The Karaites and the Hebrew Bible

Geoffrey Khan, University of Cambridge

Karaism arose in the early Islamic period as a movement within Judaism whose essential difference from Rabbanite Judaism consisted in their rejection of the legal authority of the oral law embodied in the Mishnah and Talmuds. The Karaites held that the basis of legal authority was the Bible. They shared the Bible in common with Rabbanite Jews and felt no need to create a separate version of Scripture that deviated from that of the Rabbanite Jewish tradition. This should be contrasted with the Samaritans, who broke away from Judaism and expressed their communal identity by adopting a different tradition of Scripture with its own distinct modifications and tendentious additions. The fact that the Karaites and the Rabbanites shared the same scripture meant that Karaites and Rabbanites had a common interest in carefully preserving the transmission of this scripture.

In the Middle ages all Jewish communities shared the same consonantal text of the Bible, but there were conspicuous differences across various communities regarding the reading traditions of the text, i.e. the ways in which the text was read aloud. This is reflected in the different vocalization sign systems that are attested in medieval manuscripts. These sign systems can be classified broadly into the Tiberian, Palestinian and Babylonian systems, though in each case the manuscripts attest to a number of variant sub-systems. The different vocalization system do not represent any substantial differences in text among the different reading traditions, but they do reflect considerable differences in pronunciation and also, in many cases, differences in morphology.

The so-called standard Tiberian system of vocalization signs was regarded in the Middle Ages as the most prestigious and authoritative system. The reading tradition that the Tiberian vocalization reflected, known as the Tiberian reading tradition, was held to have similar prestige. The Tiberian vocalization sign system was developed in the early Islamic period by the Masoretes of Tiberias. The purpose of the sign system was to function as a written notation representing a tradition of reading that had been transmitted orally over many generations since the Second Temple Period. The activities of the Tiberian Masoretes came to an end in the 10th century. Shortly thereafter the Tiberian reading tradition fell into oblivion among Jewish communities. The Tiberian sign system, however, which had been developed to represent the reading tradition was eventually adopted by all Jewish communities and it replaced the other sign systems. As a result the Tiberian signs came to be read with various local reading traditions, none of which were direct continuations of the Tiberian reading tradition.

It is important to note that the Karaites shared with the Rabbanites not only a common scripture but also shared with them the recognition of the Tiberian tradition of scripture as the most authoritative. It is for this reason that the Karaites had a particular interest in the Tiberian Masoretic tradition.

Karaites were closely associated with the Tiberian Masoretic tradition. This is demonstrated in a number of ways.

Many of the surviving monumental Tiberian Masoretic codices that were written towards the end of the Masoretic period in the 10th and early 11th centuries contain inscriptions that indicate that the manuscript was dedicated to a Karaite community.[1]

Bible manuscripts often passed from Rabbanite into Karaite hands and *vice versa* and some of the manuscripts dedicated to Karaite communities may have been originally in the possession of Rabbanites. Such is the case with the Aleppo codex. This manuscript contained an inscription that indicates that it was written by the scribe Shlomo ben Buyāʿā and its vocalization and Masora were supplied by Aharon ben Asher and that a certain Israel ben Simḥa of Baṣra dedicated the manuscript to the Karaite community of Jerusalem. The first folio of the manuscript, however, contained a notice recording the fact that it was dedicated to the Rabbanite community of Jerusalem (על ישראל הרבנים השוכנים בעיר הקו׳).[2] The inscription indicating that the manuscript was dedicated to the Karaite community should be dated to the middle of the 11th century, about a hundred years after the manuscript was first produced by Ibn Buyāʿā and Ben Asher. The notice at the beginning of the manuscript suggests that it was originally in Rabbanite hands and was subsequently purchased by the Karaite Israel ben Simḥa. This manuscript was transferred to Egypt after the capture of Jerusalem by the Crusaders, where it was placed in the Rabbanite synagogue of the Palestinians. When in Egypt, it was consulted by Maimonides, who pronounced it to be the most reliable model manuscript.[3] By the 16th century the manuscript had passed into the possession of the Rabbanite community of Aleppo.[4]

