**Ibn al-Kaṯār's Perception of the Origin of Language in His *Šarḥ im bəḥuqūtay/baquti***

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**The Works of Nafīs a-Dīn Abū l-Faraj Ibn al-Kaṯār**

The name of the author of the work examined here is Abū l-Faraj Ibn al-Kaṯār. Due to the status and respect he enjoyed during his lifetime, he was known as Nafīs a-Dīn (“the Precious of Religion”) and also as Šams al-Ḥūkmāa (“the Sun of the Sages”). Al-Kaṯār is best known for his treatise *Šarḥ* (Commentary) *im bəḥuqūtay*. He was active during the thirteenth century, and possibly in the early fourteenth century. As I shall show here, Al-Kaṯār’s references to Samaritan *piyyutim* and to the names of the well-known poets of the Samaritan sect, as well as to several biblical exegetists, provide important evidence of his education and his thorough knowledge of Samarian literature written in Aramaic, Hebrew, and Arabic.

**The Treatise *Šarḥ im bəḥuqūtay***

The work is entitled *كتاب شرح* *im bəḥuqūtay* (The Book of Commentary of Im Bəḥuqūtay, and in the Samaritan pronunciation – Im Baquti). The treatise is relatively expansive, extending over 236 pages (according to Ms **1**, held at the library of the Ben-Zvi Institute in Jerusalem). It is written in Medieval Arabic in Arabic letters; verses from the Pentateuch and quotes from the Samaritan *piyyutim* are written in the Samaritan Hebrew alphabet. The work begins with a linguistic discussion of the parts of speech, by way of a foundation for discussion of the prepositions אם+ב; the introduction complements the body of the treatise, which focuses mainly on a commentary on the Torah portion *Im bəḥuqūtay*.

Despite its title, however, the treatise does not focus exclusively on this Torah portion. The work does not have a systematic character and examines a wide range of issues unrelated to *Im bəḥuqūtay*. While commenting on selected verses from this portion, particularly verses from Chapters 26–27 of Leviticus, the author expanded on various halakhic questions, including a discussion of positive and negative commandments, noting the conditions for their performance and mentioning several specific commandments, with examples and brief explanations. He also touched on the characteristics of the believer, Moses’ mission, and evidence of Moses’ status as an emissary of God (i.e., a prophet), among other questions.

While examining these issues, the author engaged in numerous linguistic discussions. A review of the content and methodology of these explanations shows that Al-Kaṯār explored numerous linguistic questions concerning all branches of language: A. issues in phonology; B. issues in morphology; C. issues in syntax; D. semantic questions, including the meaning of words.

In addition to quotes from the Pentateuch, the author also quoted from the works of prominent poets of the Samaritan community and from earlier biblical commentaries to reinforce and support his exegeses. He mentioned the fourth-century figure Marqah, who is regarded as the greatest Samaritan poet and is known for his treatise *The Teaching of Marqah*. He also referred to the الشيخ ابو الحسن الصوري (Šeykh Abū l-Hasan a-Ṣūrī), who was probably active in the eleventh century; a-Ṣūrī wrote various commentaries, including *A-tabākh*, and is credited with preparing the first translation of the Pentateuch into Arabic. The author also mentioned the names of الشيخ غزال ابن درتة, the scholar Ṭabya ben Darta, who was active in the tenth and early eleventh centuries, and of the صاحب الدارن – عمرم درة (Amram Darah), a well-known fourth-century Samaritan poet and priest who wrote *piyūtīm* in Aramaic. Biblical commentators he referred to include الدستان (A-Dustān), who wrote an exegesis on the Book of Numbers. A-Dustān, who was also a poet, lived before the thirteenth century, in a period when Aramaic was still spoken in the Samaritan community.

In this lecture, I have chosen to focus on an issue from the field of linguistic philosophy. I will concentrate on the perception of the author Ibn al-Kaṯār regarding the origin of language. I will also examine a second issue that complements and clarifies the first, namely the semantic phenomenon of polysemy; thus the second aspect will illuminate the first.

**First Issue: The Origin of Language**

In his extensive 236-page work, Ibn al-Kaṯār twice mentions the concept of وضع في اللغة, and in three more he refers to this concept without mentioning it by name.

