

# THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS IN THE HISTORIOGRAPHY AND SELF-IMAGE OF CONTEMPORARY KARAITES\*

DANIEL J. LASKER

Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

Karaism is the most resilient, longest surviving, Jewish sectarian form of religion, having presented an alternate, non-rabbinic Judaism for at least the past 1100 years. The term “Karaites” is usually taken to mean “scripturalist,” and, indeed, the Karaites claim that their religious law is in accordance with the biblical precepts, whereas rabbinic Judaism (or Rabbanism) is often, from their point of view, at variance with the Bible. The Karaites do not accept Jewish law as formulated in the Talmud and the post-Talmudic codes (such as the *Shulḥan Arukh*), and they have developed their own law codes and religious practices. Over the years, Karaite observances have become closer to rabbinic practices in many respects, but there are still noticeable divergences between the two variations of Judaism. Today, there are approximately 30,000 Karaites in the world, most of whom are of Egyptian origin and live in the State of Israel.<sup>1</sup>

How Karaism arose is still an open question, a question that has long intrigued both theologians and historians. These groups have looked to the Karaites in an attempt to reach a better understanding of Judaism. Rabbanite historiographers, claiming that rabbinic Judaism has been, is, and will be the one and only normative Judaism from

---

\* This article is based on a talk presented at the Conference of the Institute of Judeo-Islamic Studies, Denver, 1996.

<sup>1</sup> At present, there is no one adequate introduction to Karaism, but M. Polliack (ed.), *Karaite Judaism: An Introduction to the History and Literary Sources of Medieval and Modern Karaism* (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming), is intended to fill that gap. In the meanwhile, the following can be profitably consulted: L. Nemoj, *Karaite Anthology* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1952); P. Birnbaum (ed.), *Karaite Studies* (New York: Hermon Press, 1971); S.W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952<sup>2</sup>) 5.209–85, 388–416; and M. Corinaldi, *The Personal Status of the Karaites* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 1984).

Sinai to the Messiah, have seen Karaism as a medieval aberration brought about by the personal pique of a disgruntled office seeker, Anan ben David. According to the Rabbanite account, the eighth-century Anan was denied the position of exilarch and founded Karaism as a means of avoiding punishment by the Muslim authorities; as a further concession to Islam, he included some Islamic features in his new-born religion.<sup>2</sup> Some Christians have looked to Karaism as the pristine Judaism of Jesus, which existed before the rabbinic perversion of that religion, or as an inspiration for their own religious beliefs.<sup>3</sup> Modern academic historians have generally considered Karaism to be one in a series of non-rabbinic forms of Judaism which have existed side by side with the rabbinic variety, providing evidence of the essential pluralism inherent in the religious expressions of the Jewish people. And for the Karaites themselves, the real question has always been not: "How did Karaism arise?" but: "How did rabbinic Judaism break away from the Torah-true Judaism as represented by Karaism?"<sup>4</sup>

As historians debate the question of Karaite origins, trying to make sense of the meager scraps of information surviving from the early Jewish Middle Ages, another avenue of exploration has recently been pursued, namely, how have the Karaites themselves understood their own origins? Since not much new can apparently be said about Karaite history, attention has been paid recently to Karaite historiography and self-understanding. An innovative article by W. Brinner has examined the difference in approach to Karaite origins as expressed by Karaites living in Islamic countries ("Karaites of Islam") and by those living under Christendom ("Karaites of Christendom"). The former stressed their Jewish identity, since it was advantageous to be considered Jewish by Muslims who were tolerant only of "Peoples of the

---

<sup>2</sup> The classical Rabbanite approach to Karaite origins can be found in the text translated by Nemoy, *Anthology*, 4–5. For Nemoy's evaluation of that approach, see *Anthology*, 3–8; and idem, "Anan ben David: A Re-Appraisal of the Historical Data," *Semitic Studies in Memory of Immanuel Löw* (ed. A. Scheiber; Budapest: Publications of the Alexander Kohut Memorial Fund, 1947) 239–48; reprinted in Birnbaum, *Studies*, 309–18.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of one aspect of Christian Hebraist interest in Karaism, see, e.g., J. van den Berg, "Proto-Protestants? The Image of the Karaites as a Mirror of the Catholic-Protestant Controversy in the Seventeenth Century," *Jewish-Christian Relations in the Seventeenth Century* (eds J. van den Berg and E.G.E. van der Wall; Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988) 33–49.

<sup>4</sup> A number of these historiographical issues are discussed in my "Islamic Influences on Karaite Origins," *Studies in Islamic and Judaic Traditions II* (eds W.M. Brinner and S.D. Ricks; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989) 23–47.