



# The Views of Saadia Gaon and al-Qāḍī Abd al-Jabbār on God's Justice and Their Relevance to Dialogue among Civilizations

The surge in scholarly fervor across the Arab world following the Hellenistic resurgence instigated shifts in religious thought concerning theodicy. Saadia Gaon and al-Qāḍī Abd al-Jabbār, representing Jewish and Islamic scholars respectively, exemplify this evolving trend. This study endeavors to delve into Gaon and al-Qāḍī Abd al-Jabbār's perspectives on divine justice and its implications for human agency. Employing a qualitative approach with content analysis as the analytical tool, this research reveals a convergence of ideas between Gaon and al-Qāḍī regarding the manifestation of divine justice through human autonomy. This autonomy operates within the framework of revealed restrictions transmitted to the messenger of God. These limitations establish a moral framework delineating choices of good and evil, ultimately entrusted to human discretion guided by reason. The primacy of reason underscores moral rationality, guiding individuals towards virtuous conduct. Within the realm of human freedom, diverse actions unfold, contributing to cultural evolution and the advancement of civilization. Moral rationality emerges as a pivotal tool in religious comprehension, fostering dialogue between Abrahamic faiths and facilitating the pursuit of a more cohesive global society.

**Keywords:** Judaism, Islam, theodicy, civilization

Peningkatan intensitas keilmuan di dunia Arab pasca kebangkitan Helenistik berdampak pada perubahan konsepsi keagamaan yang berkaitan dengan konsep teodetik. Saadia Gaon dan al-Qāḍī Abd al-Jabbār yang merepresentasikan sarjanawan Yahudi dan Islam menampilkan pola perubahan tersebut. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi pandangan Gaon dan al-Qāḍī Abd al-Jabbār tentang keadilan Tuhan yang berkonsekuensi terhadap tindakan manusia. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan *content analysis* sebagai teknik analisisnya. Penelitian ini menunjukkan kesamaan konsep antara Gaon dan al-Qāḍī terhadap implementasi keadilan Tuhan yang termanifestasi dalam kebebasan manusia untuk bertindak. Kebebasan ini dibingkai oleh pembatasan yang dimanifestasikan dalam wahyu yang disampaikan kepada utusan-Nya. Konsep batasan memberikan skala nilai kebaikan dan kejelekan yang pilihannya diserahkan kepada manusia melalui pertimbangan akal. Fungsi akal menjadi dominan yang mengantarkan keduanya sampai pada rasionalitas moral. Dengan kebebasan yang dimiliki manusia, mereka dapat mengaktualisasikan beragam tindakan yang mengantarkannya pada pembentukan kebudayaan yang berkontribusi pada perkembangan peradaban. Fungsi rasionalitas moral dalam memahami agama dibutuhkan sebagai perangkat dialektis antar agama Abrahamic yang mendukung terciptanya tatanan masyarakat global yang lebih baik.

**Kata Kunci:** Yudaisme, Islam, Teodisi, Peradaban

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## Introduction

The resurgence of the Hellenistic tradition, shaping scholarly progress in the Arab sphere, instigated a shift in the theological scholars' approach to religion. This transition unfolded within religions guided by sacred texts, prompting alterations in interpretive frameworks. Saadia Gaon (892-942 CE), emblematic of Judaism, exemplified this evolving understanding of theological underpinnings. Concurrently, al-Qāḍī Abd al-Jabbār (932-1024 AD), representing Islam, introduced novel concepts in elucidating Islamic fundamentals.<sup>1</sup> The introduction of these fresh perspectives on religion by both figures sparked debates, particularly regarding the concept of divinity. A compelling discourse emerged from their discussions on God's justice in relation to human agency in worldly actions, with a shared aim of revitalizing the concept with similar motivations.<sup>2</sup> Their conceptions of divine justice underscored a rational spirit reflective of the Hellenistic philosophical tradition.

Previous studies have overlooked the dialectical relationship between Gaon and al-Qāḍī, who represent the two major Abrahamic religions. Researchers have tended to only examine these figures partially, often resorting to comparisons within their respective religious frameworks without systematically exploring the relationship between their concepts. Studies focusing on Gaon typically introduce his figures,<sup>3</sup> epistemological conceptions,<sup>4</sup> and methods of scriptural interpretation,<sup>5</sup> while those analyzing Gaon often connect him to the thoughts of Jacob al-Qirḳisānī<sup>6</sup> and Peter Alfonsi<sup>7</sup>. Similarly, research on al-Qāḍī Abd al-Jabbār tends to highlight his contributions to Mu'tazilah, which form the basis of his ideology.<sup>8</sup> Regrettably, previous studies have neglected to address the significant contributions of these two figures to the development of civilization through the reconceptualization of human action.

