THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS AND MEDIEVAL JEWISH STUDIES: METHODS AND PROBLEMS

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Since the twentieth-century discoveries in the Judean Desert, many scholars have noted similarities in the Scrolls and in medieval Jewish religious phenomena. Some of these similarities are quite marked, found mostly in testimony and sources concerning medieval Islamicate sectarian Judaism. Based upon these similarities some observers have suggested models for religious and historical continuity to connect the Dead Sea Scrolls to medieval Jewish religious movements, including the Magharians and especially the Karaites. Many of the theories that have been suggested are weakened by an inherent two-fold difficulty. The problem, simply put, is as follows. If, on one hand, the Karaites are intellectual and/or communal descendants of the Scroll community, then one needs to demonstrate some kind of historical continuity across a little-known period in Jewish history spanning the seven or eight centuries that intervened between the destruction of Qumran in 68 CE and the era to which we usually assign Karaite origins. If, on the other hand, the Karaite phenomenon is a medieval movement independent of second temple period antecedents, then one must be able to explain striking similarities shared by these two groups. This simple description of the problem remains useful today.

In the Middle Ages the Karaites refer to themselves as שָׁנָה עֲבָרָא or שָׁנָה יְבָעֵל (“people of the Book” or “masters of the Book”) and יְבָעֵל (rendered as “readers” or perhaps “scripturalists,” alternately “callers”). They are a Jewish sect whose teachings reject the authority of rabbinic

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1 I want to thank Lawrence Schiffman for this succinct description proffered in a casual conversation, which led me into an inquiry of this topic, at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion and Society of Biblical Literature, San Francisco, November 1992.

2 On the name יְבָעֵל, see M. Gil, A History of Palestine, 634-1099 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 784. Gil suggests that the Hebrew term corresponds to the Arabic dā‘īn, which refers to Ismā‘ili missionaries or “propagandists” who
tradition and leadership, not acknowledging the rule of the Oral Law and its literature, the Mishnah and the Talmud. Karaites recognize only the Hebrew Bible as a divinely-revealed authoritative source for law. This is the first of three characteristics of Karaism identified by M. Zucker in his discussion of Daniel al-Qâmisï, a late ninth-century Karaite whose writings use many terms also known from the Scrolls. Zucker also noted that al-Qâmisï’s teaching incorporated a call for return to Palestine and, in a manner similar to the Scrolls, advocated an ideology of spiritual rigor in the form of asceticism and mourning. In addition, it is significant that in its medieval phase Karaism was millenarian and messianic, resulting in constructions of the community and its laws that were predicated upon working toward the imminent end of time. This is a component of much of the ideology of the Scrolls. Additionally, like the Dead Sea Scroll community’s denunciations and accusations of its opponents, the Karaites believed that their opponents, the rabbis, were responsible for the Exile because they perpetuated the evils that brought about the destruction of the Temple and that they benefited from their hegemonic position as leaders of the community.

The crux of the continuity problem is to be found in ideological parallels, but more importantly, in many instances of shared terminology found in Karaite literature of the ninth through eleventh centuries and in the Scrolls, especially the Damascus Document, but also found in the Community Rule and a few other sources. To illustrate, a few of the many examples of terms that Karaites used to characterize their rabbinical opponents are cited here. N. Wieder and others noted that Daniel al-Qâmisï and his Karaite successors, such as Salmon ben Yerûḥîm and Sahl ben Maṣliḥah in the tenth century and Elijah ben Abraham and Judah Hadassi in the twelfth century, used the term מַשְׂאֵר or מַשָּׁר (“deflectors from the way”) which is found in CD 1:13, 2:6, spread their sectarian version of Shi‘ite Islam in the eighth and ninth centuries, preaching to Muslims to convert to the true path. On the other hand, the Hebrew root קור is usually associated with the meaning “to read,” thereby identifying the Karaites as scripturalists.

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