**The first and second instances:**

The first instance occurs in the commentary on Leviticus 26:5:

וְהִשִּיג לָכֶם דַּיִש אֶת בָּצִיר: וּבָצִיר יַשִּיג אֶת הַזָּרַע (נ"מ זָרַע): וַאֲכַלְתֶּם לַחְמְכֶם לָשֹבַע: וִישַבְתֶּם לָבֶטַח בְּאַרְצְכֶם

wā̊ššǝg lā̊kimma deš it bā̊ṣǝr wbā̊ṣǝr yaššǝg it azzēra wā̊kåltimma lēmmā̊kimma alšāba wyā̊šåbtimma albēṭå bā̊reṣkimma.]

Your threshing shall overtake the vintage, and your vintage shall overtake the sowing; you shall eat your fill of bread and dwell securely in your land.

As he sets out to explain the meaning of the verbal form וַאֲכַלְתֶּם and the noun לֶחֶם here, he makes the following comment regarding the verb: واصل **وضعه** باللغة العبرانية للاكل بالفم (“and its principal **determination** in the Hebrew language is eating by the mouth”). Regarding לֶחֶם, he comments: واعلم ان לחם اسم **وضع** في اللغة العبرانية للغداء المطلق (“and know that לחם is a noun **determined** in the Hebrew language for the definitive food”).

Ibn al-Kaṯār’s use of the Arabic verb **وُضِعَ** (“was determined, established”) essentially exposes his perception concerning the origin of language in general, and the Hebrew language in particular.

The debate among the philosophers of Ancient Greece concerning the origin of language is well known: one position argues that language stems from nature, while the other insists that it is the product of consensus. This debate continued centuries later among the Arab scholars and among the rabbinical sages who lived in the Arabic cultural domain. Rabbi Saadia Gaon is the most prominent example of this; his opinion emerges intermittently throughout his works, particularly in his treatise *Faṣīḥ al-lughah al-‛ibrāniyah* (“The Finesse of the Hebrew Language”). The members and sages of the Samaritan community also lived in the Arabic cultural domain and were surely familiar with the writings of the Arab scholars and the rabbinical grammarians and philosophers. Without any doubt, they must have been influenced by the attitudes of both these circles.

In the context of the above-mentioned debate, the author’s use of the verb **وُضِعَ** (“was determined, established”) shows that he favors the “consensus” school of thought. This approach suggests that nouns were determined by agreement among humans, who established a name for every object in reality. These nouns are not inherent to the meaning of the object, and since they are the product of consensus, then just as people agreed on a particular name for a given object, so they could also agree to attribute a different name to that same object. Since the entire system depends on human consensus, it is pointless to demand reasons for the words themselves, or for their form or pronunciation. The letters and vowel points, too, are the product of human consent and accordingly cannot be explained.

An examination of Ibn al-Kaṯār’s comments not only highlights his thorough familiarity with Arab and rabbinical linguistic approaches, including the views of Saadia Gaon but also reveals his broad linguistic thought, which is surprisingly close to modern perspectives. His comments raise the idea of arbitrary linguistic signs – an approach that in modern times is identified with the prominent linguist De Saussure. He effectively distinguishes between the concepts of “signifier” and “signified,” referring respectively to the name of an object and the object itself (الشيء – the thing) that the name signifies.

As Ibn al-Kaṯār sees it, while language is the product of consensus, the scope of consensus does not include every individual, and certainly not contemporary speakers, for whom the language constitutes a long-standing tradition. Here enters the idea of the “Determiner of the Language” who established its words. The Determiner of the Language is not a given individual, and certainly not God, but some unknown being from the earliest days of the language whose identity is not explained by his remarks. The Determiner of the Language chose the names for objects on an arbitrary basis and imbued his choice with an element of permanency; this permanency is the object of human agreement through a consensus that is passed down from one generation to the next.

**The following features characterize Ibn al-Kaṯār’s perception:**

• The choice made by the Determiner of Language (**واضع اللغة**) is arbitrary.

• The product of this choice is fixed (**وضعت**) in the language.

• The determination became a consensus (**اصطلاح**).

• The determination was transmitted to the following generations (**انتقال**).

Thus it emerges that the consensus predates our time and that by virtue of tradition, we are obliged to adhere to the determined nouns and must not deviate from them.

