

The Bedell/Boyle Lecture 2013

בני מקרא

القرائيون

An Introduction to Karaite Judaism and its  
Contribution to Biblical Studies

Jonathan Kearney

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## **INTRODUCTION**

### The Bedell/Boyle Lecture Series

The Bedell Boyle Lecture Series is named in honour of the Hon Robert Boyle (1626-1691), who made a large contribution to the printing and publishing of the Bible for Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and also to propagating Christianity in America and Malaya. He was President of the Royal Society as well as being the distinguished scientist of Boyle's Law.

It is also intended to honour William Bedell (1571-1642), Bishop of Kilmore and Ardagh, who is famous for an Irish translation of the First (Old) Testament and for Bedell's Bible, which was published in 1685 and with which Boyle was concerned. Each year, a speaker of world stature, or who has demonstrated national leadership in a particular field, is asked to speak on a topic relating some aspect of the Holy Scriptures to current developments.

The 2013 Lecture was given by Dr Jonathan Kearney.

#### Biographical Note

Jonathan Kearney, a native of Dublin, studied Near Eastern Languages, Judaism and Islam in UCD (PhD, 2007). His book on Rashi, a mediaeval Jewish scholar and exegete, was published by T & T Clark in 2010. He has lectured in UCD, TCD and St Patrick's College, Maynooth. He has also taught English as a Second Language for County Dublin VEC and County Kildare VEC. In September 2013, he will take up a lecturing position in Religious Studies in St Patrick's College, Drumcondra

## THE BEDELL-BOYLE LECTURE 2013

# “It is the duty of the believer to know the language of the Torah and its interpretation”: An Introduction to Karaite Judaism and its Contribution to Biblical Studies

Jonathan Kearney

## Introduction

That religions are not monolithic and homogeneous entities has become a cliché in the academic study of religions. There is, for instance, no single Christianity — rather, there are many (if not countless) Christianities. The diversity alluded to in this phrase, one suspects, goes beyond the familiar denominations of Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Lutheranism, Anglicanism and Presbyterianism to encompass the infinite subjectivity of religious experience and the countless possible degrees of personal engagement and levels of commitment. In so far as we all speak our own individual dialect of our mother-tongue — our idiolect — perhaps all adherents of religions practice their own individual forms of those religions (we might somewhat playfully coin the term *idiocult*). As scholars of religion (and especially as educators) however, we are compelled to engage with complexity, unpack it, simplify it, schematise it and classify it. After all — and this holds true outside of the discipline — what is the use of a one-to-one map of reality?<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, it is vital that we do not allow our models, maps or taxonomies to take precedence over the realities that we encounter on the ground (or outside the library). After years of working in education, it is sometimes possible to fall into the habit of teaching the simplified model as an end in itself — and not as a preliminary means by which to begin to understand the complex reality that underlies it and to facilitate our students' engagement with that complexity.

Those who have even a passing familiarity with Judaism will have some sense of the diversity of Judaism today. Contemporary Judaism can be broadly divided into Orthodox and non-Orthodox varieties. Among the Orthodox, there are a number of strands: Haredi, Modern and Hasidic; while non-Orthodox varieties of Judaism include Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist. All of these forms of Judaism have their origins in Rabbinic Judaism — however much they adhere to or reject its tenets.

However, there are a number of forms of Judaism that are not part of this wider (ultimately) rabbinic family. The most well-known is probably Samaritanism — although some would argue that the Samaritans are not Jewish at all, but are adherents of a survival of a form of ancient Israelite religion.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> As the economist Joan Robinson has observed: "A model which took account of all the variegation of reality would be of no more use than a map at the scale of one to one." *Essays in the Theory of Economic Growth* (London: Macmillan, 1962), 33.

<sup>2</sup> For an accessible introduction to Samaritanism, see Anderson and Giles (2002).

Roshwald (1973), in his two articles which deal with the Karaites, Samaritans and the so-called Falashas,<sup>3</sup> refers to all three as “marginal Jewish sects.” The purpose of this lecture is to introduce one of these groups: the Karaites or Karaite Jews (the difference in connotation is not insignificant, as we shall see below). More specifically, we will focus on one of the major contributions made by the Karaites to Jewish culture and civilization (and indeed, to world culture and civilization): their study of the Bible and its language.

