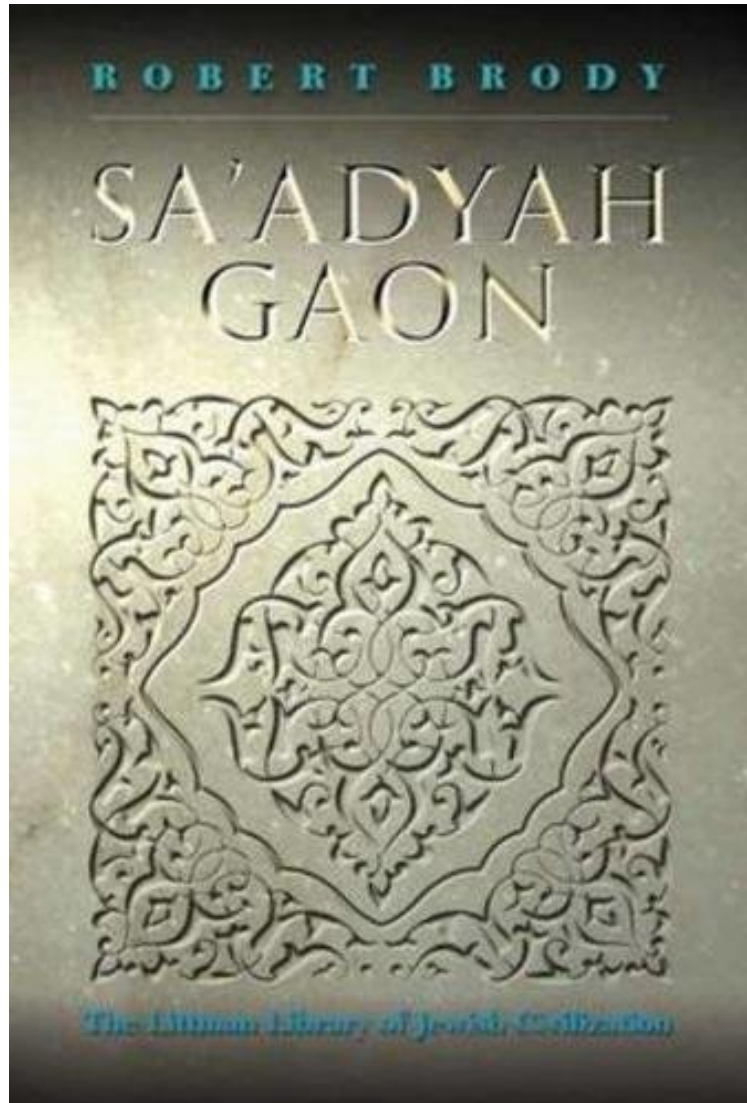


[Mobile book] Sa'adyah Gaon (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization)

Sa'adyah Gaon (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization)

Robert Brody

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Robert Brody : Sa'adyah Gaon (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization) before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Sa'adyah Gaon (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization):

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Fascinating work, about one of the most fascinating personalities in Jewish thought. By Ben Rothke The period of the Geonim dates from roughly 600 CE to 1040 CE. The Geon was the head of the Sura and Pumbedisa yeshivas in Babylonia, and was the de facto spiritual leader of the worldwide Jewish community. Much of the Geonic period is shrouded in mystery. In fact, it's unclear just how the Geon was elected in the first place. Sa'adyah Gaon was arguably the greatest of the Geonim. And in a remarkable biographical work