**Definition of the approach:**

Nouns are determined by consensus among humans and are not inherent to the meaning of the object. After all, if the meaning of an objective required a particular name, it would not be possible for there to be any difference between human languages and it would not be possible to call a given object by different names in the various languages. Accordingly, for example, a courtyard (*ḥaṣer* in Hebrew) would also have to be called *ḥaṣer* in Arabic, rather than ساحة (*sāhah*).

The fact that objects have different names in each language proves that these names are not inherent to the meaning of the object, but are the product of consensus among humans. In each language, the consensus determined a different name. Just as a given name for an object was agreed upon in a particular language, so people could also have agreed on a different name for the same object. Everything depends on human consent, and accordingly, it is pointless to search for the reasons behind the form or pronunciation of words.

Ibn al-Kaṯār’s comments do not specify who the Determiner of Language is; the reference cannot be to Adam, the first human, as stated in the Book of Genesis: “And the Sovereign God formed out of the earth all the wild beasts and all the birds of the sky, and brought them to the Human to see what he would call them; and whatever the Human called each living creature, that would be its name. And the Human gave names to all the cattle and to the birds of the sky and to all the wild beasts; but no fitting counterpart for a human being was found” (Genesis 2:19–20); “Then the Human said, ‘This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. This one shall be called Woman, for from a Human was she taken’” (Genesis 2:23); “The Human named his wife Eve because she was the mother of all the living” (Genesis 3:20). In contrast, Ibn al-Kaṯār prefers the generic term “**واضع اللغة**” (Determiner of Language).

The Determiner of Language (**واضع اللغة**) is the creator of language who “fixes” words, as part of a process that includes the selection and determination of names; consensus; and transmission to the following generations. **لغة** thus stands for the body of language, a given language, and the calling by names. In other words, the determination of words is undertaken by a human.

The question posed by the Greek philosophers was a philosophical one, whereas the question grappled with by the Arab sages and philosophers is a thoroughly theological one. For the Arab sages, the debate is not ordered along an axis between “nature” and “consent,” since they did not even consider the possibility that language is not from God. Thus they interpreted “from nature” as “of divine origin.” Within Arabic culture, those who addressed the question of the origin of language in the eighth and ninth centuries were religious sages and philosophers, not grammarians. The latter confined their studies to overtly linguistic questions and did not examine the origin of language.

Arab grammarians only begin to show an interest in the origin of language in the tenth century. They were unable and unwilling to ignore the approaches that had already been adopted and formalized within their religious worldview, and accordingly, they accepted these while pursuing a debate that had not begun within the confines of linguistics. In the Arab context, the first position argued that language came from God, and not from humans. This position is supported by a verse in the Quran (Al-Baqarah 31) وعَلَمَ اَدَمَ الأسْمَاء كُلَّهَا (“He taught Adam the names of all things”). This position represents the school of divine determination (**توقيف**) or divine inspiration (**الهام**).

The opposing school is that of consensus – **اصطلاح**, which argues that language is a human invention and that humans reached agreement regarding the meaning of words and use of language. This approach was mainly held by the Mu‛tazilah school of theology and by philosophers influenced by the teachings of Aristotle, such as the scholar Al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 869) and the well-known philosopher and commentator on Aristotle, Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (d. 950).

Ibn al-Kaṯār may have been influenced by the Mu‛tazilah school or directly by Saadia Gaon, who certainly had an influence on his thought in general.

**Second Issue: Polysemy**

In the Middle Ages, prior to the preparation of comprehensive dictionaries, Arab grammarians composed numerous monographs discussing the meaning of words: words pronounced differently reflecting different meanings; words pronounced differently but with the same meaning (such as جلس and قعد); and words pronounced the same but with different meanings.

The Samaritan sages were far more concerned about the issue of words written identically but with different meanings, or words with several meanings, than their Arab or rabbinical Jewish counterparts. The reason for this is simple: the traditional Samaritan version of the Torah does not have vowel points and its precise reading is transmitted orally from one generation to the next (the Samaritan community maintains this tradition to this day). This clarifies the discussion of this subject by Ibn al-Kaṯār in his book. I will now attempt to illustrate his discussion through a handful of examples.

