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New lines of investigation

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CHAPTER ONE

*The study of medieval Karaism, 1989–1999**Daniel Frank*

During the past decade the study of Karaism, its history and literature has begun to flourish. Over one hundred and fifty publications have appeared – a modest figure, perhaps, in comparison with scholarship on Maimonides, kabbalah, or medieval Hebrew poetry, but impressive in its own terms. And while a handful of eminences dominated Karaite studies in the previous decades, over sixty scholars contributed to the field during the 1990s.¹ This growth may be attributed to three main factors: the general expansion of Jewish studies; the development of Judaeo-Arabic research in particular; and the reopening of the great Russian manuscript collections.

New scholars seek new areas of research; Karaite literature has proved attractive, at least in part, because of its relative neglect. At the same time, as the field of Judaeo-Arabic has come of age, attention has focused quite naturally on the extensive *oeuvre* of Karaite authors in tenth- and eleventh-century Jerusalem which includes pioneering works of Hebrew lexicography and grammar, theology, law, biblical exegesis, and Bible translations. Due to their abstruseness, magnitude and language, the great majority of these compositions remain unpublished. While substantial numbers of Karaite codices are available in Europe and the United States, by far the greatest repository of all Judaeo-Arabic manuscripts – especially Karaitica – remains the vast collections assembled by Abraham Firkovitch during the last century and preserved in the Saltykov-Shchedrin public library, St Petersburg. Until the recent collapse of the Soviet Union, Western specialists in Hebrew and Judaeo-Arabic literature were apt to speak of ‘the

For Raphael Loewe:

Faith! Thine is understanding wide / As Ocean, and thy learning’s art / With answers leaves all satisfied / In mind, thy law makes wise their heart. (*Ibn Gabirol*, 57)

¹ During the 1960s and 1970s the field was dominated by by the late Professors Nemoj, Scheiber, Vajda, and Zucker, together with Professors Ankori and Wieder *yibbadelu le-ḥayyim arukkim*. For an overview, see Frank (1990a).

Leningrad Problem', i.e. the possibility (probability?) that other, probably better manuscripts of the texts they were studying existed, inaccessible, in Russia.² By the early 1990s, research trips confirmed the richness of the Firkovitch hoards. Judaeo-Arabic literature would require a complete reassessment. Lost works and forgotten authors could now be recovered. Even favourite classics would have to be reconsidered.³ But the appalling condition of many manuscripts, and – even more dauntingly – the lack of any catalogue or reliable handlist made serious work in Russia virtually impossible.⁴ Fortunately, through the indefatigable efforts of several Israeli scholars and a munificent benefaction, a photographic team was dispatched to St Petersburg where the entire collection of perhaps seventeen thousand items was microfilmed. The films were deposited at the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts (IMHM), at the Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem, where they are currently being catalogued. Since the Firkovitch material may be studied there alongside films of manuscripts from virtually every other major collection, the IMHM remains the single most valuable resource for serious work on Hebrew manuscripts.⁵

And in the field of Karaitica there has been real progress. At least seven doctoral dissertations have been completed during the past decade, as well as several substantial master's theses.⁶ There have been quite a few important publications, as we will see presently. And most significantly, several promising collaborative projects have been launched. In what follows, I have tried to survey comprehensively – if not exhaustively – recent scholarship on medieval and early modern Karaism. Representative publications dealing with the sect's history over the past two centuries have also been noted.⁷

² On these manuscripts, their provenance and significance see Beit-Arié (1991) and Ben-Sasson (1991).

³ E.g. the *ḏiḡwān* of Judah Halevi; see Y. Yahalom, 'The Leningrad Treasures and the Study of the Poetry and Life of Yehuda Halevi' (Hebrew), *Pe'amim* 46–7 (1991): 55–74.

⁴ Paul Fenton's handlist (1991) proved to be an important tool until it was largely superseded.

⁵ The IMHM now holds as well microfilms of the Hebrew-character manuscripts in the Institute of Oriental Studies (St Petersburg). This collection contains most of the old Karaite National Library, formerly in the Crimea.

⁶ Doctoral dissertations: Astren (University of California, Berkeley 1993), Frank (Harvard 1991), Freund (Stockholm 1991; published) Kollender (Bar-Ilan 1991), Olszowy-Schlanger (Cambridge 1995; published 1998), Polliack (Cambridge 1993; published 1997) and Tirosh-Becker (Hebrew University 1999); published MA thesis: Livne-Kafri (1993).

⁷ For reasons of space, not every item in the bibliography has been mentioned in the body of the text.