This study aims to delve into the perspectives of two influential thinkers from Judaism and Islam regarding theodicy, with a particular focus on its impact on civilization. Diverging from previous research primarily

<sup>1</sup> W. Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1985), 58–59; W. Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1973), 207.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan P. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 159–62; Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization, v. 1, the Classical Age of Islam* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 233–35; W. Montgomery Watt, *The Influence of Islam on Medieval Europe* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1972), 10–13.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Jacobs, "Saadia Gaon," in *Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2020), 1743–47, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1665-7\\_455](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1665-7_455); Eliezer Schlossberg, *R. Saadia Gaon: A Leader of Generations* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Ghorban Elmi and Mohsen Rahmani Nejdad, "Epistemology of Saadia Gaon," *Comparative Theology* 13, no. 28 (2022): 117–36, <https://doi.org/10.22108/COTH.2023.130365.1634>; Safiya Shakir Mahmood, "Etymological Comparisons in Hebrew, Arabic and Aramaic in the Saadia Gaon," *Annals of the Faculty of Arts, Ain Shams University* 51, no. 15 (December 30, 2023): 143–52, <https://doi.org/10.21608/aafu.2023.335147>.

<sup>5</sup> Tamás Visi, "The 'Meteorological' Interpretation of the Creation Narrative from John Philoponus to Saadia Gaon," *Aleph: Historical Studies in Science and Judaism* 21, no. 2 (2021): 209–78; Eleonore Stump, "Saadia Gaon on the Problem of Evil," in *Beyond Faith and Rationality. Sophia Studies in Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Traditions and Cultures*, ed. R.S. Silvestre et al., vol. 34 (Cham: Springer, 2020), 49–74, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-43535-6\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-43535-6_4).

<sup>6</sup> Nadia Vidro, "Non-Rabbanite Jewish Calendars in the Works of Jacob Al-Qirḳisānī and Saadia Gaon," *Aleph: Historical Studies in Science and Judaism* 21, no. 1 (2021): 149, <https://doi.org/10.2979/aleph.21.1.0149>.

<sup>7</sup> Carmen Cardelle de Hartmann, "Saadia Gaon and Petrus Alfonsi," *Historical Interactions of Religious Cultures* 1, no. 1 (2024): 50–74, <https://doi.org/10.1628/hirec-2024-0005>.

<sup>8</sup> Ahmad Nor Adeen Kattan, "The Role of Context in Guiding the Signs of Qur'anic Verses to Support Qadi 'Abd Al-Jabbar's Theological Denomination," *Turkish Studies - Language and Literature* 17, no. 1 (2022): 115–35, <https://doi.org/10.7827/TurkishStudies.57620>; Mahdi Zarei-Kachosangi, Ali Allahbedashti, and Reza Berenjkari, "A Criticism of Al-Qadi Abd Al-Jabbar Mu'tazili on Human Essence," *Religious Anthropology* 20, no. 50 (2024).





centered on historical narratives, this study offers a fresh approach to complement these historical accounts. To accomplish this objective, the research delineates two core inquiries. The first pertains to elucidating the descriptive assertions delineating the argumentation of God's justice constructed by both figures. The second inquiry involves an evaluative analysis of the role of evolving conceptions of human actions in fostering the construction of a more enlightened civilization, sanctioned by religious narratives.

The deactualization of concepts based on rationalistic theodicy is built through the argument that human freedom of action that reflects the conception of justice contributes to building civilization. Changes in actions, driven by moral considerations and the need for human development, become the primary drivers of cultural evolution.<sup>9</sup> This continuous cultural renewal, in turn, fosters a more stable civilization where religion plays a vital role. As David B. Richardson argues, the stability of civilization development hinges on the ability of a society's moral principles to adapt to evolving needs.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, blaming religion for the stagnation of civilization goes against the very notion of freedom of human agency enshrined in religious commandments.

This study adopts a qualitative methodology emphasizing dialectical aspects to examine the historical evolution of thought. The qualitative approach is selected with a deliberate focus on methodological orientation, facilitating a generative exploration of conceptual frameworks.<sup>11</sup> The primary data sources for this study consist of the writings of Saadia Gaon and al-Qāḍī Abd al-Jabbār. The selection of Gaon and al-Qāḍī as subjects of research stems from the

interconnectedness of their intellectual networks. Gaon, recognized for his influence by Mu'tazila thought,<sup>12</sup> necessitates comparison with prominent Mu'tazila figures of his time, such as al-Qāḍī. Data collection relies on documentation techniques, involving a thorough examination of works representing the conceptual frameworks of both scholars. The subsequent data analysis employs content analysis techniques to elucidate meanings by identifying relationships within the textual descriptions of the scholars under investigation.<sup>13</sup>

### Historical Context of Saadia Gaon and al-Qāḍī Abd al-Jabbār's Thought

An examination of the historical backdrop surrounding Saadia Gaon and al-Qāḍī Abd al-Jabbār reveals a shared narrative that underpins the development of their ideologies. Both figures, living in the 10th to 11th centuries A.D., were deeply entrenched in the intellectual milieu dominated by Mu'tazila theology. This section delineates the historical context shaping the philosophical frameworks of Saadia Gaon and al-Qāḍī Abd al-Jabbār, presented individually.