---

[1] Evidence of such dedications are found in the colophons of several of the Bible manuscripts in the second Firkovich collection published by Kahle (1927, 56–77), e.g. no. 2 (Cod. 159, dedicated to the Jerusalem Karaite community, 937 A.D.), no. 3 (Cod. 10, dedicated to the Fustat Karaite community, eleventh century), no. 8 (Cod. 223, 225, dedicated to the Jerusalem Karaite community, 1017 A.D.), no. 11 (Cod. 25, 26, dedicated to the Fustat Karaite community, eleventh century), no. 12 (Cod. 94, dedicated to the Karaites of Egypt, 1100 A.D.), no. 13 (Cod. 34, dedicated to the Karaites of Fustat after the death of its owner, eleventh century). See also the colophons published by Poznanski (1913), e.g. p. 115 (dedicated to the Karaites of Ramla, 1013 A.D.).

[2] The original inscriptions are now lost and survive only in copies (Kahle 1927, 7–12; Ofer 1989).

[3] See Goshen-Gottstein (1960), Penkower (1981) and Ofer (1989) for the evidence that the Aleppo Codex was indeed the manuscript that Maimonides saw in Egypt. It is generally believed that this pronouncement of Maimonides ensured that the Ben Asher Masoretic tradition became the

Some Tiberian Masoretic Bible codices that have inscriptions indicating their dedication to the Karaite community of Jerusalem in the 10th or 11th century and were subsequently transferred to Egypt were held in the possession of Karaite community of Cairo down to the present. This applies to several of the old Bible codices kept in the Karaite synagogue of Cairo (Gottheil 1905, 647), including the manuscript known as C3 (10th century, no. 18 in Gottheil's list) (Penkower 1989), and the so-called Cairo Codex of the Prophets (datable to the 11th century, the colophon indicating the date 895 C.E. being a copy of an earlier colophon).[5]

Although a dedication of a manuscript to a Karaite community does not necessarily mean that it originated in Karaite circles, the identification of the person who commissions the writing of the manuscript as a Karaite is proof that its production was a Karaite initiative. This is, indeed, the case with the codex Leningradensis (I Firkovitch B19a), which was commissioned by the Karaite Mevorakh ben Joseph ha-Kohen, who was, therefore, its first owner. According to the colophon of this manuscript it was written by the scribe Samuel ben Jacob in the first decade of the 11th century (the various dating formulas correspond to dates between 1008 and 1010). Samuel is said to have added the vocalization, accents and masoretic notes based on 'the corrected and clear[6] books of the teacher Aharon ben Moshe ben Asher, may he rest in Eden (מן הספרים המוגהים והמבוארׄ אשר עשה המלמד אהרן בן משה בן אשר נוחו בגן עדן). This, therefore, was a copy of a Tiberian Masoretic manuscript and was not itself produced by a Tiberian Masorete. Jacob ben Samuel also wrote a Bible manuscript preserved in the Karaite synagogue in Cairo, no. 14 in the list of Gottheil (1905). The colophon indicates that this was commissioned by David ben Yeshua ha-Levi who presented it to the Karaite community of Cairo. So the production of this manuscript, too, appears to have been a completely Karaite initiative.[7]

---

authoritative one in Judaism. A source from the eleventh century refers to the possibility of following either the school of Ben Asher or that of Ben Naphtali, without any evaluation (Eldar 1980). It is relevant to note, however, that the original vocalization and accents of the manuscript C3 of the Karaite synagogue in Cairo (Gottheil 1905 no. 18) exhibited features of Ben Naphtali's system but these features were corrected by Mishael ben Uzzi'el in the early 11th century to the reading of Ben Asher (Penkower 1989).

[4] See the reconstruction of the history of the manuscript by Kahle (1927, 3–12) and Ben-Zvi (1960).

[5] For the arguments regarding its dating, see Cohen (1982), Glatzer (1989, 250–59), Lipschütz (1964, 6–7).

[6] Kahle interprets the term מבוארׄ as 'supplied with Masora'.