## Who are the Karaites?

If one begins to investigate Karaite Judaism, most of the popular sources — if indeed we could describe such literature as popular at all — begin in an essentially negative space. To be a Karaite Jew is not couched in terms of what this is or what this entails — rather, Karaite identity is characterised by what it is not. The Karaites, so such accounts inform us, are a Jewish “sect” that rejects the rabbinic tradition or some such formulation. Perhaps this is the inevitable lot of a group the genesis of whose distinct identity is perceived by outsiders as a form of protest against the position of a majority. However, to fully understand the nature of Karaite Judaism it is necessary for us to re-examine and re-interrogate what we understand or mean by the very term Judaism itself.

For the Karaites of course, their movement is not a sect, schism or heresy. Instead, it is the original form of Judaism that has remained true to the revelation of the Torah to Moses at Sinai. From this perspective, the mainstream of non-Karaite Judaism (Rabbanite Judaism)<sup>4</sup> constitutes a deviant sect. According to one of the great Karaite scholars, Ya'qūb al-Qirqisānī (first half of tenth century), whose *Kitāb al-Anwār wa'l-Marāqib* (“Book of Lights and Watchtowers”) contains a history of Judaism and its various groups or “sects”, the Rabbanites - rather than representing mainstream Judaism - were the inheritors of the first person “to show dissension in the Jewish Religion, to sow disobedience to the Law among the people of Israel [and] to alter the divine ordinances and to supplant them” — the rebel Jeroboam who became the first king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel.<sup>5</sup> Al-Qirqisānī quotes the biblical condemnation of the “sins that Jeroboam committed and led Israel to commit” (1 Kings 14:16).<sup>6</sup> Just as we have to reject the polemical anti-Karaite accounts of the movement’s origin as reliable historical sources, so too must we reject Karaite ones in this regard. However, just as the Rabbanite accounts provide an invaluable source of how the Karaites were seen by their opponents, so too do the Karaite accounts provide an invaluable source of how they saw themselves and how they saw their opponents.

## Rabbinic Judaism - the Judaism of the Dual Torah

In order to better understand Karaite Judaism, we must say something of the Judaism against which it is so often defined and measured (or, from another perspective, against which it formed as a reaction) — Rabbinic Judaism. This is the form of Judaism that

<sup>3</sup> The term *Falasha* is not used by the community itself which refers to itself as *Beta Israel* (“House of Israel”). *Falasha* is a derogatory exonym meaning “foreigners” or “exiles” in Amharic.

<sup>4</sup> The term *Rabbanite* (synonymous in many ways with *Rabbinic*) is often used to distinguish the majority from the minority (*Karaite*) when discussing the historical relationships between the two groups.

<sup>5</sup> The death of Solomon (c. 931 BCE) was followed by a division of the united monarchy into two states: the southern kingdom of Judah (ruled by Rehoboam, the son of Solomon), and the northern kingdom of Israel (ruled by Jeroboam). The northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians in 722 BCE while the southern kingdom fell to the Babylonians in 587 BCE.

<sup>6</sup> In Nemoy (1952:45-49).

developed following the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE by the Romans under Titus. The destruction of the Second Temple (which has never been rebuilt) was both a national and religious disaster. It ended what little remnant of Jewish political autonomy existed under Roman rule and the Temple cult that lay at the centre of Judaism. Such a crisis had been confronted before following the destruction of the First Temple and the defeat of the Kingdom of Judah by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar II in 587 BCE and the subsequent deportations of leading Judean citizens to the capital of the Neo-Babylonian Empire.

Although its origins lay in a national and religious disaster, the Babylonian Diaspora was to become one of the glories of Judaism. Indeed, it would not be unreasonable to claim that Rabbinic Judaism (and, subsequently Judaism as we know it today) was, in large part, formed by those Jews exiled to Babylonia and their descendants. Even after the Achaemenid Cyrus II defeated the Babylonians in 539 BCE and issued an edict permitting the exiles to return to Judah and rebuild their Temple, many Jews elected to stay in Babylonia. Their theological response to the crisis of exile from the Promised Land became paradigmatic for Judaism - in whatever lands it found itself. The religious, social and intellectual institutions that they created continue to shape Judaism to this day. Paramount among these institutions were the rabbinical academies (or *yeshivot*). Here, the sages (or rabbis) formulated and codified the vast body of teaching that forms the basis of Rabbinic Judaism — known to us principally through the Babylonian Talmud.