#### 1. Historical Context of Saadia Gaon's Works

Born and raised in the village of Dilazh, Fayyum region, Egypt, Saadia was a rabbi (Jewish teacher/religious leader) and the first prominent philosopher of Judaism to write systematic works. Saadia ben Joseph (also known as Sa'id bin Yusuf al-Fayyumi) is the most common way to refer to this prominent rabbi and philosopher. Variations exist in the transliteration of his first name. Rosenblatt, Malter, and Husik use Saadia, while Goodman and Sherbok prefer Saadiah. Brody employs the transliteration

<sup>9</sup> Jaroslav Krejci, "Civilization and Religion," *Religion* 12, no. 1 (January 23, 1982): 29–47, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0048-721X\(82\)90014-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/0048-721X(82)90014-8).

<sup>10</sup> David B. Richardson, "The Philosophy of History and the Stability of Civilizations," *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 20, no. 2 (1957): 158–90, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tho.1957.0012>.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph A. Maxwell, "Why Qualitative Methods Are Necessary for Generalization.," *Qualitative Psychology* 8,

no. 1 (February 2021): 111–18, <https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000173>.

<sup>12</sup> Wilferd Madelung and Sabine Schmidtke, *Rational Theology in Interfaith Communication: Abu l-Husayn Al-Basri's Mu'tazili Theology among the Karaites in the Fatimid Age* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), vii.

<sup>13</sup> Kimberly A. Neuendorf, *The Content Analysis: Guidebook* (California: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2017).





Se'adyah.<sup>14</sup> Throughout this work, we adopt the form Saadia for consistency. As a prominent theologian, Saadia championed the Babylonian yeshiva over its Palestinian counterpart. Yeshivot (plural of yeshiva) are Judaic institutions dedicated to the study of traditional texts like the Torah and Talmud. Similar institutions exist within the Islamic educational tradition, such as madrasahs and hawzas. Notably, Saadia became the first Gaon (head) of a Babylonian yeshiva to hail from outside the region's dominant scholarly family.<sup>15</sup> In addition, he is considered a revolutionary who transformed the intellectual and literary agenda of the cultural elite associated with the Geonic academies<sup>16</sup>. A defender of tradition, he nonetheless revolutionized the academic landscape.<sup>17</sup>

Saadia Gaon's intellectual world was shaped by a confluence of factors, including various theological schools like the Qadariyya, Mu'tazila, and Asy'ariya. In addition, he was shaped by tensions within the Jewish community between the Karaites (derived from the Hebrew verb "qara", or Arabic "Qara'a" meaning "to read")<sup>18</sup> and Rabbinic/Rabbanite/Rabbanian tradition Rabbinteachings or schools.<sup>19</sup> Saadia emerged as a staunch defender of Rabbinic

Judaism against the Karaite challenge, which centered on the primacy of oral tradition alongside scripture. He also engaged in a heated debate with Aaron ben Meir, a Rabbinic leader from Jerusalem, regarding the Jewish calendar.<sup>20</sup> Like other early Jewish philosophers, Saadia drew heavily on Mu'tazila theology, a prominent school of Islamic thought during the classical era.<sup>21</sup> Saadia was heir to the main line of development of the Jewish religion, and as head of the academy of Sura (the name of the city in Iraq), he was the intellectual representative of the Jewish people and Judaism of his time.<sup>22</sup>

Saadia Gaon's lasting impact lies in his attempt to reconcile Jewish tradition with the prevailing scientific and philosophical currents of his time.<sup>23</sup> His magnum opus, the *Kitab al-Amanat wa al-I'tiqadat* (Book of Beliefs and Opinions), composed in Arabic during his Baghdad exile in 933, exemplifies this endeavor. Influenced by Aristotelian and Platonic thought, Saadia employed a multifaceted approach. He drew on scriptural evidence (*naqli*) and rational arguments (*'aqli*), similar to those used in *Kalām* (Islamic theological discourse), to refute opposing views and address objections to his own. Notably, his efforts

<sup>14</sup> Saadia Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs & Opinions*, trans. Samuel Rosenblatt (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976); Henry Malter, *Saadia Gaon: His Life and Works* (New York: Hermon Press, 1969); Isaac Husik, *A History of Mediaeval Jewish Philosophy* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1946); Lenn E. Goodman, "Saadia Gaon Al-Fayyumi," in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman, v. 1, part (London and New York: Routledge, 1996); Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *Medieval Jewish Philosophy: An Introduction* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1996); Robert Brody, *The Geonim of Babylonia and the Shaping of Medieval Jewish Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> Robert M. Seltzer, *Jewish People, Jewish Thought: The Jewish Experience in History* (New York and London: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. – Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1980), 377; Goodman, "Saadia Gaon Al-Fayyumi."