appropriately titled *Sa'adyah Gaon*, Robert Brody, professor of Talmud at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, provides a fascinating overview of his life, the challenges he faced, battles he fought, and how his influence is still felt today. Just how great was Sa'adyah? Brody quotes no less than Abraham ibn Ezra who referred to him as the chief discourses everywhere (), a Rabbinic idiom meaning that his opinions should be the starting point for any intellectual discussion. Sa'adyah was the most influential rabbinic personality of the Geonic period whose broad influence on the development of the Jewish tradition is still felt today. A biography of such a figure was much needed, and Brody's work fills this lacuna. The first chapter opens with an introduction to the Geonic period that provides a background to the milieu in which Sa'adyah lived. A polymath of the first order, six of the eight chapters focus on the various subject areas on which Sa'adyah wrote, namely with a focus on Sa'adyah as a philosopher, Biblical commentator, linguist, poet, man of Halacha and polemicist. Brody provides a meaningful overview of who Sa'adyah was, what he stood for, and the many battles he fought. Looking at his life now, it's quite easy to overlook what a trailblazer and revolutionary Sa'adyah was. Brody writes that as far as we know, the only literary activity in which the Babylonian Geonim before Sa'adyah's time engaged in was the writing of responsa. Sa'adyah diverged from that path and we still have a large amount of his writings on myriad topics, though some have been lost. Brody also interestingly notes that one of Sa'adyah's significant departures from precedent was that he was the first to introduce the Jerusalem Talmud and aggadic midrashim to the literary world of rabbinic Babylonia. Sa'adyah is perhaps best known for his theological battles with the Karaites. The book notes that he was certainly well suited to that line of activity, which demanded intellectual and rhetorical vigor and a powerful and combative personality. It was that very personality that led him to be elected as Geon, which is remarkable given his Egyptian birth. As the Geonate was traditionally left to native Babylonian scholars. In addition, Brody pays special attention to the great calendar controversy of 922 with Aaron ben Meir of Eretz Yisrael, in which Sa'adyah prevailed. Sa'adyah's victory was due in large part to the force of his personality, boldness, brilliance and sense of conviction. The calendar controversy arose in part due to the prolonged, and often fierce, rivalry that existed between the scholars of Babylonia and Israel. Much was at stake, as the Rabbinic leadership in Babylonia and Israel were in competition in general for influence over the Diaspora. Brody lists over twenty books and treatises that Sa'adyah wrote, of which his most famous is *Emunos ve-Deos* (The Book of Beliefs and Opinions), composed in 933 CE. The theme of the book is his reconciliation of Jewish tradition and rationality. Brody notes that Sa'adyah was so multifaceted that it's impossible for any one person to do justice in a biography of Sa'adyah and evaluate the full extent and variety of his life's work. Unfortunately, Brody exacerbates that given the brevity of the book, coming in at a scant 160 pages. One gets the feeling that Brody is holding back, and in this case, readers would appreciate much more details about Sa'adyah. Sa'adyah was the type of brilliant individual that only comes along every few hundred years. Brody's book, albeit a brief one, gives you a sense of who Sa'adyah was, and the impact of his works. It's a fascinating work, about one of the most fascinating personalities in Jewish thought.

Sa'adyah Gaon was an outstanding tenth-century Jewish thinker - a prominent rabbi, philosopher, and exegete. He was a pioneer in the fields in which he toiled, and was an inspiration and basis for later Jewish writing in all these areas. The last major English-language study of his work was published in 1921, long before Genizah research changed the understanding of the time in which he lived. Robert Brody's masterly work, covering Sa'adyah's biography and his main areas of creativity in an accessible way, is therefore a much-needed reassessment of an outstanding figure. The opening chapter, on the geonic period that formed the background to Sa'adyah's life (a period on which there are few works in English), is followed by an overview that brings out the revolutionary aspects of his work and the characteristic features of his writings. Subsequent chapters consider his philosophical works; his Bible commentaries; his pioneering linguistic work; his poetry; his halakhic activity (including an examination of his use of the Palestinian Talmud compared to that of the Babylonian Talmud); and his activity as a polemicist, notably against the Karaites. An Epilogue sums up his importance in medieval Jewish culture. Particularly valuable features of the book are the copious quotations from Sa'adyah's works, which facilitate familiarity with his style as well as his ideas; the clarity in presenting complex and difficult concepts; the constant assessment of his relationship to his predecessors in his various fields of study and his own unique contributions to each field; and the contextualization of his contribution within the political, cultural, and religious climate of his times so that both revolutionary and conservative elements in his thought can be identified and evaluated.