[7] Jacob ben Samuel also wrote the Bible manuscript no.27 of Gottheil's list, which was preserved in the Karaite synagogue, for a certain Yaḥya ben Jacob.

The dedication inscription of the Aleppo codex indicates that even when this carefully produced model manuscript that was written by Tiberian Masoretes came into the possession of a Karaite community, it was made available also for Rabbanites to consult in order to check readings: ואם יחפוץ איש מכל זרע ישראל מבעלי המקרא והרבנים בכל ימות השנה לראות בו דברי יתר או חסר או סתור או סדור או סתום או פתוח או טעם מהטעמים האילו יוציאוהוה אליו לראות ולהשכיל ולהבין 'If anybody of the seed of Israel, from among the Karaites or the Rabbanites, wishes on any day of the year to see in matters relating to full or defective orthography, what is disordered or ordered, closed or open sections, or one of the accents, they should bring it out for him to see and check and so gain understanding' (Kahle 1927, 4–5; Ofer 1989, 288–89).

Some scholars who are known to have been Karaites can be shown to have been closely associated with the Tiberian Masoretic tradition. This applies to the Karaite grammarians who were active in Jerusalem towards the end of the Masoretic period. The two most important Karaite grammarians in this repect are ʾAbū Yaʿqūb Yūsuf ibn Nūḥ (known in Hebrew as Joseph ben Noaḥ, second half the tenth century) and ʾAbū al-Faraj Hārūn ibn Faraj (first half of the eleventh century).[8]

According to Ibn al-Hītī, who wrote a chronicle of Karaite scholars, Yūsuf ibn Nūḥ had a college (*dār li-l-ʿilm*) in Jerusalem, which appears to have been established around the end of the tenth century.[9] ʾAbū al-Faraj Hārūn belonged to this college of Karaite scholars. Some sources refer to Yūsuf ibn Nūḥ ʾAbū Yaʿqūb Yūsuf ibn Baḵtawaih (or Baḵtawi), or Joseph ben Baḵtawaih. Baḵtawaih may have been the Iranian equivalent of the name Nūḥ or Noaḥ (cf. Persian *baḵt* 'fortune, prosperity'). Inscriptions on some of the early Masoretic Bible codices that dedicate the manuscript to the Jerusalem Karaite community give instructions for them to be deposited in the *ḥaṣer* ('compound') of Joseph ben Baḵtawaih, which is likely to be identical with Ibn Nūḥ's college, referred to by Ibn al-Hītī by the corresponding Arabic term *dār*.[10] The manuscript C3 of the Karaite synagogue in Cairo (Gottheil 1905 no. 18; Penkower 1989) contains the inscription אני מישאל בן עזיאל בן יוסף בן הלל בדקתי זאת התורה שלקדש חצר בן בכתויה ירחמיהו אל 'I Mishael ben ʿUzzʾiel ben Yoseph ben Hillel checked this holy Torah in the enclosure of ben Bakhtawaih, may God have

---

[8] For details of the Karaite grammarians of Jerusalem and their grammatical thought see Khan (2003; 2014a; 2000), Khan, Gallego and Olszowy-Schlanger (2003), Vidro (2009; 2011).

[9] . For the text of Ibn al-Hītī see G. Margoliouth (1897: 433, 438-39). Ibn al-Hītī was writing in the fifteenth century. For the background of Ibn Nūḥ's college, see J. Mann (1935: 33-34).

[10] Cod. 159 of II Firkovitch collection, dedicated 937 A.D. (Kahle 1927 no.2, p.60), Cod. 225 of II Firkovitch collection, dedicated 1017 A.D (Kahle 1927 no. 8, p.67). The inscription in cod. 159 relating to the compound of Joseph ben Bakhtawaih is separate from the main dedication, which is dated 937 A.D. Since Yūsuf ibn Nūḥ/Joseph ben Bakhtawaih is known to be active at the second half rather than the first half the 10th century, the inscription relating to his compound must have been added later. The inscriptions in both manuscripts add the blessing ירחמהו יי 'may God have mercy on him' after the name Joseph ben Bakhtawaih, which indicates that they were written after his death.

mercy on him.' This indicates that it must have been kept in ben Bakhtawaih's enclosure, where the scholar Mishael ben Uzziel consulted it.