<sup>16</sup> Gaoni is also known as Geonic in English as an adjective, while Geonim is the plural word of Gaon.

<sup>17</sup> Alexander Marx, "Rab Saadia Gaon," in *Rab Saadia Gaon: Studies in His Honor*, ed. Louis Finkelstein (New York: Arno Press, 1980), 65–69; Brody, *The Geonim of Babylonia and the Shaping of Medieval Jewish Culture*.

<sup>18</sup> "Karaism | Jewish Religious Movement | Britannica," n.d.

<sup>19</sup> "Rabbinic Judaism | Britannica," n.d.

<sup>20</sup> Brody, *The Geonim of Babylonia and the Shaping of Medieval Jewish Culture*; Cohn-Sherbok, *Medieval Jewish Philosophy: An Introduction*.

<sup>21</sup> Husik, *A History of Mediaeval Jewish Philosophy*; Seltzer, *Jewish People, Jewish Thought: The Jewish Experience in History*.

<sup>22</sup> Husik, *A History of Mediaeval Jewish Philosophy*.

<sup>23</sup> Malter, *Saadia Gaon: His Life and Works*.





transcended mere apologetics. The doctrines he defended were inevitably shaped by the process of rigorous examination.<sup>24</sup>

## 2. Historical Context of the Works of Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar

'Abd al-Jabbar, born around 935 CE (323 AH) in Hamadan, Iran, emerged as the last great theologian of the Mu'tazila school. Though known for his opposition to traditionalist interpretations, he possessed a strong foundation in Islamic jurisprudence, having received the training expected of Muslim scholars of his era. He bore the honorific title "*Imad al-Din*" (Pillar of the Religion) and served as a Qadi (judge), eventually attaining the position of *Qadi al-Qudat* (Chief Judge).<sup>25</sup>

While a Mu'tazila theologian, 'Abd al-Jabbar's approach was not universally accepted within the school. He, however, saw his greatest contribution as the development of a systematic method for theological inquiry and the refinement of argumentation in general.<sup>26</sup> According to G.F. Hourani, 'Abd al-Jabbar's works were not a mere summary of the Mu'tazila's decline but rather the culmination of their intellectual tradition. Engaging with both leading Mu'tazila thinkers and their opponents, he presented the most elaborate defense of Mu'tazila doctrines ever written. Furthermore, his writings delve into a broad and sophisticated discussion of ethics.<sup>27</sup>

Social and political struggles within early Islamic societies motivated and helped

frame the conflicting discourses of Mutazilites, traditionalists, Shiites, and other groups vying for power. Caliph al-Ma'mun (reigned between 813 and 833 AD) openly championed the Mutazila position regarding the doctrine of the Qur'an that was created and declared it the official state doctrine throughout the caliphate. However, al-Ma'mun's policy ultimately proved unsuccessful, meaning it did not continue beyond his reign.<sup>28</sup>

The appointment of al-Mutawakkil as caliph completely reversed the previous situation, which tended to favor the Mu'tazila school of thought as the official state teaching. This school of thought also began to lose its influence among religious intellectuals. In the following century, the Ash'ariya, who came from the Mu'tazilites but respected tradition, emerged to oppose the Mu'tazila doctrines. After that, the Ash'ariya and Maturidiya dominated the theological scene. 'Abd al-Jabbar was the last widely recognized Mu'tazila teacher of the Islamic Middle Ages, although he was not the last important Mu'tazila thinker.<sup>29</sup>

'Abd al-Jabbar wrote a summary of the Mu'tazila kalam, *Kitab al-usul al-khamsa* (Book of Five Principles). He intended that his summary be memorized by the kalam students who studied with him or one of his students, where he dictated the book to them, just as other kalam masters trained their students to debate with their opponents.<sup>30</sup> 'Abd al-Jabbar also dictated a commentary

<sup>24</sup> Oliver Leaman, *An Introduction to Medieval Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 7–8; Goodman, "Saadiyah Gaon Al-Fayyumi."

<sup>25</sup> Richard C. Martin, Mark R. Woodward, and Dwi S. Atmaja, *Defenders of Reason in Islam: Mu'tazilism from Medieval Schools to Modern Symbol* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997), 49; George F. Hourani, *Islamic Rationalism: The Ethics of 'Abd Al-Jabbar* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 5.

<sup>26</sup> Martin, Woodward, and Atmaja, *Defenders of Reason in Islam: Mu'tazilism from Medieval Schools to Modern Symbol*.

<sup>27</sup> George F. Hourani, *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 100.

<sup>28</sup> Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (New York and London: Columbia University Press-Longman, 1983), 62–63.

<sup>29</sup> Martin, Woodward, and Atmaja, *Defenders of Reason in Islam: Mu'tazilism from Medieval Schools to Modern Symbol*; Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought*.

<sup>30</sup> Martin, Woodward, and Atmaja, *Defenders of Reason in Islam: Mu'tazilism from Medieval Schools to Modern Symbol*; Leaman, *An Introduction to Medieval Islamic Philosophy*.





