The pages of a rabbinic Bible (miqra’ot gedolot) constitute a treasury of traditional learning. Since the eighteenth century these great works have presented the Hebrew Bible as a multi-layered text. Scripture, Aramaic translations, medieval commentaries and super-commentaries are all carefully arrayed so that we may compare interpretations, catch allusions, and follow debates. Here exegetes from eleventh-century Troyes, thirteenth-century Gerona, and sixteenth-century Bologna keep company, with the younger authors often citing and criticizing their elders’ views. Virtually all of them were Europeans, the products of Ashkenazic (Franco-Germanic) or Sefardic (Spanish) intellectual traditions. The Aramaic targumim apart, all of the commentaries are in rabbinic Hebrew.

But the Jewish Bible commentary was born in the Islamic East, not the Christian West. Writing in Arabic, Jewish scholars in Iraq and the Land of Israel developed a new literary genre in order to meet the changing needs of eastern communities. Even as rabbinic culture and prestige reached new heights under the leadership of the Babylonian Geonim and their academies, Islamic culture was penetrating Jewish society more deeply. Long the vernacular, Arabic now replaced Aramaic as the language of Jewish scholarship, and an Arabic Bible translation (tafsir) now accomplished the task of the Aramaic Targum. And since the anonymously edited, loosely structured midrashim were inadequate for readers accustomed to the systematic works of Arabic scholarship, commentaries were fashioned on Christian models available in the Islamic world.

An internal schism, dividing the Jews into Rabbanite and Karaite camps, also served as a catalyst in this process. Staunch scripturalists, the Karaites rejected rabbinic authority and sought to restore Judaism to its biblical roots. Beginning in the first half of the tenth century, they produced an impressive body of literature to further their reforming campaign. Though written almost entirely in Arabic and largely forgotten, the numerous commentaries that they and their Rabbanite opponents composed are the true ancestors of the Hebrew works enshrined in a rabbinic Bible.
This book traces the contours of Karaite biblical exegesis as it developed in the Islamic East during the tenth century. Rather than attempting a comprehensive study of the major exegetes and their commentaries, I have taken a thematic approach. There are good reasons for setting more modest goals. Very few of these works have ever been published, even in part, and most of the existing editions are unsatisfactory. While the extensive manuscript holdings in Western Europe have long been accessible, the greatest collection of Karaite manuscripts—preserved in the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg—is only now being catalogued. Until a proper survey of this material has been completed, it would be premature to attempt anything like a fair assessment of medieval Karaite exegesis. All the same, it is possible to investigate certain key problems and themes which preoccupied these early commentators. If it is too soon to attempt a large canvas, there is plenty of material for the sketchbook. It is my hope that through the studies presented here I will have contributed to the fascinating picture of medieval Jewish biblical interpretation which is now beginning to emerge from these texts. In the same spirit, I have cited the commentaries at length, allowing the exegetes to speak for themselves. I know of no better way to convey some sense of their methods, style, and general approach.

If this story has a hero, it must be Japheth b. Eli, the first Jew to comment on the entire Bible. Japheth hailed from Basra, but sometime after the middle of the tenth century he moved to Jerusalem, joining the Karaite community of Mourners for Zion. Over a period of perhaps four decades he accomplished his monumental task, composing highly detailed, comprehensive commentaries which are almost all extant in manuscript. Indeed, his work was preserved and recopied by Karaite communities over the next nine centuries. Like his fellow sectarian, Japheth viewed the world through biblical lenses. And since he also took pains to cite multiple interpretations, it is possible to reconstruct the ideational universe of the Jerusalem Karaites from his exegesis. The commentaries are a source, therefore, for our knowledge of the specific context in which they were written. At the same time, they furnish much of the raw material for an evaluation of the tenth-century exegetical enterprise as a whole.

This work comprises six chapters. Chapter One introduces the exegetes and their world. The hallmark of early Karaite interpretation is an anti-traditionalist rationalism. Investigating the Bible without rabbinic preconceptions became an intellectual and religious
imperative. At the same time, certain scholars, such as Daniel al-Qīmīsī, connected the woes of the Exile with adherence to rabbinic Judaism. Preaching a return to scriptural religion, they urged their fellow-Jews to settle in Jerusalem. As Mourners for Zion, they pursued a regime of night-vigils, prayer, lamentation, and Bible-study. And through their prognostic approach to biblical prophecies, they found their own world—their activities, travails, and ultimate triumph—predicted in Scripture. The chapter concludes with a study of the dictum ascribed to Anan b. David, “Search Scripture well, and do not rely upon my opinion”—a slogan that encapsulates early Karaite biblicism.

From the beginning, the Karaite-Rabbanite debate has been defined by the question of authority. This is especially true in the realm of law where divergent practices demarcate the two groups. For Karaites, legislation must be firmly grounded in Scripture; ancestral tradition simply will not do. By contrast, Rabbanite Jews effectively give priority to the Oral Tradition—in the form of the Talmud—which serves to mediate biblical law. Chapter Two explores these positions by considering the ways in which Karaite and Rabbanite scholars handle ambiguous or indeterminate areas of scriptural legislation.

