the sphere of elemental air any more than they had at first.

He brought an illustration for this. He said that when porous bodies are squeezed and the air within them is expelled, they have a much smaller magnitude than before; such happens with wool that is made into felt, and so also cotton and other [materials]; likewise in the case of snow. If one fills a large vessel with it when it is diffuse and then melts it with fire, it will turn into a small amount of water. Similarly, the [primeval elemental] waters became thick and hard when they gathered into one place. However, the sphere of water remained as it had been, just as large and of the same thickness as it had been before the uncovering of the land.

Part of this passage is preserved in the extant portions of Saadia's long commentary to Genesis: "However, the preferred [opinion] in this matter is that the water, when first created [lacuna] was thinner than it is now. It reached to the firmament (*al-jild*). When God wished [to gather them], they collected together and thickened. They took on the consistency (*qiwâm*) that they now have."⁴

At least two passages from Saadia's long commentary on Genesis are cited in Hebrew translation by Judah Barceloni.⁵ In this connection it may be pertinent here to report that I have recently discovered a full (or nearly so) copy of the early translation of Saadia's commentary to *Sefer Yeşirah*; that Hebrew version, too, has been known only through some citations by Barceloni.⁶ Saadia's influence on early medieval philosophy has long been recognized, but the specific lines of transmission, especially the Hebrew translations of his writings, are still not entirely clear. It may be hoped that the ongoing intense study of Hebrew manuscripts will yield additional data.

Appendix:

The Passage from Saadia in Hebrew Translation

ורבנו סעדיה כתב שלא נוסף דבר על שעור כדור המים בהקות המים אשר היו על הארץ הנגלית היום אל מקום אחד כי בהתחלה כאשר נבראו היו קלושים דקים ורפים וכאשר נקוו אל צד אחד נתקשו ונתעבו עד שלא יוסף דבר בשעור המים במקום אשר נהוו בו ולא באו בתוך גבול גלגל האויר היסודי יותר מאשר היה בתחלה והביא משל על זה ואמר כי בהעצר הגופות המחולחלות ויצא הרוח אשר בתוכם יהיו פחותים משעורם הראשון הרבה מאד כענין הצמר אשר כשיעשה ממנו נמטי וכן צמר גפן וכיוצא בו וכן השלג אם ימלא אדם כלי גדול ממנו כאשר הוא רפה ויותר באש ישוב מים בשעור מועט וכן שבו המים עבים וקשים כאשר נקוו אל מקום אחד והיה כדור המים במקום ההוא גדול ועב בעבי הראשון בטרם הגלות הארץ.

⁴ Moshe Zucker, *Saadya's Commentary on Genesis* (New York, 1984), p. 33.

⁵ These are discussed by Henry Malter in his magisterial *Saadia Gaon, His Life and Works* (Philadelphia, 1921), p. 312, item c. The corresponding passages can now be identified in Zucker's edition: Barceloni, 197:4–13 and 193:11–17 appear consecutively on p. 29 thereof. Since Zucker's edition is a reconstruction of sorts (this can be gathered from the notes, sparse as they are), the passages may not necessarily have followed each other in Saadia's commentary. Additional information about the reception of Saadia's commentary in Europe as well as possible traces of Hebrew translations can be found in Malter, *Saadia Gaon*, pp. 274–275, 287–289, and 313–316.

⁶ The copy is found in MS Vatican, ebr. 236, ff. 95a–141b. I am currently preparing the text for publication.