**The First Word: The Verb אָכַל (ā̊kål)**

In his discussion of the meanings of the word **אָכַל** (**ā̊kål**), Ibn al-Kaṯār offers several meanings for various words derived from the root אכל in the pa‛al construction, as follows:

**1. Eating with the mouth – الاكل بالفم**

واصل وضعه في اللغة العبرانية للاكل بالفم من الانسان والحيوان – its chief determination in the Hebrew language is of eating with the mouth in humans and animals [p. 203].

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| • | בְּעִצָּבוֹן **תֹּאכְלֶנָּה** (= **tā̊՚ūkēlinna**) כֹּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ  “By hard labor shall you eat of it all the days of your life” (Gn 3:17) |
| • | לֶחֶם לֹא **אָכַל** (= **ā̊kål**)  “He ate no bread” (Ex 34:28) |
| • | וְנָתַן (נ"מ וְנָתַתִּי) עֵשֶב בְּשָדְךָ לִבְהֶמְתֶךָ ו**ְאָכַלְתָּ** (= **wā̊kā̊ltå**) וְשָבָעְתָּ  “I will also provide grass in the fields for your cattle—and thus you shall eat your fill” (Dt 11:15) |

**2. Annihilation/Destruction – فناء**

**استعرت** هذه اللفظة للفنى – this word was also **borrowed** for the sense of annihilation/destruction.

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| • | וַתֵּצֵא אֵש מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה **וַתֹּאכַל** (= **wta՚ūkǝl**) עַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ אֶת הָעֹלָה וְאֶת הַחֲלָבִים  “Fire came forth from before the Sovereign and consumed the burnt offering and the fat parts on the altar” (Lv 9:24)  [Arabic: AH and AS: واحرقت – “and burned”; Samaritan: (J) ואכלת, (A) ואכלת] |
| • | אֶרֶץ **אוֹכֶלֶת** (=**ā̊kēlåt**) [נ"מ אֹכֶלֶת] יוֹשְבֶיהָ הִיא  “The country […] is one that devours its settlers” (Nm 13:32)  [Arabic: AH and AS: تفني = destroy, annihilate; Samaritan: (AJ) אכלה] |
| • | וְאָכַלְתָּ (= **wā̊kā̊ltå**) אֶת כָּל הָעַמִּים  “You shall destroy all the peoples” (Dt 7:16)  [Arabic: AH and AS: وتفني – “and you will destroy, annihilate.” Samaritan: (J) ותיכל] |

**3. Control – استلاء**

**استعرت** هذه اللفظة للاستلأ – this word was also **borrowed** for the sense of control/seizure.

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| • | וְאָכַלְתָּ (= **wā̊kā̊ltå**) אֶת שְלַל אֹיְבֶיךָ  “and enjoy the use of the spoil of your enemy” (Dt 20:14)  [Arabic: AH and AS: ותאכל. Samaritan: (J) ותאכל] |

Regarding Lv 26:5, ואכלתם לחמכם לשבע (“you shall eat your fill of bread,”) the word אכלתם has the principal meaning fixed by the Determiner of Language, i.e., eating with the mouth.

Conclusion: We can see that Ibn al-Kaṯār offers three meanings for the verb אכל. If we compare this to the Samaritan lexicographer Pineḥas Hacohen ben Yosef Harabban (fourteenth century), we see that al-Kaṯār omits one meaning, that of “swept, cleaned” as understood in the Hebrew at Lv 11:40: וְהָאֹכֵל מִנִּבְלָתָה יְכַבֵּס בְּגָדָיו וְטָמֵא עַד הָעָרֶב (though JPS applies the primary sense of אכל: “anyone who eats of its carcass shall wash those clothes and remain impure until evening”). [w**ā̊**kkal] – the Samaritan tradition regards the form here as an active participle in the pi‛el, interpreted as a past tense form. Conversely, al-Kaṯār adds a meaning not found by Pineḥas Hacohen, namely that of “control.”

