CHAPTER EIGHT

KARAISM AND SUFISM

Paul B. Fenton

As is known, Karaism emerged in its initial stages as an amalgamation of various mainstream and heterodox trends in Babylonian-Persian Jewry.1 Interestingly, it developed against an Islamic background in precisely the same regions as the nascent Sufi movement, whose masters taught in Baghdad and the Persian province of Khurasan. Given the rationalistic and Mu'tazilite leanings of the early Karaite sectarians, their attachment to the literal interpretation of Scripture, and their disdain of the mystical works of the Rabbanite tradition, they could hardly be expected to have shown any interest in the writings of their Sufi contemporaries. However, the ascetic tendencies of the early Muslim mystics had a lot to commend themselves to their Karaite contemporaries of the East, who, having dismissed the rabbinic moral ideals, were in search of alternative sources of inspiration for their own ethical code. During the period of its consolidation in the ninth and tenth centuries, Karaism made great strides in the areas of exegesis and theology, incorporating into its writings elements of Neoplatonic philosophy and spirituality.2 It is known that in the first centuries of the Abbaside period (beginning 750), these sectaries adopted an ascetic way of life. Daniel ben Moses al-Qūmīsī, who flourished towards the close of the ninth century, seems to have spent some time in Khurasan before settling in Jerusalem, bringing with him from the East the ideals of poverty and self-mortification. He attracted to the Holy City a congregation of scholars, later known as the Shoshanim “the lilies”. The spiritual centre they established there survived the Seljuq conquest of 1071 and blossomed until its final destruction at the hands of the Crusaders in 1099. Calling themselves ’Avely Sīyyon “mourners of Zion”, they

1 See also → Gil, Karaite Origins; → Erder, Karaites and Second Temple Sects.
2 See also → Ben-Shammai, Philosophy; → Polliack, Exegesis.
advocated voluntary poverty, continuous fasting and abstention from meat and wine.\textsuperscript{3}

Now, it is a matter of speculation as to what degree these principles were influenced by similar trends amongst the early Sufis active in Iraq and Persia, who were also known as bakkāʿim, ‘weepers’, on account of their custom to accompany their devotions with profuse tears. The later constitution of Sufis into brotherhoods may too have had an influence on the formation of the Karaite congregation of the \textit{Shoshanim}.

Ascetism continued to constitute a central characteristic of Karaite ethics. Their practices are vividly described in a moving epistle, known as \textit{Iggeret ha-Tokhaḥah}, by Sahl ben Mašliaḥ, a member of the Jerusalem circle, who was active in the second half of the tenth century. Although written in Hebrew, some of its expressions of otherworldliness, abstention, seclusion, vigils and weeping are distinctly reminiscent of Sufi practices and terminology. This is especially so of the passionate terms in which he describes the love of God, for example, in the following extract. These are so uncharacteristic of Karaite writings, which, based on the Muʿtazilite theory of commutative justice, usually perceived man’s relation to God in judicial and rational terms. Indeed, the Muʿtazilites scorned the amorous language of the Sufis, which they disqualified as anthropomorphic:

Righteous and pious men (saddiqim we-hasidim) have assembled at Jerusalem and have established vigils to pray and to supplicate opposite the Hall of the Temple and to implore their God to save the lost sheep and restore them to their cities, in order to fulfill His word: “Return, O virgin of Israel, return to these cities” (Jeremiah 31:20). Behold now this loveliest of all women weeping and wailing over the sin of her youth, lovesick (hosheget)\textsuperscript{4} for her husband, and pining (nikhse-fet) after her lover [...]. This is the practice of (Karaite) Israelites who have sought (God’s) pleasure\textsuperscript{5} and secluded themselves from the desires of this world. They have given up eating meat and drinking wine, and have clung to the Lord’s law and have stood in assiduous watch before the doors of His Temple [...] they have abandoned their merchandise and forgotten their families; they have forsaken their native land and left palaces in order to dwell in reed huts. They have quit the cities

\textsuperscript{3} See also → Erder, Mourners of Zion; Mann, \textit{Texts and Studies}, II, pp. 3–127; Ben-Sasson, “The Karaite community”, pp. 1–18; Wieder, \textit{Judaean Scrolls}, index: Mourners for Zion; Vajda, \textit{Deux commentaires}, p. 20.

\textsuperscript{4} The choice of this term is probably influenced by the Arabic verb ʿashaqa used by the Sufis to describe passionate love of God.

\textsuperscript{5} Here too the term niteraṣu evokes the Sufi virtue riḍā (‘grace’).