CHAPTER FIVE

THE KARAITES AND THE SECOND TEMPLE SECTS

Yoram Erder

Dedicated to the blessed memory of Shulamit Sela

There is no doubt that the Karaite movement owes an enormous debt to Islam, the cultural context in which it was founded, however, even the earliest modern scholars of this movement sought—and correctly so—its fundamental elements in the Jewish sects that functioned during the Second Temple period. Geiger, one of the initial researchers, was among the founders of the school that considered the Karaites as a carry-over of the Sadducees with respect to many halakhot.\(^1\) Moreover, it is well-known that the Rabbanite scholars of the Middle Ages also believed that the Karaites were the Sadducees of their day, and even labeled them as such. Another attempt to uncover the sources of Karaite halakhah was made by Revel, who pointed to the connection between Philo’s version of the halakhah and those of Karaism.\(^2\)

A turning point in the study of the impact of the Second Temple sects on the Karaites occurred following the publication by Schechter of two documents from the Cairo Genizah, which he entitled *Fragments of a Žadokite Work.*\(^3\) These documents were copied by two scribes of the geonic period, but from the first Schechter understood, on the basis of their content, that they belonged to the ancient period. Many of those who first studied these documents, including Schechter himself, recognized at once that there was a connection between Karaite halakhah and the halakhot mentioned in the two documents in question. This parallel led Büchler to conclude that the two documents were originally written by early Karaites.\(^4\)

With the discovery of the Qumran scrolls in 1947, it became clear

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1 Geiger, “On the matter”.
2 Revel, “Inquiry into the sources.
3 Schechter, *Fragments of a Žadokite Work.*
4 Büchler, “Schechter’s Jewish sectaries”.

that the two documents published by Schechter were quite simply later copies of one of these scrolls, which is today known as the Damascus Document. We now have available to us an edition containing all the fragments of the Damascus Document that were discovered in Qumran, and these may be compared with the two texts that were found in the Cairo Genizah. An overall study of the Qumran scrolls, which simultaneously compared them with Karaite literature—particularly that of the Mourners of Zion—led scholars to conclude that, starting with the middle of the ninth century, certain circles of the Karaite Mourners of Zion, who were living in Jerusalem, had been exposed to the Qumran texts and were influenced by them. Below, we shall see that the impact of these works on the nascent Karaite movement started even before the Mourners of Zion made their appearance in the historical arena and went to settle in Jerusalem. In fact, not only the Karaites in Palestine were exposed to the literature of the sects during the geonic period. Anyone who studies Pirqei de-Rabbi Eliezer, a Rabbanite work written in Palestine in about the eighth century, will clearly discern that it was influenced by the Book of Jubilees. The Book of Jubilees, which is mentioned explicitly in the Damascus Document, greatly affected the shaping of the Qumran sect’s doctrine. Hebrew fragments of the Book of Jubilees were found in the treasure-trove discovered in the Judean Desert.

As mentioned, the scrolls associated with the sects aroused the greatest amount of interest among the Karaite Mourners of Zion living in Jerusalem. These works brought them face to face with an ancient tradition that differed completely from the Pharisee tradition, and they easily identified with certain aspects of it. It appears that we would not be straying far from the truth if we suggest that the two scribes, who copied the Damascus Document discovered in the Genizah, were Karaites. If this is indeed the case, then they need to be credited with the launching of research into the Judean Desert Scrolls, which began in 1910, with Schechter’s publication of their copies.

Not everything that the Karaites discovered in the sectarian writings to which they were exposed agreed with their way of thinking or their halakhah. An outstanding example of this is their rejection of the Qumran sect’s solar calendar, although, at the fringes of the Mourners of Zion circles, there were those who did not hesitate to adopt it. Within the Karaite movement some circles were absolutely

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5 Baumgarten, The Damascus Document.