**The Second Word: The Noun לֶחֶם** **(*lēm)***

In his discussion of the word **לֶחֶם [= lēm**], Ibn al-Kaṯār presents several meanings, as follows:

**1. לֶחֶם = The Definitive Food**

Referring to “bread,” “meat” or any other food that contributes to the body nutritionally [pp. 204–205]. Most of the instances of the word לחם in the Pentateuch refer to food. For example:

וַיִּצְעַק הָעָם לְפַרְעֹה (גרסה אחרת, אל פרעה) לַלָּחֶם (= **lal'lēm**) – Gn 41:55

הָבָה לָּנוּ לֶחֶם (=**lēm**) – Gn 47:15

[Arabic: AH and AS: قوت– “food.” Samaritan (AJ): 1st instance – לחם; 2nd instance – (J) לחם, but A מזון].

**2. Referring To Food, Even When This Does Not Include “Bread”**

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| • | הוֹצִיא לֶחֶם (= **lēm**) וָיָיִן  “brought out bread and wine” (Gn 14:18)  [Arabic: AH: خبزا – “bread,” but AS: طعاما – “food”; Samaritan: (AJ) לחם] |
| • | וְלֹא יָדַע אִתּוֹ מְאוּמָה כִּי אִם הַלֶּחֶם (= **al'lēm**) אֲשֶר הוּא אֹכֵל  “he paid attention to nothing save the food that he ate” (Gn 39:6, נ"ש)  [Arabic: AH and AS: الخبز = “the bread”; but AH (בגהוזט) and AS (D): الطعام – “the food.” |
| • | שִימוֹ לָחֶם (= **lēm** )" (בר' מג, 31) – ( من المحال كون هولاى يحضروا ليأكلون خبزا وحده =  “Serve the meal” (Gn 43:31) – “it is not possible that they came to eat bread alone”  [Arabic: AH خبزا – “bread,” but AS and AH (בגהוזט): طعاما – “food.” Samaritan: (J) לחם, but (A) מיכל]. |

**3. Possession/Belonging**

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| • | כִּי לַחְמוֹ (= **lēmmu**) הוּא  “for they are his food” (Lv 22:7), cf. לַחְמוֹ (= **lēmu**) [e.g., Gn 49:20]  [Former instance – Arabic: AH and AS: غداوه – “his food.” Samaritan: (AJ) – לחמה; second instance: AH and AS: غداوه – “his food.” Samaritan: (J) לחמה, (A) לחיפה].  [Arabic: AH: خبزا – “bread,” but AS: طعاما – “food”; Samaritan: (AJ) לחם] |
| • | מִלֶּחֶם (= **mil'lēm**) אָבִיהָ  “of her father’s food” (Lv 22:13)  [Arabic: AH and AS: من طعام = “of the food of.” Samaritan (AJ) מלחם]. |
| • | לֶחֶם (= **lēm**) אֱלֹהֵיכֶם לחמי  “food for your God” (Lv 22:25)  [Arabic: AH and AS لازم – “sacrifice.” Samaritan: (AJ)]. |

Pineḥas Hacohen ben Yosef Harabban includes the entry לחם in his dictionary, titled המליץ (*A-tūrjamān*). One of the meanings he offers there is لازم, i.e., sacrifice (Watad, *Hamelitz*, 542: 197). In this case he is referring to Lv 3:11: וְהִקְטִיר הַכֹּהֵן הַמִּזְבֵּחָה לֶחֶם אִשָּה לַיהוָה [נ"מ וְהִקְטִירוֹ] – “The priest shall turn these into smoke on the altar as food, an offering by fire to Adonai.” Saadia Gaon translates here קרבאן.

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| • | כִּי לַחְמֵנוּ (= **lēmmā̊nu**) הֵם  “for they are our food” (Dt 14:9) [Moses says that the Israelites took control of the Canaanites like the eater over the eaten, and the benefit they derive is the benefit the eater derives from the food and his strengthening thereby]  [Arabic: AH and AS طُعمنا – “our livelihood.” Samaritan: (AJ) לחמנן]. |

The Samaritan translations preserve two pronunciations of the word לחמו. The first, without doubling of the *mem*, occurs in Gn 49:20 and Dt 32:24; the second, with doubling of the *mem*, occurs in Lv 22:9. The meanings offered in Pineḥas Hacohen’s dictionary and the exegeses proposed in the Arabic translations of these verses do not enable us to make any distinction between the use of this word with or without the double *mem*; both mean “food.”