At the heart of Rabbinic Judaism lies what Jacob Neusner has called the doctrine of the Dual Torah.<sup>7</sup> The term *Torah* is often translated — somewhat unsatisfactorily and reductively — by non-Jews as law and understood as consisting of the first five books of the Bible (the Pentateuch or Five Books of Moses). However, for Jews, the word *Torah* - better translated as “teaching” or “instruction” has much wider connotations, being understood to refer to anything from the Pentateuch (in the narrowest sense) to Judaism itself (in the broadest sense).

According to this doctrine of the Dual Torah, Moses received the Torah at Sinai in two distinct forms: a written one and an oral one. The Written Torah (תורה שבכתב - *Tôrāh she-bi-ktav*) was soon codified as the Bible, while the Oral Torah (תורה שבעל פה - *Tôrāh she-be-'al peh*), a body of tradition, was transmitted orally from generation to generation until it was eventually committed to writing as the Mishnah in the rabbinic academies of Palestine under the editorship of Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi around 200 CE. This document was itself studied and debated by the rabbis for several centuries, and these debates along with the Mishnah itself form a composite document known as the Talmud. Two recensions of the Talmud exist: the Palestinian Talmud (also known as the Jerusalem Talmud or the Talmud of the Land of Israel) which reached its final form around 400 CE, and the Babylonian Talmud which reached its final form around 600 CE. It is the latter, the Babylonian Talmud (the *Bavli*), that enjoys authoritative status in Rabbinic Judaism.

One of the greatest figures in Mediaeval Judaism, Moses Maimonides (1135-1204), known in the Jewish tradition as the *Rambam*, in the introduction to his codification of Jewish law (or *Halakah*) the *Mishneh Torah*, describes the doctrine of the Dual Torah thus, using biblical texts to support it:

All the precepts which Moses received on Sinai, were given together with their interpretation, as it is said, *And I will give you the tables of stone, and the law, and the*

<sup>7</sup> The oeuvre of Jacob Neusner is intimidatingly voluminous (over 950 books alone to date, and still counting). Probably the best single entry point to his work and thought is his *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature* (Anchor Bible Reference Library; New York: Doubleday, 1994).

*commandment* (Exodus 24:12). *The law* refers to the Written Law; *the commandment* to its interpretation. God bade us fulfill the Law in accordance with *the commandment*. This commandment refers to that which is called the Oral Law ... *The commandment*, which is the interpretation of the law, he did not write down but gave a charge concerning it to the Elders, to Joshua, and the rest of Israel, as it is said, *All this which I command you, that shall you do; you shall not add to it, nor diminish from it* (Deut 4:2). Hence it is styled the Oral Torah.

The doctrine of the Dual Torah constitutes an extremely broad understanding of divine revelation. As Gershom Scholem (1971: 289) puts it, "revelation comprises everything that will ever be legitimately offered to interpret its meaning." He also quotes from *Midrash Tanhuma*, a ninth-century work of rabbinic biblical exegesis: "Torah, Mishnah, Talmud, and Aggadah - indeed even the comments some bright student will one day make to his teacher — were already given to Moses on Mount Sinai." The Talmud itself (*Menahot* 29b) offers us a vivid picture of the practical implications of the doctrine of the Dual Torah:

When Moses ascended on high he found the Holy One, blessed be He, engaged in attaching crownlets<sup>8</sup> to the letters. He said to Him, "Lord of the Universe, why should you bother with this?" He answered, "There is a man who is destined to arise at the end of many generations, named Akiva ben Yosef, who will expound upon each crownlet heaps and heaps of laws." [Moses] said to him, "Master of the Universe, show him to me." He replied, "Turn around." Moses went and sat down behind the eight row [of students and listened to the discourse], but he could not understand what they were saying. His strength left him. But then they came to a certain topic and the disciples said to [R. Akiva], "Rabbi, how do you know it?" He replied, "It is a law given to Moses at Sinai." And Moses was comforted.

Elsewhere the Talmud [*Gittin* 60b] emphasises the centrality of the Oral Torah to Rabbinic Judaism:

R. Johanan said: God made a covenant with Israel only for the sake of that which was transmitted orally, as it says, *For by the mouth of these words I have made a covenant with thee and with Israel* [Exod 34:27].

The Karaites, ultimately, refused to accept this doctrine. For them, the Torah was given in one form alone: the written one. The Oral Torah, though not entirely devoid of value, consisted of the teachings of the rabbis — for the Karaites, an entirely human product — and was not a suitable source for the formulation of *Halakah* or sacred Jewish law. A tenth-century Karaite author, Sulaymān ben Jeroham, offers a poetic refutation of the validity of the Oral Torah in his *Book of the Wars of the Lord*: "I have looked again into the six divisions of the Mishnah, / And behold, they represent the words of modern men... I therefore put them aside, and I said, There is no true Law in them."<sup>9</sup> Karaite Judaism, then, can be primarily understood as being scripturalist in its emphasis.

