HISTORY OR PHILOSOPHY? THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE PAST IN MEDIEVAL KARAITE JUDAISM

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The expansion of the Islamic Empire brought most of the Jewish world into a single socio-political sphere, and by the tenth century the Jews increasingly came to be dominated by the leadership of the rabbis under the authority of their academies in Babylonia. During this period different strands of opposition to rabbinic dominance came together to coalesce into what is identifiable as Karaism, "a Jewish sect that recognizes only the Hebrew scriptures as the source for divinely inspired legislation and denies the authority of the postbiblical Jewish tradition (the oral law) as recorded in the Talmud and later rabbinic literature."1 In its classical form Karaism is characterized by scripturalism, antirabbinic halakhah (law), a somewhat ascetic orientation, and a further characteristic often associated with the intellectuals of the movement, dialectical rationalism. In the ninth and tenth centuries the Karaites were engaged in an increasingly sophisticated and successful intellectual and social development, marked by the florescence of a scholarly center at Jerusalem and vibrant communities in Palestine, Egypt, and elsewhere.2

One of the most important Karaite writers of this period is Abū Yusuf Ya'qūb al-Qirqisānī, who wrote the كتاب الأنوار والرآب (Book of Lights and

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Watchtowers) in 937. This massive work of law, philosophy, exegesis, and numerous other ancillary topics, begins with a major section describing twenty-one Jewish sects, which represents a significant expression of Karaite historical thinking in this period. In this paper I propose to offer a new appreciation of al-Qirqisānī’s opening heresiographical section.

Rabbinic leadership in this period was based upon a “constitution” embodied in the idea of the Oral Law. The central premise is that at Mount Sinai Moses received a second revelation in addition to the Torah, which subsequently was transmitted orally through the generations. Because postbiblical Rabbanite Jewish tradition was supported by the historical ideology implicit in this formulation, any opposition group such as the Karaites could either reject historicization altogether or adopt an alternate historical identity. In the tenth and eleventh centuries the impulse towards the former was influenced by scripturalism and anti-tradition. When the available Karaite sources for this period are examined it becomes clear that in their adherence to a rejectionist stance towards transmitted tradition the Karaites by and large failed to come to a consensus regarding history and continuity with the past. Historical allusions and historicizations which have survived were offered en passant in order to fulfill ancillary intellectual and literary functions. Karaite self definition found expression in legal and pietistic activity, obviating history as a means of understanding the community.

3 Edited by L. Nemoy under the title Kitāb al-anwār wal-mardqib, Code of Karaite Law (New York: The Alexander Kohut Memorial Foundation, 1939-43), henceforth abbreviated in the footnotes as KA. I have followed Nemoy’s system for citations from the text: where general topics or references are represented by specific sections, they are cited according to al-Qirqisānī’s arrangement, i.e., section, chapter, and sub-chapter (ex.: 1.2.11); where the reference is to a specific line, phrase, or word, it is designated by the page and line number in Nemoy’s edition (ex.: 594.13). For some important references I have tried to supply both methods of citation.

4 This section of KA was translated by Nemoy, “al-Qirqisānī’s Account of the Jewish Sects and Christianity,” Hebrew Union College Annual, 7 (1930) 317-397. A better translation by Wilfrid Lockwood is now found in B. Chiesa and Lockwood, Ya’qūb al-Qirqisānī on Jewish Sects and Christianity (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Peter Lang, 1984) 91-188. Pages in Lockwood’s translation are noted in parentheses following the citation from Nemoy’s Arabic edition.


6 These historical claims and references are dealt with in my doctoral dissertation, “History, Historicization, and Historical Claims in Karaite Jewish Literature” (Berkeley: University of California dissertation, 1993) chapter 2.