**The Third Word: בָּצִיר (*bā̊ṣǝr)***

In his discussion of the word **בָּצִיר [= *bā̊ṣǝr***], Ibn al-Kaṯār presents several meanings for words (nouns and verbs) derived from the root בצר, as follows:

**1. Prevention – منع**

يقال على **المنع** – this is said with the meaning of **prevention** [p. 201].

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| • | וְעַתָּה לֹא י**ִבָּצֵר** (= **yibbā̊ṣår**) מֵהֶם כֹּל אֲשֶר יָזַמְנוּ (= yēzā̊mēnu) [נ"מ יָזְמוּ] לַעֲשוֹת  “then nothing that they may propose to do will be out of their reach.” (Gn 11:6)  [Arabic: AH and AS: يصعب – “will be difficult,” AH (يعصر – B, يتعصب – H). Samaritan: (J) יתבצר ]. |
| • | עָרִים גְּדוֹלוֹת **וּבצרוֹת** (= **wbā̊ṣīrot**) [נ"מ וּבְצֻרוֹת] בַּשָּמָיִם  “great cities with walls sky-high” (Dt 9:1)  [Arabic: AH and AS: حصون = “fortified.” [The Samaritan here has a passive participle in the pa‛al construction]. |
| • | עָרֵי **מבצר** (= **mā̊bā̊ṣǝr**) [נ"מ מִבְצָר] וְגִדְרוֹת צֹאן  “as fortified towns or as enclosures for flocks” (Nm 32:36)  [Arabic: حصون = “fortified”]. |

**2. Lack, Deficit – نقص**

يقال على النقص – it is also used for lack/deficit [p. 201]. Accordingly, it is translated with the words תגרע, תבצר.

**3. Picked – قطف**

يقال على قطف الثمر – it is used with the meaning of picking the fruit [p. 201].

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| וְאֶת עִנְּבֵי נְזִירֶךָ לֹא **תִבְצֹר** (= **tibṣår**)  “you shall not gather […] the grapes of your untrimmed vines.” (Lv 25:5)  [Arabic: AH and AS: تقطف – “you shall pick.” Samaritan: (AJ) תקטף]. |

**4. Harvest – حصاد**

It may also be understood as **קציר** – "harvest" in a metaphorical sense, since picking (of fruit) and harvesting share a common denominator, namely the severing and disconnection of one thing from another.

**The Fourth Word: זרע (*****azzēra)***

In his discussion of the word **הַזֶּרַע [= azzēra**], Ibn al-Kaṯār presents several meanings for words (nouns) derived from the root זרע, as follows:

**1. Offspring – النسل**

וזרע لفظ مشترك يقال على النسل – and זרע is a word with many meanings that is used to refer to offspring [p. 202].

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| וְהָקִים [נ"מ וְהָקֵם] **זֶרַע** (=**zēra**) לְאָחִיךָ  “and provide offspring for your brother.” (Gn 38:8)  [Arabic: AH and AS: نسلا – “offspring.” Samaritan: (AJ) זרע]. |

**2. Grains and Sown Seeds – البزر والحب الذي يزرع**

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| וְכִי יִפֹּל מִנִּבְלָתָם עַל **זֶרַע** (=**zēra**) **זֶרַע** (=**zēra**) [נ"מ עַל-כָּל זֶרַע זֵרוּעַ) אֲשֶר יִזָּרֵעַ  “If such a carcass falls upon seed grain that is to be sown.” (Lv 11:38)  [Arabic: AH بدار, AS: بدار, as also in AH (2-10). Samaritan: (AJ) זרע]. |

**3. Sowing – الزرع**

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| עַד כָּל יְמֵי אָרֶץ [גרסה נוספת, הארץ; נ"מ הָאָרֶץ] זֶרַע (=zēra) וְקָצִיר  “So long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest.” (Gn 8:22)  [Arabic: AH and AS: زرع. Samaritan: (AJ) זרע]. |

**Closing Comments**

It is evident from all the above that Ibn al-Kaṯār holds that the origin of language lies in “consent,” and that it is neither natural nor divinely inspired. Some particular entity in the early stage of language determined the names of objects by way of consent. Al-Kaṯār was probably influenced in this respect by his cultural surroundings: the Arab philosophers, sages, and grammarians. Above all, he appears to have been influenced by the Mu‛tazilah school and by rabbinical sages such as Rabbi Saadia Gaon.