## Nomenclature

We get a clear sense of the scripturalist nature of Karaite Judaism when we examine the etymology of the name by which the group is most commonly known. The English word Karaite is a rendering of the Hebrew word Qārā'im (קראיִם). This word is most often

<sup>8</sup> Crownlets are small calligraphic ornamentations added to certain Hebrew letters in the Torah scrolls used in synagogues

<sup>9</sup> In Nemoy (1952:75).

related to the Hebrew verb *qārā'* (קָרָא) — to read (especially the Scriptures) and the root of one of the most popular designations of Jewish scripture: *Miqra* (מִקְרָא) — *that which is read*. According to this understanding, we could translate the term Karaites as *Scripturalists* or *Champions of Scripture*.<sup>10</sup> It is also worth noting that this verb (*qārā'*) is cognate with the Arabic verb *qara'a* (قرأ) — to read or recite — the origin of the word *Qur'ān* (the Scripture of Islam). In Arabic, the Karaites were sometimes known as *Qarā'iyūn* (قرايين) - a term very similar to the Arabic قراء or قارئ (*qarra'* or *qāri'*) — a Qur'ān reciter. This last point is particularly relevant when we look at the Islamic context in which Karaite Judaism emerged and initially flourished.<sup>11</sup>

Another proposed etymology of the name *Karaite* notes that the Hebrew verb *qārā'* also means to *call* — a calque of the Arabic term *da'ā* (دعا) - *to call* or *to propagandise*. In this sense, the word *Karaite* is understood as “one who calls (to the true faith or to Scripture as the sole source of Judaism).” Again, given the Islamic context of early Karaite Judaism, there is a noteworthy similarity between this understanding of the designation *Karaite* and the Arabic داعي (*dā'i*; plural *du'āt*) a name given to the missionary preachers (or propagandists) of a range of sectarian positions in the early period of Islam.<sup>12</sup>

## Karaites and Early Jewish Groups

At this point, we should mention the link often made between the Karaites and earlier groups within Judaism: specifically the Sadducees and the Qumran community. The Second Temple period (538 BCE–70 CE) is often characterised as a period of “Jewish sectarianism” due to the existence of a range of different groups, each articulating its own form (or interpretation) of Judaism.<sup>13</sup> Readers of the New Testament will be familiar with the Pharisees, Sadducees and Zealots — or at least with literary constructions (or caricatures) of them. The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (37–c. 100 CE) also describes these groups — which, utilising categories comprehensible to his Greco-Roman audience — he terms “philosophies.” The Essenes described by Josephus are often identified with the Qumran community — the group whose library (the so-called Dead Sea Scrolls) was discovered in the caves of Qumran on the northwest coast of the Dead Sea (between 1947 and 1956).

The link with the Sadducees is often made on the basis that like the Karaites, the former also rejected the body of tradition (the Oral Torah) revered by the Pharisees — the group whom the Karaites regarded as proto-Rabbanites.<sup>14</sup> The Sadducees are also mentioned by al-Qirqisānī in his earlier mentioned history, the *Kitāb al-Anwār*. Of their postulated founder, Zadok, he states: “Zadok was the first to expose the errors of the Rabbanites. He openly disagreed with them and he discovered part of the truth; he also composed a book in which he strongly reprovved and attacked them.”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The Karaites were also known in Hebrew as Benê Miqrā (בני מקרא) and Ba'alê Miqrā (בעלי מקרא) — even more explicit references to scripture.

<sup>11</sup> We are not suggesting that the verbal similarities noted here are indicative of any deeper link; however, in a context where sensitivity to language and its structures were acute, such parallels and similarities could surely not have gone unnoticed.

<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that the term *dā'i* (and the related abstract noun *Da'wah*) is now used to refer to anybody who calls people to Islam — not simply to particular sectarian positions within it.

<sup>13</sup> Al-Qirqisānī in Nemoy (1952:49).

<sup>14</sup> In Nemoy (1952:50).

<sup>15</sup> In Nemoy (1952:50).