(sharah) on a book entitled *Sharh al-usul al-khamsa* (now lost). His student, Manekdim, who believed in Zaydi al-Mu'tazili, wrote a super commentary (*ta'liq*) on 'Abd al-Jabbar's commentary, entitled *Ta'liq 'ala Sharh al-usul al-khamsa*.<sup>31</sup> Here, we will discuss his views on God's justice or theodicy in the Book of *al-Usul al-Khamsa*, which was translated into English by Dwi S. Atmaja, Richard C. Martin, and Mark Woodward.

### The Concept of God's Justice in Jews and Islam: Saadia Gaon and al-Qāḍī Abd al-Jabbar's Perspectives

The concept of justice throughout human civilization is subject to relative dimensions, adjusting to the consensus established within each society's structured order. Consequently, justice is delineated differently based on the agreed-upon standards across various locales.<sup>32</sup> Particularly in societies that perceive humans as inherently frail beings, determining the parameters of justice necessitates an entity deemed superhuman, capable of transcending human frailty to ensure equitable treatment within the established norms. This commitment often resonates in societies with theological beliefs that assert divine revelation as a conduit for God's manifestation, forming a distinct category of justice known as revelatory justice.<sup>33</sup> This form of justice bears correlation with natural justice, perpetually tethered to the divine will or the intrinsic nature of existence, intricately interwoven with human fate.

This section elucidates the concept of God's justice as expounded by Saadia Gaon and al-Qāḍī Abd al-Jabbār, each representing distinct religious perspectives. Their respective interpretations are detailed below.

### 1. Saadia Gaon Arguments on God's Justice

In Jewish theology, the conception of God's justice revolves around key doctrines such as creation, free will, and belief in the final judgment, all aimed at attaining human fulfillment. Saadia Gaon posits justice as a fundamental tenet of faith, one of God's attributes establishing Him as the singular creator of the universe. He underscores the nexus between creation and justice, drawing from Deuteronomy 32:4, which asserts God's omnipotence while emphasizing His aversion to waste or injustice.<sup>34</sup> Creation, perceived as an expression of divine love for His creations, is accompanied by a set of laws designed to guide humanity toward happiness. Human happiness emerges as the ultimate goal of God's creative process, facilitated by a series of regulatory principles revealed through His messengers.<sup>35</sup>

Saadia's discourse extends beyond the external provisions bestowed upon humanity by God, encompassing the internal aspects as well. He asserts that humans are endowed with intellect (*hikmah*) and a divine soul, elevating them to a position of preeminence. The judicious application of human intellect leads to remarkable achievements, such as the ability to recall past events, anticipate future occurrences, harness animals for daily use, and extract water from the depths of the earth for surface irrigation.<sup>36</sup> The potential of the human intellect transcends the limitations of the physical body, enabling the acquisition of knowledge that expands the soul's horizons beyond the confines of heaven and earth.<sup>37</sup> This potential further surpasses the brevity of human life through

<sup>31</sup> Martin, Woodward, and Atmaja, *Defenders of Reason in Islam: Mu'tazilism from Medieval Schools to Modern Symbol*.

<sup>32</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 111.

<sup>33</sup> Majid Khadduri, *The Islamic Conception of Justice* (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 2.

<sup>34</sup> Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs & Opinions*, 134–35.

<sup>35</sup> Gaon, 137–38.

<sup>36</sup> Gaon, 181–82.

<sup>37</sup> Gaon, 183–84.





the divine promise of eternal existence in the afterlife.

The creation of the universe, governed by its ordained laws, signifies humanity as the ultimate culmination of the cosmic design, thus reinforcing the concept of God's justice. Saadia Gaon illustrates this proposition vividly, depicting God's provision not only in the external aspects necessary for human existence but also within their internal faculties.

When we examine the Scriptures, we likewise find in them a statement by God to the effect that I, even I, have made the earth, and created man upon it (Isa. 45:12). In fact, at the very beginning of the Torah God listed all classes of creatures. Then, when He had completed them all, He said: Let us make man (Gen. 1:26), like a person who builds a palace and, after having furnished and decorated it, brings its owner into it.<sup>38</sup>

According to Saadia, humans are endowed with reason (wisdom) and a divine soul, rendering them superior beings. This superiority, facilitated by the use of intellect, enables humans to achieve remarkable feats, such as recalling past events, foreseeing future occurrences, taming animals for daily needs, and extracting water from the earth. The potential of human intellect transcends physical limitations, widening the scope of the soul beyond the confines of the heavens and the earth. Moreover, this potential surpasses the constraints of human mortality, as knowledge of God's promise of eternal life in the hereafter assures transcendence beyond temporal constraints.