SCHOLARSHIP BY AND ABOUT CONTEMPORARY KARAITES

Several Karaites have published recently on the sect's history and rituals; primarily intended for internal consumption, these works contain important information on current practices. They are also invaluable communal documents, reflecting contemporary concerns, hopes and self-perceptions. Hayyim Halevi, former chief rabbi of the community in Israel, published two volumes: a collection of texts and studies (1994), intended to introduce Israeli Karaites to their literary heritage; and a textbook of *halakhah* (1996) derived from Aaron b. Elijah's *Gan Eden* (1354) and Elijah Bashyachi's *Adderet Eliyahu* (fifteenth century). A useful discussion of the Egyptian Karaite celebration of the Festival of *Maṣṣot* can be found in Yosef Elgamil's monograph (1996). The late Simon Szyszman wrote a concise overview of Karaite life in Europe from a sectarian perspective (1989); there is now a booklet as well on the Lithuanian community by Halina Kobeckaite (1997). Mourad El-Kodsi's touching account (1993) documents the encounter between a delegation of Egyptian Karaites to the eastern European communities in the summer of 1991.⁸

As modern Karaite communities have contended with the acculturation of the younger generation and the rapid loss of their cultural heritage, academics have begun to document their languages, liturgies and practices. Emanuela Trevisan Semi (1991) and Tapani Harviainen (1997) have surveyed the European centres and their populations. Trevisan Semi (1997) has compared the respective celebrations of Passover by Egyptian Karaites in Israel and Lithuanian sectarians in Trakai. Geoffrey Khan (1997b) has described the Arabic dialect of Karaites from Iraq, while Harviainen (1992, 1998) has documented the pronunciation of Hebrew by the Lithuanian and Istanbuli communities. Jehoash Hirshberg (1989, 1994) and Rachel Kollender (1991, 1994) have analysed and discussed features of Egyptian Karaite liturgical music.

For the most part, however, scholarly interest has focused on medieval and early modern Karaism; it is to the question of Karaite origins that we now turn.

⁸ Mention should be made as well of the communal newsletters that appear at irregular intervals: *Bittā'on Benei Miqra* (Ramleh, Israel) and the *KJA* [Karaite Jews of America] *Bulletin* (Daly City, California). There are also dedicated sites on the Internet.

ORIGINS

If historians now reject the standard Karaite foundation myths, they have yet to reach a consensus on the sect's origins and early years.⁹ Two scholars, Haggai Ben-Shammai and Yoram Erder, have investigated the problem from different vantage points and with differing results.¹⁰ Ben-Shammai (1992a, 1993b) has re-examined the relationship between Karaism and Anan ben David, its putative founder. Distinguishing between Anan's Aramaic *Book of Commandments* and statements attributed to him in later Arabic and Hebrew sources, he argues that Anan was no scripturalist, but rather the founder of a distinct sect with its own rival tradition. True Karaism only began with Daniel al-Qūmisī (late ninth century) who abandoned Ananism. During the tenth century, some of Anan's descendants joined the Karaites in Jerusalem, bringing with them both their Davidic lineage and their ancestor's fame. As these Ananite leaders assimilated to Karaism, they rose to high positions in the sect, becoming its 'Princes' (*neṣi'im*). True scripturalism, 'total rejection of any tradition and individual exegesis became hallmarks of early Karaism'.¹¹ This short-lived phase was necessarily succeeded, however, by the admission of a Karaite tradition (Ar. *naql*, Heb. *ha'ataqah*) as a valid source of legal authority during the latter half of the tenth century.

Erder has focused on the connection between the terminology and doctrines of the Karaites and Qumran literature. The latter, he argues, exercised a 'powerful influence' on the medieval sectarians and constituted 'an inexhaustible source of inspiration for them'.¹² While he rejects any historical connection between the ancient and medieval sects, he emphasizes the degree to which Qumranian notions were appropriated by the Karaites. He maintains that not only did the latter take over Qumran epithets, but that they were also indebted to the Dead Sea group – whom they styled 'Sadducees' – for halakhic teachings (1992, 1994a, 1998); even the name 'Karaites', he argues, derives from the Qumran phrase *qeri'ei shem* (1994b) rather than the notion of Scripture (*miqra*) or religious propagandist (*qarra*).¹³ If Ben-Shammai and Erder differ in their approach to Karaite origins, they agree that the sect crystallized in the time of Daniel al-Qūmisī (latter half of the ninth century) who settled with his followers in Jerusalem.

⁹ For a convenient survey of the stories concerning Anan b. David and Karaite origins, see L. Nemoy, *Karaite Anthology* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1952), 3–8.

¹⁰ For an instructive exchange between them on matters of method, see *Cathedra* 42 (1987): 54–86.

¹¹ Ben-Shammai (1993a: 329). ¹² Erder (1994b: 205, 207).