The Karaites have also been linked with the Qumran community. This connection is usually postulated on the basis of the discovery of a mediaeval copy of a work known as the *Damascus Document* in the Cairo Genizah, published by Solomon Schechter in 1910 as *Fragments of a Zadokite Work*.<sup>16</sup> Several ancient manuscripts of this work were also found among the Qumran writings. This theory is sometimes supported to al-Qirqisānī's intriguing reference to a mysterious group whom he calls the Magarians ("Cave People"):

About that time there appeared also the teachings of a sect called the Magarians, who were so called because their religious books were discovered in a cave (magār). One of them was the Alexandrian, whose well-known book is the principal religious book of the Magarians. Next to it in rank is a small booklet called the Book of Yaddu'a, also a fine work.<sup>17</sup>

Linking Karaite Judaism to the Sadducees and Qumran community is one of the two major tendencies among historians of Karaite origins identified by Polliack (2002:299-302).

## The Islamic Context

The second major tendency in the historiography of Karaite Judaism identified by Polliack (2002:300) emphasises Islamic "models of scripturalism (such as early Shi'ism)." However, whether we accept Islamic models as formative of Karaite Judaism or not, the Islamic context of the early phase of the movement warrants some attention at this point. Islam — which means *submission to the will of God* — is a monotheistic religion the primary source of which is the Qur'ān: believed by Muslims to be the collected revelations sent down by God to the Prophet Muhammad over a twenty-two-year period (620-632 CE). Crucially, Muhammad did not regard himself as the founder of Islam (nor do Muslims so regard him). Rather, Muhammad is the last in a long line of prophets through whom God has periodically revealed his will to humanity. This line of previous prophets includes Abraham (Ibrāhīm), Moses (Mūsā), and Jesus ('Īsā), and the revelations made to them are named as the *Suhuf*, the *Tawrāt* and the *Injīl* respectively. Both the Qur'ān itself and Islamic tradition stress the continuity between the revelations made to Muhammad and those made to earlier prophets. So, instead of being an innovator, the Prophet Muhammad is regarded as a restorer: the restorer of Islam — the primordial religion of humanity.

The Prophet Muhammad instituted a new political order. The community of believers he headed was known as the *Umma*. The majority of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims believed that the Prophet died without appointing a successor: these are the Sunnis. They hold that a *shura* (or council) of the Prophet's closest companions met following his death and elected one of their number — Abū Bakr — as the successor of the Prophet.

<sup>16</sup> A *genizah* is a depository in a synogue used for the temporary storage of written texts that were no longer used or required. Reverence for the sanctity of name of God is so great in Judaism that any texts that may contain the Holy Name are not disposed of in a careless fashion. Instead, they are stored carefully until such a time as they can be disposed of in a suitably reverent fashion - usually by burial. The genizah of the Ben Ezra synagogue in Cairo, known as the Cairo Geniza, first brought to scholarly attention in the late nineteenth century, contained a massive accidental archive of Jewish documents (both sacred and secular) covering a period of a millennium. While the Ben Ezra synagogue was Rabbanite, a number of Karaite documents (and documents dealing with Karaites) were found there. However, Polliack (2002: 300) points out that there is no indication of a Karaite connection to the *Damascus Document*. Cairo had a number of Karaite synagogues. For more on the Cairo Geniza see the works of Goitein (1999) and Ghosh (1992) mentioned in the further reading section below.

<sup>17</sup> In Nemoy (1952:50).

The Shī'a on the other hand, believed that Muhammad appointed his nephew and son-in-law 'Alī as his successor during his lifetime. For the Shī'a, 'Alī is the first of Twelve Imams. Abū Bakr, however, ruled as the first caliph of Islam. The word caliph comes from the Arabic *khalīfa* which means "successor." So, the caliph was the successor of the Prophet as head of the Umma - but not as a prophet. The caliphate was a religiously constituted polity: its ruler, the caliph, was known as the Amīr al-Mu'minīn (the commander of the faithful). The first four caliphs are referred to as the *Rāshidūn* or Rightly-Guided, and each was either elected by committee or nominated by his predecessor. However, after these four, the caliphate became a largely hereditary or dynastic office. The first dynasty, the Umayyads, ruled the Islamic world for around a century from their capital Damascus.