The endowment of reason bestowed upon humans by God serves as a conduit for the implementation of divine justice. Through their intellect, individuals are granted the freedom to make choices, the

consequences of which are determined by a system of rewards and punishments. This freedom, constrained by rational deliberation, enables humans to discern between actions deemed commendable or reprehensible based on their natural inclinations.<sup>39</sup> Saadia Gaon further contends that reason empowers humans to govern their impulses and desires, such as lust and sexuality, thereby safeguarding their species—a divine manifestation of wisdom.<sup>40</sup> Failure to restrain vices results in divine retribution in the afterlife, serving as a means to restore violated justice.<sup>41</sup> The mechanism of reward and punishment, integral to justice, necessitates human compliance with divine commands and prohibitions, wherein consequences are meted out accordingly. Saadia posits that these directives validate human superiority over other creatures, affirming their pivotal role as the axis and foundation of the world (*qutb al-'alam wa qa'idatuhu*).<sup>42</sup> Thus, through God's justice, humans are entrusted with the capacity to act in accordance with divine mandates, demonstrating their authority to both execute and abstain from actions guided by divine decree.

The enactment of justice through adherence to commands and prohibitions outlined in revelation is not the sole factor safeguarding humans from reward and punishment. Actions stemming from personal decisions, even those not explicitly outlined in holy texts, must also be guided by a sense of justice aimed at preserving and upholding religious principles.<sup>43</sup> This ethos is realized through a belief in the Day of Resurrection, where judgment is meted out.<sup>44</sup> Saadia Gaon posits that disbelief in the Day of Resurrection precludes an individual from being resurrected, as they reject what

<sup>38</sup> Gaon, 181.

<sup>39</sup> Gaon, 325.

<sup>40</sup> Gaon, 185–86.

<sup>41</sup> Gaon, 325.

<sup>42</sup> Gaon, 182–83; 138–40.

<sup>43</sup> Gaon, 232.

<sup>44</sup> Gaon, 429.





they denied previously. Furthermore, Saadia asserts that retribution, emblematic of God's justice, transpires in this world as well. Human suffering, manifested through illness, serves as a purifying agent from sin, fostering greater submission to the divine.<sup>45</sup> Punishment and reward, according to Saadia, are indispensable tools to instill fear or aspiration in humanity.<sup>46</sup>

## 2. Al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār's Arguments on God's Justice

In the theological framework of al-Qāḍī Abd al-Jabbār, the doctrine of God's justice (*al-'adl*) underscores human moral accountability for their actions, thereby ensuring that God's interactions with humanity cannot be deemed unethical. Al-Qāḍī argues that human responsibility for their deeds stems from their designation as moral agents (*al-mukallaf*) by God (*al-mukallif*). According to him, the concept of obligation (*taklif*) is intrinsically linked to human capacity (*al-qudra*) to fulfill the obligations imposed upon them.<sup>47</sup> This capacity empowers humans to exercise free will, enabling them to freely choose belief or disbelief, thus expressing their inherent freedom. The autonomy bestowed upon humans allows for actions to emanate from their own volition, with the potential for morally reprehensible deeds that cannot be ascribed to God.<sup>48</sup> Al-Qāḍī contends that God does not engender ethically wrong actions, as such actions would render His commands to pursue righteousness and eschew wrongdoing—accompanied by the reward for obedience and punishment for disobedience—meaningless.<sup>49</sup> Wrongful actions committed by humans are, according to al-Qāḍī, liable to divine retribution due to the freedom granted to them.

In the theological perspective of al-Qāḍī, an individual's choice to engage in wrongful actions serves as a criterion for the rewards bestowed upon them by God, reflecting divine justice. Al-Qāḍī articulated this concept in response to inquiries regarding the suffering of the offspring of polytheists. In his view, divine punishment and retribution are reserved solely for those who have committed sins, thereby exempting innocent children from such consequences.<sup>50</sup> Al-Qāḍī underscores that individuals are held accountable only for their own actions and are not burdened with the mistakes of others, including their own parents.<sup>51</sup> Regarding worldly afflictions, al-Qāḍī posits that the hardships and suffering endured by humans serve as a means to attain benefits in the afterlife, illustrating God's justice.<sup>52</sup>

The discourse surrounding human freedom to choose their actions arises from the contention over whether humans possess the ability to shape their own destinies or if their wrongdoing originates from divine intervention. This notion is contested by al-Qāḍī, who rebuts the idea that God is responsible for human misdeeds, asserting that such a belief undermines the concept of God's justice. According to al-Qāḍī, God is devoid of any moral imperfection (*qabīh*) and all His actions are inherently good (*hasana*).<sup>53</sup> Moreover, al-Qāḍī posits that it is inconceivable for wise beings to command what they detest or forbid what they desire. Since God commands belief and prohibits disbelief, it follows that He desires belief and abhors disbelief. Consequently, individuals who commit wrongful acts are identifiable by

<sup>45</sup> Gaon, 184–85.

<sup>46</sup> Gaon, 185–86.

