“The One Who Defeats the Power of the Stars”: Medieval Exegetics in Polish-Lithuanian Karaite Poetry

Riikka Tuori

Abstract

Early in its development, Karaite Judaism became known for its emphasis on the art of biblical exegesis. This article introduces late representatives of this long-standing tradition: exegetical terms and references in paraliturgical Hebrew poetry (zĕmīrōt) by early modern Karaites in Poland-Lithuania. These poems, which were transmitted in many Eastern European manuscripts, were published in nineteenth-century Karaite siddūrīm. Their authors represent the upper echelon of Polish-Lithuanian Karaite society, referred to in contemporaneous sources as creative scholars, busy merchants, and dynamic leaders of their communities. This study examines phrases and techniques that link these poems to medieval Karaite and Rabbanite commentaries through analyses of select examples from these zĕmīrōt. Its findings echo earlier research on Karaite education in Eastern Europe: Polish-Lithuanian Karaites were conversant in the language of medieval exegetes, embraced many of their views on science and philosophy, and advocated the veracity of Karaite interpretations of the Hebrew Bible.

This article examines how Polish-Lithuanian Karaite poets occasionally incorporated exegetical terms, phrases, and notions into their original poetry (zĕmīrōt) through a discussion of pertinent examples from these works and by providing English translations.1 It aims to establish possible literary connections between Karaite poetry and medieval (Karaite and Rabbanite) commentaries on the basis of their shared use of exegetical terms and, to some extent, how these poets serve as exegetes who rewrite and interpret biblical narratives through poetry. The four poems considered here—with a brief overview

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of their form and contents—were each written by a different Karaite author. Each appears in the fourth volume of the Karaite prayer book;\(^2\) alternative versions have been transmitted in various Eastern European manuscripts.

1 Karaite Poets in Poland-Lithuania

Karaites lived within three major regions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569–1795): Lithuania (especially Troki and neighbouring towns), Galicia (Halicz and Kukizów), and Volhynia (Luck and Deraźne).\(^3\) These northern Karaites sought interaction with their southern co-religionists in Turkey and Jerusalem through correspondence, making pilgrimages, and hosting Karaites visitors.\(^4\) Both of these groups spoke various dialects of Karaim (a Turkic language)\(^5\) while maintaining Hebrew as their primary literary language.

\(^2\) Siddūr ha-tĕfillōt kĕ-minhag ha-yĕhūdīm ha-qārāʾīm, 4 vols. (Ramle, 1961–64; reprint of Vilna, 1891), 496–230. The fourth volume of this siddūr includes 230 paraliturgical Hebrew poems by Rabbanite and Karaite Jewish authors. The identities of many Karaite poets (or, sometimes, their relatives) are recorded in acrostics within their poems, and in headings that were written by Pineḥas Malecki, editor of the siddūr, to introduce each poem. Manuscripts occasionally transmit additional information about these poets. For a concise yet comprehensive list of the poems included in that fourth volume of the siddūr, see Tuori, Karaite Zĕmīrōt, 393–404.