The Umayyads were toppled in 749 by a revolutionary movement that brought a new dynasty of caliphs - the 'Abbasids - to power. The 'Abbasids moved the centre of the caliphate to Baghdad and instituted what is often referred to as the Golden Age of Islamic civilization. Mesopotamia, now the centre of a global Islamic empire, was already home to substantial Christian and Jewish populations, and the relationship between the ruling power and these groups was shaped by the Islamic doctrine of revelation mentioned above. If Islam and its Scripture represent the fullest and the final form of God's revelation of his will to humanity, what then is the status of earlier prophets and their revelations? For Muslims, belief in these earlier prophets and the revelations made to them is an article of faith. However, they also believe that the scriptures used by Jews and Christians do not correspond to these earlier revelations. The doctrine of *tahrīf* (*alteration or corruption*) holds that both communities lost the original revelations (whether through neglect or deliberate distortion). That said, by virtue of this link, Jews and Christians were granted a special status within the Islamic order. They were known as *Ahl al-Kitāb* ("People of the Book").

## **Anan ben David: Mythical Founder**

A well-known anti-Karaite report (attributed by some to Sa'adiah Gaon and preserved in the writings of a twelfth-century Karaite, Elijah ben Abraham)<sup>18</sup> attributes the genesis of the movement to the thwarted ambitions of an eighth-century Babylonian Jewish sage known as Anan ben David. According to this account, Anan (who was of royal Davidic descent) started life as part of the Babylonian Jewish aristocracy. He was in line for the headship of the Babylonian Jewish community — a hereditary office known as the exilarchate — but due to his impiety, he was passed over in favour of his younger brother Hananiah. As was the custom of the time, Hananiah was confirmed in his office by the Muslim head of state — the Caliph. In a fit of pique, Anan gathered a group of heretical malcontents around himself and they declared him exilarch (or *anti-exilarch*) of their own secret deviant group. When the Muslim authorities eventually learned of the matter, Anan was arrested and sentenced to death for defying the authority of the caliph. While awaiting execution in prison, Anan was engaged in conversation by a fellow prisoner, a Muslim scholar identified by another source as Abū Hanīfa al-Nu'mān ibn Thābit (d. 767) — founder of the Hanafī *madhhab* of Islamic jurisprudence. Abū Hanīfa, we are told, advised Anan to seek an audience with the caliph and to tell him that he was the leader of a religion distinct from that of his brother. Anan managed to persuade the

<sup>18</sup> On Sa'adiah Gaon see Kearney (2010-11),

caliph that this was the case, citing the difference in the calendars of the two groups in support of his claims. So, this narrative holds, began the Karaite sect.<sup>19</sup>

This account is clearly a biased work of anti-Karaite polemic, and as such is not a particularly trustworthy historical source. However, it is extremely useful in providing us with an insight into how the movement's opponents viewed it and the figure that later became identified (rightly or wrongly) as its founder. According to this commonly-held and reproduced narrative, Anan's motives for splitting from mainstream Judaism were entirely base and self-interested. He is presented as a devious and furtive figure. He does not present his movement as a rival form of Judaism, nor is the movement based on conviction — rather, it was founded for no reason other than to save his own neck; and on the advice of a Muslim, he claims to be the head of an entirely different religion. A twelfth-century (Rabbanite) Jewish chronicler, Abraham ibn Dā'ūd, says of Anan: "Moved by envy and hatred, which took hold of his heart, he proceeded to build up a sand hill of heresy and to seduce Israel from the tradition of the Sages ... He composed books and set up his own disciples and he invented out of his own heart laws which were not good and judgements by which men could not live in righteousness."<sup>20</sup>

The association of Anan with Abū Hanīfa is also worthy of some comment. The sacred law of Islam — the *Shari'a* — is derived from its principal sources (Qur'ān and *Hadīth* - Scripture and Tradition) by means of an activity known as *fiqh* (jurisprudence). The majority community of Muslims — the Sunnls — recognize the equal validity of four schools of *fiqh* known as *madhhabs*. Abū Hanīfa is the eponym of the oldest of these madhhabs (the Hanafī; the others are Shāfi'i, Hanbalī and Mālikī). The Karaites may have initially perceived themselves (and been perceived) as a sort of Jewish *madhhab* — a school of jurisprudence, distinct from the Rabbanites, yet recognising their equal validity.

The identification of Anan as the sole founder and arch-heresiarch of Karaism — a heresy motivated by rancour — simplifies a situation of far greater complexity, and robs the group of any foundation in principled objection to the doctrines and direction of mainstream Rabbanite Judaism. Al-Qirqisānī has the following to say about Anan: "He was the first to make clear a great deal of the truth about divine ordinances. He was learned in the lore of the Rabbanites, and not one of them could gainsay his erudition. It is reported that Hay, the president of the Rabbanite Academy, together with his father, translated the book of Anan from the Aramaic into Hebrew and found nothing in it of which they could not discover the source in Rabbanite lore ... The Rabbanites tried their utmost to assassinate Anan, but God prevented them from doing so."<sup>21</sup>

However, a more recent theory of Karaite origins is presented in the works of Moshe Gil. Gil posits a later date for the development of Karaite Judaism (mid-ninth, rather than mid-eighth century) and sees it as a movement that combines two major tendencies: one being descendants of Anan ben David, the other members of various marginal messianic Jewish groups of the early Islamic period.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> See Nemoy (1952:3-6).