<sup>47</sup> al-Qāḍī Abd Al-Jabbār al-Asad Abādī, *Uṣūl Al-Khamsah* (Kuwait: Maṭba'ah Jāmi'ah al-Kuwait, 1998), 78.

<sup>48</sup> al-Asad Abādī, 77.

<sup>49</sup> al-Asad Abādī, 81.

<sup>50</sup> al-Asad Abādī, 82.

<sup>51</sup> al-Asad Abādī, 83.

<sup>52</sup> al-Asad Abādī, 84.

<sup>53</sup> al-Asad Abādī, 76.







their own volition,<sup>54</sup> a consequence of the freedom bestowed upon them.

The liberty bestowed upon humans is circumscribed by directives imbued with the values cherished by God, disseminated to humanity via revelation delivered through His messenger. According to al-Qāḍī, revelation constitutes a divine gift bestowed upon humanity, encapsulating the guidance (*al-hudā*) necessary for navigating life's journey. Al-Qāḍī illustrates this notion by likening revelation to sustenance provided to those experiencing hunger.

Then if asked: Do you say that Allah has shown the truth (*al-haqq*) to everyone He created, and He has guided them to religion? Say to him: Yes, and the proof is that if Allah is the Most Forgiving and the Most Merciful, then it is not possible for Him to impose on us (what He has obligated us to) unless He has told us what He will impose on us, and it is not possible for Him to forbid us from disobedience unless He has warned us about it so that we can avoid it, because He wants good for us. Therefore, He must explain and show us the right path (*tarīq al-rusyd*) so that we can take it, and the wrong path (*tarīq al-ghayy*) so that we can be careful in taking it. If He does so, and then He issues a command to someone, and that person disobeys it, then that person harms himself and will perish despite clear evidence (that warns him); and if [that person] obeys it, he will do good for himself and will be saved. Allah is good to all people (*al-mukallifin*), both to those who believe and those who do not believe, just as if a person offers food to two starving people, and one of them eats it, then he has done morally good to both of them.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>54</sup> al-Asad Abādī, 80.

<sup>55</sup> al-Asad Abādī, 85.

<sup>56</sup> Schlossberg, R. *Saadia Gaon: A Leader of Generations*,

The existence of revelation is an embodiment of God's justice for all humans to lead them to goodness without any coercion so that humans who do evil are considered to have chosen to leave the guidance.

The emphasis on the ramifications of human actions in the world, coupled with God's determination to mete out retribution, epitomizes the theological discourse during the era inhabited by Saadia Gaon and al-Qāḍī Abd al-Jabbar. Both figures, contemporaries residing in the same epoch, embody the theological debates within Judaism and Islam, aimed at assessing the evolving concepts of divinity. Gaon directed his critique towards the Karaites, who rejected the oral law of the Torah, and Heretics who viewed the world as chaotic and devoid of purpose, leading to a loss of faith in God.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, al-Qāḍī engaged in theological debates within Islamic sects, particularly with the Mu'tazila school. Al-Qāḍī, representing the Mu'tazila, offered corrections to the concept of justice (*al-adalah*) espoused by the al-Asy'ariyah, who advocated the absolute sovereignty of God's will over humans.<sup>57</sup> Despite differing theological contexts, both Gaon and al-Qāḍī constructed their fundamental theses along similar lines, accentuating the freedom granted to humans to make choices laden with accountability for their actions.

The orientation towards elucidating God's justice, accentuating the bestowal of freedom upon humans to act, encapsulates the convergence of Gaon and Saadia's perspectives within a unified framework of thought. Saadia's argumentation, rooted in the notion of human agency in distinguishing between good and evil actions, reflects his influence from the Mu'tazila

<sup>57</sup> Martin, Woodward, and Atmaja, *Defenders of Reason in Islam: Mu'tazilism from Medieval Schools to Modern Symbol*, 72.





conception.<sup>58</sup> This concept, institutionalized by Saadia, forms the cornerstone of all ideologies advocated by al-Qāḍī, who emerged as the epitome of Mu'tazila scholars of his era. In a broader context, these shared understandings underscore the interconnectedness of theological discourses across Abrahamic religions, offering potential contributions to global civilization.<sup>59</sup> This discourse highlights the historical precedent of interconnections and dialogues concerning theological matters within Abrahamic faiths, emphasizing their contemporary relevance through constructive dialogue.

### The Relevance of Theological Dialogue for the Progress of Civilization

Saadia Gaon and al-Qāḍī Abd al-Jabbār demonstrate a constructive dialectical approach in their examination of God's justice, emphasizing human freedom to make choices. They contend that the control over actions originates from divine texts revealed to messengers. The assessment of actions is abstracted by reason to discern whether they are deemed good or bad. Errors in this assessment have repercussions in the rewards bestowed by God, both in the present life and the afterlife. Within this framework, God is perceived as playing no direct role in human decisions to act contrary to sacred texts, which are considered negative. The efficacy of the consequences of actions is contingent upon human belief in the existence of the Day of Judgment, where actions in the world are accounted for and judged.