¹³ The classic treatment of epithets shared by the two sects remains N. Wieder, *The Judean Scrolls and Karaism* (London: East and West, 1962).

HISTORY: THE TENTH AND ELEVENTH CENTURIES IN THE
 ISLAMIC EAST

Most of the early Karaites seem to have originated in Iraq or even further east. Their relations with the Geonim, especially Saadya ben Joseph, have remained a starting point in Karaite studies at least since Poznanski's day.¹⁴ Robert Brody's splendid introduction to Gaonic culture (1998) and David Sklare's impressive monograph on Samuel ben Hofni Gaon (1996) are indispensable for an understanding of the intellectual world in which Karaism emerged.

The leading figure among Iraqi Karaites during the first half of the tenth century seems to have been Ya'qūb al-Qirqisānī. Bruno Chiesa and Wilfred Lockwood (1992) have published a portion of the commentary on Genesis, part of an ongoing project to edit and translate what remains of *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*. Fred Astren (1995) and Chiesa (1988) have considered *Kitāb al-Anwār*, particularly the heresiographic section, in the context of medieval historiography and dialectics. Other studies include Nemoy (1992) – issued over sixty years after his first publication on *Kitāb al-Anwār* – and Khan (1990b).

THE JERUSALEM COMMUNITY

Gil (1992) and Ben-Shammai (1996) – both revised translations of earlier studies – together provide a sound historical and bio-bibliographic orientation. On the basis of a responsum by Yūsuf al-Baṣīr, Ben-Shammai (1992b, 1994a) has located the medieval Karaite quarter south-east of the Temple Mount on the site of the Ofel within Eudocia's wall.

The Jerusalem community, self-styled 'Mourners for Zion' or 'Lilies' (*Shoshanim*), have been the subject of several thematic studies. Walfish (1991) has emphasized their settlement or 'Aliyah' ideology, while Erder (1997a, 1997b) has highlighted their absolute rejection of the Diaspora – theologically, physically, and halakhically. Noting lines of continuity with earlier sectarian movements, he points up differences of legal opinion between tenth-century Karaites in Jerusalem and Iraq. Frank (1995) discusses biblical exegesis and liturgy as expressions of communal identity. Drory (1992, 1994) assesses the special roles assigned Hebrew and Arabic in the literary systems of tenth-century Karaites.

¹⁴ See S. Poznanski, *The Karaite Literary Opponents of Saadiyah Gaon* (London: Luzac, 1908); repr. from *JQR* o.s. 18–20 (1905–8).

The Karaites of tenth and eleventh-century Jerusalem were remarkable for their scholarship. Prolific authors, they were among the first Jews to employ certain literary genres. Their interest was absorbed in the Bible, which they sought to transcribe meticulously, translate precisely, and explicate fully. A thousand years ago, a typical Karaite biblical codex was three-tiered: the Hebrew text of the Bible in Arabic characters; a running Arabic translation; and a detailed commentary. There were also independent Hebrew grammars and dictionaries. Recently, scholarship on these various fields has proliferated.

ARABIC BIBLE TRANSCRIPTIONS

The peculiar Karaite practice of presenting the biblical text in Arabic characters has been regarded as a sign of extraordinary acculturation: the community must have been more comfortable with Arabic script than Hebrew. Geoffrey Khan (1992a) has questioned this interpretation. He sees the transcriptions as an attempt by certain sectarians to record their reading tradition independent of the Masoretic text championed by the Rabbanites. The phenomenon would belong, then, to a broader polemical context in which the Karaites sought to differentiate themselves as much as possible from rabbinic tradition. Since both Hebrew- and Arabic-character manuscripts exist, however, the practice may have been largely a matter of personal preference (1993). Khan has also edited a collection of such biblical fragments from the Genizah (1990a). Needless to say, this material provides important data for the history of Hebrew phonology (Khan 1992b). Tapani Harviainen has published a series of linguistic studies, based upon Arabic Bible transcriptions in the Firkovitch collections (1993, 1994, 1995, 1996a).

ARABIC BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

While Saadya Gaon's *tafsīr* has received much attention over the years, Karaite renderings of the Bible into Arabic have been virtually ignored. Meira Polliack (1997) has put matters right in her seminal monograph (see also 1993–4, 1996). In comparing and analysing a half-dozen Karaite versions, she has discerned certain distinctive trends: a resistance to Targum on both ideological and philological grounds; a predilection for extreme literalism, even at the expense of good Arabic; an emphasis on individualism and freedom of opinion; and above all, a conception of translation as an interpretative genre.