Biblical narrative, by contrast, presented relatively few real sources of friction between the two groups. Rabbanite and Karaite authors alike favored lengthy, deliberate expositions. Chapter Three is devoted to explications of dream narratives—specifically Genesis 40–41 and Daniel 2—which afford our exegetes an occasion for discussing the interpretive process. Since they regarded dream interpretation and biblical exegesis as essentially a single rational activity, their interpretations of these passages betray much about their self-perceptions.

For medievals dream interpretation was, of course, prognostic, and a significant portion of the Jerusalem Karaites’ writings manifests an apocalyptic outlook. Chapters Four, Five, and Six each investigate a separate aspect of the Mourners’ prognostic exegesis. Chapter Four is devoted to the interpretation of the Song of Songs, which Salmon b. Yerūḥām and Japheth b. Eli read as salvation history. A comparison of their commentaries—the earliest extant on the Song by Jews—reveals significant developments in the conception and execution of the genre. In its attempt at a comprehensive reading, Japheth’s commentary in particular displays sensitivity to the Song’s structure, while distinguishing sharply between the literal (zāhūr) and hidden (bāṭīn) meanings of its figurative language.
The salvation history read into the Song of Songs also furnished a framework for interpreting many of the Psalms, which the Karaites regarded as divinely inspired prayers. Since prayer and biblical interpretation constituted the primary activities of the Mourners for Zion, a study of their liturgy will clarify their self-perceptions, hopes, and fears. Japheth’s Commentary on the Psalter seems to have been intended as a liturgical commentary; a short treatise on prayer included in his son Levi’s Code sketches the essential components of the daily liturgy itself. In Chapter Five, liturgy and commentary are correlated in order to establish the basic texts of Jerusalem Karaite prayer and the meaning with which they were invested.

A self-constituted community with a reformist agenda, the Karaites of tenth-century Jerusalem polemicized extensively against Rabbinic institutions. At the same time, they were acutely aware of the threat Christianity, and especially Islam, posed to Judaism in general. Chapter Six is devoted to inter-religious debates and their reflexes in Karaite Bible commentaries. Following Christian precedents, Muslim scholars assembled a collection of biblical testimonia to the truth of their prophet’s message which they presumably used in their missionary campaigns. While some Jewish authors, such as al-Qirqisānī, responded directly to these arguments, others, such as Japheth, crafted tacit, but no less effective replies. The chapter also demonstrates how certain of Japheth’s theological doctrines were likely shaped by polemical considerations.

Sectarian, unpublished, long-winded, and in Judeo-Arabic, the commentaries of tenth-century Karaites have, until recently, attracted little attention. Until serviceable editions and translations appear, they will remain relatively inaccessible. But in reality, they are neither alien nor irrelevant to the history of Jewish biblical interpretation. On the contrary—as the Epilogue argues—the classic Bible commentaries of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Spain and Provence, were inspired by works composed centuries earlier in the Islamic East by Rabbanites and Karaites. I hope that this book stimulates further interest in the writings of several remarkable scholars who shaped biblical studies over a thousand years ago.

* * *
Texts

Since very few of the commentaries have been published, I have included the original Judeo-Arabic of most of the passages cited as a separate section at the back of the book. These texts are not given in full critical editions, but rather as eclectic collations; I explain my editorial methods at the beginning of the section. Each text has been assigned a number, corresponding to the chapter in which it is discussed: 2.1, for example, refers to the first text discussed in Chapter 2 (Japheth b. Eli, Commentary on Leviticus 11:13–19). Since this comment is fairly long, I have divided it into paragraphs: 2.1.3 refers to the third paragraph of text 2.1. In the body of the book and the notes these numbers are always given in boldface.

Translations

Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Arabic and Hebrew are my own.

Transliteration

Hebrew has been transliterated according to the system used in the Association for Jewish Studies Review.

Arabic transliteration follows the Encyclopaedia of Islam, with the exceptions of j for djj and q for k.

Conventions

The names of medieval scholars are given in accordance with modern scholarly usage. Inevitably, there is some inconsistency, e.g., Yaʿqūb al-Qirqisānī, but Japheth b. Eli. Biblical citations have often been translated according to the specific exegetical context in which they occur. In general, I have modeled my translations on the Revised Standard Version or quoted it verbatim, but I have drawn upon other translations as well, notably the New Jewish Publication Society version. English citations from the Babylonian Talmud and Midrash Rabbah follow the Soncino Press translations.

* * *
Portions of this book have been published elsewhere in different versions:


Chapter 4: A Hebrew version was published as ‘Ve-qol ha-tor nishma’ be-’arseimu: peirushei ha-qara’im salmon ben yeroham ve-yefet ben ‘eli le-shir ha-shirim (“The Voice of the Turtledove Is Heard in Our Land”: The Commentaries of the Karaites Salmon ben Jeroham and Japheth ben Eli on the Song of Songs”), International Rennert Guest Lecture Series, Bar-Ilan University, 2001.


I thank the presses for their permission to publish this material.

* * *

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Most of the texts discussed here remain in manuscript. I read them on microfilm either at home or at the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts [IMHM] of the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem. I am especially grateful to the Institute and its remarkable staff—who are as helpful as they are learned—for all their assistance. I should also like to thank the following Libraries for permitting me to consult their manuscripts and to publish passages from them: the British Library, London; the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York; the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris; the Russian National Library, St. Petersburg; and the Institute of Oriental Studies, St. Petersburg.

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