The scale of moral determination, facilitated by the abstraction of rationality, has prompted

changes in the legal framework of religion, adapting to pragmatic needs acknowledged by human intellects. This rational approach has influenced the reinterpretation of religious laws, incorporating commands and prohibitions guided by human wisdom to foster practical legal structures.<sup>60</sup> Gaon's rationale behind legal construction ultimately aims at human happiness attainment.<sup>61</sup> The pursuit of human happiness necessitates the reevaluation of actions within legal frameworks, considering contextual shifts. This mechanism, identified by Wasserstrom, serves as a tool utilized by Jewish, Christian, and Islamic scholars during the ninth and tenth centuries.<sup>62</sup> Rationality imbued with moral considerations drives alterations in rule implementation, fostering civilization development through inclusive theological ideologies.

The advancement of ancient civilizations was propelled by inclusive theological beliefs that fostered the constructive engagement of every individual. According to Jaroslav Krejci, progress across diverse religious cultures stemmed from the allowance of varied freedoms and religious coexistence, wherein individuals could select actions based on personal decisions.<sup>63</sup> These decisions, in turn, reflect considerations of the positive and negative facets of human life, informed by the formulation of civilization-building principles grounded in open theological perspectives and the active involvement of all religious participants.<sup>64</sup> By granting individuals the freedom to abstract their logical deliberations, humanity could embark on creative endeavors aimed at self-development

<sup>58</sup> David Sklare, "Mu'tazili Trends in Jewish Theology - A Brief Survey," *İslami İlimler Dergisi* 12, no. 2 (2017): 145–78.

<sup>59</sup> Brian Cox, "The 'Third Way' of Abrahamic Reconciliation," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 4, no. 2 (2006): 49–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2006.9523251>.

<sup>60</sup> Ahmed Ali Siddiqi, "Moral Epistemology and the Revision of Divine Law in Islam," *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion* 10, no. 1 (November 13, 2021): 43–70, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ojlr/rwab006>.

<sup>61</sup> Malter, *Saadia Gaon: His Life and Works*, 213.

<sup>62</sup> Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew: The Problem of Symbiosis under Early Islam*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 142.

<sup>63</sup> Krejci, "Civilization and Religion."

<sup>64</sup> Turan Kayaoglu, "Constructing the Dialogue of Civilizations in World Politics: A Case of Global Islamic Activism," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 23, no. 2 (April 2012): 129–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2012.655064>.





and the exploration of curiosity, thereby autonomously shaping their civilizations.<sup>65</sup> Gaon and al-Qāḍī epitomized this encouragement within their teachings, which underscored the practical application of God's justice to human affairs.

Therefore, if we want to build a better life, then theologically, we believe that as humans, we have and are equipped with the ability to design a life that we consider good. Of course, we also believe that there are always dimensions that we cannot or do not fully control. Perhaps that is an area where God, in His omnipotence, is wanting something else. For example, we can see this in the pandemic phenomenon in the last few years. However, this fact does not negate at all that, as humans, we are obliged to try or make efforts to choose the best. With this understanding, theologically, we affirm God's omnipotence over His creatures. However, on the other hand, God also wants us to use our reason and God's guidance in making choices that are considered good. We do not act fatalistically in a world with all its imperfections.

Abrahamic religions are the majority religions the world's population adheres to today. Their theological views and understandings will always have a global impact. The constructive theological arguments will have a broad impact on human life. The concepts of God's justice, omnipotence, and human ability (*qudrah*) to do things considered good are part of the key concepts in building world civilization. God has given guidance in revelation and reason, and at the same time, God has given human beings the ability to know and implement it. The enthusiasm of adherents of the Abrahamic religions to build a theological dialogue that complements each other constructively rather than destructively is expected to impact a better global life significantly.

## Conclusion

In matters of God's justice, Saadia emphasizes that humanity is the purpose of creation and humans have free choice. Humans experience themselves to be free, and there is no evidence that their actions are coerced. The demands for responsibility for human actions show that humans have freedom. 'Abd al-Jabbār's discussion of Divine justice is based on the thesis that God wants goodness for humans. He does not will or create evils. God offers guidance (*huda*) on the right path but does not force people to go astray (*dlalal*). Therefore, immoral deeds are punishable. God does not force these actions to happen to humans. It would be unfair for God to punish His creatures for the actions He created in humans.

Saadia Gaon and Abd al-Jabbar's exploration of the problem of Divine justice shows that there are many similar problems and theological arguments in Abrahamic religions, including Christianity. In the contemporary context, leaders of these religions must continue building theological dialogues. They can complement each other and exchange ideas in leading people in the contemporary era. What is also important is the effort to build a better civilization for living together through theological dialogues. There is no great civilization in the world without the role of religion. Therefore, hopefully, the role of the Abrahamic religions in this matter and their theological dialogue will help and contribute to building a better civilization.

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