The close relationship of the early generation of Karaite grammarians in the tenth century, such as Ibn Nūḥ, to the Tiberian Masoretic tradition is reflected by the methodology and disciplinary structure of their works. The grammatical work of Ibn Nūḥ that has come down to us is a grammatical commentary on the Bible known as the *Diqduq*. The term *diqduq* does not have the sense here of 'grammar' as an independent discipline, but rather as the 'study of the fine details of scripture'. A central feature of Ibn Nūḥ's method of presentation is the explanation as to why a word has one particular form rather than another. This often involves comparing closely related forms that differ from the form that is under investgation only in small details. The issue that is addressed is why these fine distinctions in form exist, with a view to finding hermeneutical significance in them. This may be compared to the practice of the Masoretes to collate words that were similar in form but differed only in details. This was a central feature of the masoretic method and lists recording these collations are found throughout the masoretic notes that were attached to Bible codices. The purpose of this was to draw attention to fine details of form to ensure that they were preserved in the transmission of Scripture. Collations of two closely related forms of word were also compiled in independent masoretic treatises, such as *ʾOḵlah we-ʾOḵlah*.[11] By the tenth century, the Masoretes also compiled treatises that formulated rules for the occurrence of some of these fine distinctions in form with regard to vowels and accents. The most famous work of this kind is the *Diqduqe ha-Ṭeʿamim* 'The rules of the details of the accents', which was compiled in the first half of the tenth century by Aharon ben Asher.[12]

Apart from these parallels in methodology, another feature that reflects the close relationship of Ibn Nūḥ's work to Masoretic activities is the fact that Ibn Nūḥ's grammatical comments relate mainly to morphology, with some consideration of syntactic issues. They make only very marginal reference to issues of vocalization and accents. They, therefore, complement the Masoretic treatises, indicating that the early Karaite grammarians were developing the Masoretic tradition rather than setting up an independent discipline.

This complementary relationship between the Masorah and grammar which characterizes the early Karaite grammatical tradition contrasts with the scope of the grammatical work composed by Saadya Gaon in the tenth century. After leaving Egypt, Saadya spent a few years in Tiberias studying among the Masoretes.

---

[11]. The treatise *ʾOḵlah we-ʾOḵlah* is named after the first two words of the first list ('eating' [I Sam. 1:9] 'and eat' [Gen. 27:19]), which enumerates pairs of words, one occurring with the conjunctive *waw* and the other without it. For a general discussion of the background of the text see Yeivin (1980: 128-131). An edition of the text based on the best manuscripts has been made by Díaz Esteban (1975) and Ognibeni (1995).

[12]. The definitive edition of this text is by Dotan (1967).

According to Dotan (1997, 33–40) he composed his grammar book (*Kitāb Faṣīḥ Luġat al-ʿIbrāniyyīn* 'The Book of the Eloquence of the Language of the Hebrews') while he was in Tiberias during the second decade of the tenth century. Unlike the *Diqduq* of Ibn Nūḥ, the grammatical work of Saadya does not complement the work of the Masoretes but rather incoporates numerous elements from it. The surviving sections of the work include not only treatments of grammatical inflection and word structure but also several chapters relating to the Tiberian reading tradition. The material for some of these has clearly been incorporated from the Masoretic tradition and direct parallels can be found in the extant Masoretic treatises such as *Diqduqe ha-Ṭəʿamim* (Dotan 1997, 34–36). Saadya refers to the accents on various occasions. Dotan, indeed, suggests that one of the missing chapters from Saadya's work may have been concerned specifically with accents. We may say that Saadya's grammar book is not a product of collaboration with the Masoretes or a complementary expansion of the scope of Masoretic teaching, as is the case with the *Diqdquq* of Ibn Nūh, but rather was intended as standing separate from the Masoretic tradition.