<sup>20</sup> In Nemoy (1952,6).

<sup>21</sup> In Nemoy (1952:52)

<sup>22</sup> Gil's research is presented succinctly in his contribution to Polliack's survey (2003): Moshe Gil, "The Origins of the Karaites." Polliack also summarises Gil's hypothesis: Polliack (2002:303-305).

## The Text of the Bible and its Exegesis

One of the most recent (and the most commonly used) critical editions of the Hebrew text of the Bible/Old Testament, *Biblia Hebraica Quinta*, uses as its textual basis a manuscript of the Hebrew Bible known as the Leningrad Codex.<sup>23</sup> This manuscript, so-called because it has been kept in what is now known as the National Library of Russia in Saint Petersburg since 1863, was originally produced in Cairo and dates from 1008 CE. It was acquired by a Karaite manuscript collector Abraham Firkovich (1786-1874). The Leningrad Codex is the oldest extant complete manuscript of the Hebrew Bible (the older Aleppo Codex is incomplete) and is, therefore, the finest representative of what is known as the *Masoretic Text*.

The word masoretic comes from the Hebrew *masorah* which means tradition. The Masoretic Text, then, is the text of the Hebrew Bible that has been passed down from one generation to the next. The masoretes were the scholars who devoted themselves to the faithful preservation and transmission of this text. They did this through a number of sophisticated strategies which included the production of concordantial textual apparatuses and the careful study of Hebrew grammar. The most famous masorete was Aaron Ben-Asher (first half of tenth century) of Tiberias in Galilee. As part of his masoretic activity, Aaron was also a pioneering grammarian of Hebrew. The Leningrad Codex, whose scribe was Samuel ben Jacob, comes from the Ben-Asher tradition. It is widely (though not universally) accepted that Aaron Ben-Asher and his family were Karaites.<sup>24</sup>

Given their focus on the Bible as the exclusive source of religious authority and truth, it is hardly surprising the Karaites were extremely productive in the field of biblical exegesis. Indeed, knowledge of the sacred text and its exegesis was an article of faith. The title of this lecture is the sixth of the ten principles of Karaite Judaism enumerated by the fifteenth-century Turkish scholar Elijah Bashyatchi.<sup>25</sup> Karaite biblical exegesis has sometimes been dismissed as literalistic. However, it might be better described as linguistic- contextual, similar in many regards to the peshat tendency of rabbinic exegesis. However, the importance of Karaite biblical exegesis goes well beyond their own literary productions. The challenge posed to the Rabbanites by the Karaites caused a broad refocusing of attention on the Bible in Judaism. Those Rabbanites wishing to counter Karaite claims needed to carefully ground their arguments in the biblical text. This in turn required a close understanding of the biblical text and its language. The continued development of Jewish biblical exegesis and, quite probably, the genesis of scientific Hebrew linguistics both owe incalculable debts — both direct and indirect — to the Karaites.

## Conclusion

At the beginning of this lecture we mentioned that simplification and the levelling out of complexity are inevitable consequences of representation. Reality needs to be resized before it can be described. However, it is important that we do not let our maps or models of things blind us to the often challenging reality of those things. Studying groups

<sup>23</sup> *Biblia Hebraica Quinta* (BHQ) is the fifth edition of the *Biblia Hebraica*. The first edition, edited by Rudolph Kittel, appeared in 1906. The Leningrad Codex has been used as its textual basis since the third edition of 1929-1937 (*BHK<sup>3</sup>*).

<sup>24</sup> See Ben-Hayyim (2007).

<sup>25</sup> See Nemoy (1952:236-270; especially 250-56).

such as the Karaites can be a useful corrective to this tendency. By forcing us to engage with complex historical debates on the nature of Judaism, its boundaries (both internal and external) and the nature and location of religious authority, such study can help us overcome facile and overly-reductive representations. Such an approach can bring a renewed freshness to our understanding and study.

