CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MAJOR TRENDS IN KARAITE PHILOSOPHY
AND POLEMICS IN THE TENTH AND
ELEVENTH CENTURIES

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The history of Karaite philosophy in the Middle Ages in general, and more specifically until the eleventh century constitutes part of the history of Jewish medieval religious thought in general. Yet there are some characteristics that are particular to Karaites:

(I). Almost all Karaite communities in that period were located in Islamic countries, except some modest beginnings of Karaite presence in Byzantium. It follows that all literary works in this area, like the Rabbanite ones, were written in Judaeo-Arabic. The meaning of this fact regarding terminology and conceptual systems is that Karaite religious thought, like its Rabbanite counterpart, should be studied in the wider context of Arabic religious thought that was common to Muslims, Jews and Christians. This was the result of the adoption of the Arabic language and Arab civilization by Jews for all purposes.

(II). Karaite religious thought in this period follows closely the Islamic system known as kalām, which rejected the Aristotelian system as well as its medieval Neo-Platonicized brand, and in which the apologetic (or polemic) element is dominant. Consequently, no followers of other systems are known among Karaites of the period, like the Neo-Platonic thinkers among Rabbanites in the Islamic East or West, for example.²

(III). Karaite writings of the period abound with polemics. The polemic is often interwoven in theological discussions, but may appear in the form of independent statements or expositions. Examples will be mentioned below so far as they touch on ideological matters rather

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¹ The term philosophy denotes here religious philosophy or thought that may be referred to as theology as well. See Ben-Shammai, “Kalām”, p. 136, n. 1.
² See Ben-Shammai, “Kalām”, p. 125.
than legal (halakhic) ones. The history of Karaite religious thought in the period under discussion may be divided into three stages:

Beginnings: Embryonic, dogmatic statements, with no systematic works. This stage is reflected in the work of Daniel al-Qūmīsī (Jerusalem, still active around 900). Theological-polemical statements are also found occasionally in exegetical works and fragments ascribed to al-Qūmīsī.

The tenth century: Karaite religious thought at this stage is embedded to a large extent in biblical commentaries, where one can find quite elaborate and extensive discussions on theological questions. This is true especially in introductions to books of the Bible. Typical representatives of this stage are Yaʿqūb al-Qīrqiṣānī (active in Iraq in the first half of the 10th century) and Yefet ben ʿEli (in Jerusalem, second half of the tenth century).

The eleventh century: Characteristic of this stage are systematic works, comprehensive compendia as well as monographs, though elaborate discussions of theological questions may be found also in exegetical and halakhic works. Typical representatives of this stage are Yusuf al-Baṣīr (d. around 1040) and Yeshuʿah ben Yehudah (flourished ca. 1040–1060), who were both active in Jerusalem.

It should be added that this division is based on the extant literature. There may be some evidence that the authors who are here classified in the two early stages had also composed systematic works on religious thought. Thus M. Zucker published a Judaeo-Arabic fragment which he ascribed to a work by Daniel al-Qūmīsī entitled Kūṭāb al-Tawḥīd (The Book of Unity).3 This ascription cannot, however, be definitely verified. Qīrqiṣānī is said, according to his own testimony, to have written a systematic theological work with the same title.4 Nothing of that work has been recovered so far.

Beginnings

The earliest known Jewish philosopher in the Middle Ages, Daʿūd ibn Marwān al-Muqammaṣ (early ninth century), was a mutakallim. He is quoted in early Karaite sources with much appreciation, which

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4 See Encyclopedia Judaica, X, cols. 1047–8; Chiesa, "Yaʿqūb al-Qīrqiṣānī" p. 22, discusses also other theological works of al-Qīrqiṣānī; see also below, n. 97.