ARABIC BIBLE COMMENTARIES

Ben-Shammai (1991b) re-edited and translated a fragment of Daniel al-Qūmisī's Hebrew commentary on Daniel containing some interesting historical data; Qūmisī's exegetical works were important forerunners of the great Judaeo-Arabic commentaries composed during the tenth century. The studies by Erder and Frank mentioned above ('The Jerusalem Community') draw heavily upon the Bible commentaries of Japheth ben Eli.¹⁵ His writings and those of his predecessor Salmon ben Jeroham remain largely unpublished, because of their size, language and obscurity. By any standard, they are important texts which should interest biblicists, historians, and philologists alike. Publications include: (1) a partial edition and French translation of Salmon's commentary on Psalms (Alobaidi 1996);¹⁶ (2) an edition of Japheth on Habakkuk (Livne-Kafri 1993); and, (3) most importantly, a *catalogue raisonné* of Firkovitch manuscripts of Japheth's commentary on Genesis (Ben-Shammai et al. 2000) which, at last, organizes some of the Russian materials and permits the contemplation of an edition. The catalogue also includes a sample edition and translation of the introduction and commentary on Genesis 1:1–5 (by Sagit Butbul and Sarah Stroumsa) as well as an essay by Haggai Ben-Shammai on the manuscript tradition of Japheth's translation. A forthcoming study (Frank 2001) uses Firkovitch material to recover another 'lost' work – Salmon's Judaeo-Arabic commentary on the Song of Songs, the oldest extant on the book by a Jewish author. In comparing Salmon and Japheth's interpretations of the Song, the author assesses the book's special importance for the *Shoshanim* as well as the evolution of the Bible commentary within the tenth-century community.

HEBREW GRAMMAR AND LEXICOGRAPHY

One of the most exciting developments has been the rediscovery of an extensive Karaite grammatical literature composed in Judaeo-Arabic. Two figures, the exegete and teacher Joseph ben Noah and the grammarian Abū'l-Faraj Hārūn, were primarily responsible for Karaite advances in Hebrew grammar during the late tenth and early eleventh centuries.¹⁷ Khan (1997a) provides an entrée to their complex grammatical theories; see also Basal (1998), Becker (1991), Maman (1996, 1997)

¹⁵ On Japheth's attitude towards Islam, see also Erder 1997c.

¹⁶ On the Psalms commentaries of Salmon and Japheth see Simon 1991.

¹⁷ See the chapter by Geoffrey Khan in the present volume (chapter 5).

and Zislin (1994). Eldar (1994) has written a monograph on the curious treatise *Hidāyat al-qāri* ('Guidance to the Reader') whose author he has demonstrated to have been Abū'l-Faraj Hārūn; on this text see also Morag (1997). For other treatments of Karaite (and Rabbanite) lexical and grammatical writings during this period, see Eldar (1992), Maman (1992, 1995), Olszowy-Schlanger (1997) and Zislin (1990). The peculiar Hebrew employed by eleventh-century Byzantine Karaites has been described by Maman (1989) and Hopkins (1992).

RABBINIC CITATIONS IN KARAITE WRITINGS

Two Israeli philologists have become particularly interested in the extensive citations of rabbinic texts embedded in Karaite works, especially the Bible commentaries of Yeshuah ben Judah. Often transcribed into Arabic characters, these passages offer early, oriental attestations of *midreshei halakhah*; see Maman (1990, 1991) and Tirosh-Becker (1991, 1993).

YUSUF AL-BAŞİR

The leading scholar in the Jerusalem community during the first decades of the eleventh century was Yūsuf al-Baṣīr, a Jewish Mutazilite theologian and jurist. Georges Vajda's edition of al-Baṣīr's *Kitāb al-Muḥṭawī*, a *kalām* treatise, appeared posthumously;¹⁸ subsequently, a missing chapter was discovered and published (Vajda and Fenton 1991). Al-Baṣīr's extensive legal writings had been virtually ignored until the appearance of David Sklare's masterly survey (1995). Together with Ben-Shammai, he has also produced a detailed catalogue of al-Baṣīr manuscripts in St Petersburg; the volume includes a text edition by Ben-Shammai of material missing from the Vajda *Muḥṭawī* as well as a short piece by Sklare on unknown Karaite works preserved in the Firkovitch collection (Sklare and Ben-Shammai 1997). A responsum by al-Baṣīr – the first ever published – appears in Ben-Shammai 1994a.

YESHUAH BEN JUDAH (ABU 'L-FARAJ FURQAN BEN AL-ASAD)

Al-Baṣīr's successor in the Karaite community of Jerusalem, Yeshuah ben Judah, left behind an extensive *oeuvre* much of which has been preserved in manuscript. It is also the subject of a cataloguing project at the Jewish National and University Library. While his most extensive works

¹⁸ (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1985); see Ben-Shammai (1988–9).