The Karaite-Rabbanite dispute also provides a fascinating example of a religious tradition challenged from within and its reaction to that challenge. Although its origins were clearly more complex, the Karaite challenge came to be understood largely as one that questioned the traditional loci of religious authority. As is often the case, a group acquires a sense of its own distinctive identity when challenged from within. External challenges can be easily met and resisted by recourse to an “us versus them” dynamic. However, what happens when part of the “us” challenges legitimacy and authority? This is a far more serious challenge. In this regard, we might say that the Karaites, despite themselves, strengthened the very edifice they sought to challenge by forcing their Rabbanite rivals to articulate and demarcate their boundaries — thereby acquiring an even greater sense of their own identity and consolidating their fundamental principles.

Although expressing it in terms of a competition is somewhat lazy, one might say that the Rabbanite party won the dispute with the Karaite party: the numbers on the ground testify to that. It might be fairer to say that their particular form of Judaism proved ultimately more attractive than that of the Karaites. However, to extend this metaphor somewhat, we could say that if Karaism aimed to refocus Judaism on Scripture it certainly did not lose. Unsurprisingly, for a group whose name means Scripturalists, they engendered a refocusing of Judaism on Scripture (or the Written Torah, if you will) - not only through their own efforts, but in what they provoked in their Rabbanite rivals.

They were leaders in the scientific study of the Hebrew language, as knowledge of its grammar and syntax were more important guides to biblical exegesis for them than the teachings of the rabbis. As we saw in the title of this lecture, the Karaites believed it was incumbent on every Jew to understand Hebrew to facilitate unmediated access to Scriptures. As with their exegetical efforts, their grammatical work also provoked similar efforts by Rabbanites. The Karaites also played a major role in the preservation and transmission of the text of the Bible. Some of the Tiberian Masoretes were most probably Karaites. Anybody who has worked with the Masoretic text has reason to be grateful to them for this enormous undertaking of incalculable value.

The study of the early Karaites also allows us to see one of the ways in which Judaism reacted to a major historical, cultural and religious transformation: the rise of Islam and the formation and flowering of a high Islamic intellectual culture under the 'Abbasid caliphs of Baghdad. The parameters of this lecture have necessitated a narrow focus on the earliest phase of Karaite history. However, the story does not end there: by following the migratory journeys of the Karaites from the Middle East into North Africa, Byzantium, the Crimea, Central Europe and the Baltic allows us to witness the adaptability of the Jewish people. The continued existence of the Karaites today is a testimony to their dedication to the (Written) Torah and their tenacity in maintaining their particular interpretation of it.

## Further Reading

The best way to encounter Karaite Judaism is through the writings of the Karaite Jews themselves. The classic anthology edited by Nemoy (1952) is still the most readily accessible and interesting collections of the of Karaite literature from its earlier periods.

For contemporary Karaite writing, one must consult the multi-authored introduction of Yaron et al. (2003). Nehemia Gordon, a prominent Karaite Jewish scholar and author maintains a webpage that contains a good deal of information on Karaite Judaism both contemporary and historical: <http://karaite-korner.org/>.

Short, scholarly yet highly accessible introductions to Karaite Judaism can be found in the Lasker et al. (2007) and by Nemoy and Frank (2005). Nemoy (1997) is useful for its emphasis on the place relationship between the Karaites and their Islamic environment. Lasker (1981) has also written a useful overview of the severing of the ways between Rabbanite and Karaite Judaism.

For those seeking a concise survey of the state of contemporary academic Karaite studies, Polliack (2002) is an excellent starting point. The encyclopaedic reference work edited by Polliack (2003) is absolutely essential for further study. Within this volume, Polliack's own "Major Trends in Karaite Biblical Exegesis in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries" (pages 363-413) is especially useful. Daniel Frank (2000) has also written a concise yet comprehensive survey of Karaite biblical exegesis.

Those interested in Jewish life (Rabbanite as well as Karaite) in the Arabic-speaking Muslim-majority world can consult Stillman (1979). More recently, *Cultures of the Jews: A New History* (New York: Schocken, 2002) edited by David Biale offers a wide-ranging survey of the diversity of Jewish cultures both past and present.

The Cairo Geniza mentioned above provides us with an incredibly rich store of sources for reconstructing Mediterranean Jewish life in the mediaeval period (including a great deal of Karaite material and material dealing with Karaites). The definite work on the Genizah material is S.D. Goitein's five-volume *A Mediterranean Society*. A convenient one-volume abridgement is available (1999). Those seeking a more popular introduction to the Genizah might enjoy the fascinating anthropological narrative cum creative history by Ghosh (1992).

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