The complementary relationship of Ibn Nūḥ's grammatical work with Masoretic activity is further shown by an early text published by Allony (1964) that contains a list of technical terms for the various aspects of Biblical study. These are described in the text as *diqduqe ha-miqra*, which has the sense of 'the fine points of Scripture established by detailed investigation'. The list includes masoretic, grammatical and hermeneutical terms. These correspond closely to the terminology and concepts of Ibn Nūḥ's *Diqduq*. The range of the topics of analysis denoted by the terms also parallels the scope of analysis that is found in the *Diqduq*, though, as we have remarked, the focus of the *Diqduq* is more on the grammatical and hermeneutical aspects than on the masoretic. It is more accurate to say that the masoretic works and Ibn Nūḥ's *Diqduq* combined cover the range of topics contained in the list. The Masora and Masoretic treaties, on the one hand, and the grammatical work of Ibn Nūḥ, on the other, complement each other to establish the *diqduqe ha-miqra*. This list was not intended primarily as a foundation for the study of grammar per se, but rather as a methodology for establishing the correct interpretation of Scripture. It appears to reflect the scope of the scholarly work that developed around the core Masoretic activities, in which the grammatical work of Karaite scholars such as Ibn Nūḥ play an integral role.

Allony, in his edition of this list of technical terms, claimed that it was of Karaite background. One should be cautious, however, of being too categorical on this issue. Certain details of its content suggest that it was composed in the early Islamic period. It would, therefore, come from a period when Karaism was in its embryonic stages of development. The main evidence that Allony cites for its being

a Karaite work is the reference in the text to the 'masters of Bible study' (*baʿale ha-miqra*). This term was used in some texts in the Middle Ages to designate Karaites.[13] It is found, however, already in Rabbinic literature in the sense of 'those who study only the Bible and not the Mishnah or Gemara'.[14] It should be noted, moreover, that in masoretic texts it is sometimes used as an epithet of the Masoretes, who were professionally occupied with the investigation of the Bible.[15] The contents of the list were incorporated by a number of later authors into their works. These included not only Karaites but also Rabbanites, such as Dunaš ben Labraṭ.[16]

ʾAbū al-Faraj Hārūn, who was based at the college of Karaite scholars, is said by Ibn al-Hītī to have been the student of Ibn Nūḥ. The content of ʾAbū al-Faraj's work, however, is very different from that of Ibn Nūḥ, mainly because it conforms more closely to the theories of grammar propounded by the mainstream Baṣran school of Arabic grammar. The Arabic works of ʾAbū al-Faraj, nevertheless, still maintain the complementarity between grammar and Masora, which is charateristic of the work of Ibn Nūḥ, in that they are by and large restricted to morphology and syntax with minimal consideration of vocalization and accents, which reflects the close relationship of ʾAbū al-Faraj to the Masoretic tradition, again contrasting with the grammatical work of Saadya.

Moving now from the para-masoretic discipline of Karaite grammar to core masoretic activities, we are able to identify the authors of some of Masoretic treatises at the end of the Masoretic period in the 11th century as Karaite. ʾAbū al-Faraj Hārūn himself wrote a treatise on the biblical reading known as *Hidāyat al-Qāriʾ* 'Guide for the Reader', which described the pronunciation of consonants and vowels and the principles of the accents (Eldar 1994). This complemented his grammatical works on morphology and syntax (Khan 2014b). He states that his sources for the work were earlier masoretic treatises and the pupils of the writers of these earlier treatises (תלאמידהם),[17] which indicates that he had access to an oral tradition of instruction in the Tiberian reading. Another scholar working in the Karaite college founded by Yūsuf ibn Nūḥ/Joseph ben Baḵtawaih was Mishael ben ʿUzziʾel. As we have seen above, in an inscription in the manuscript C3 of the Karaite synagogue in Cairo he writes that he checked the manuscript in the 'enclosure of ben Baḵtawaih'. This implies that he was a Karaite belonging to the circle scholars in the Karaite college, most likely contemporary with ʾAbū al-Faraj Hārūn in the first half of the 11th century. This is almost certainly the the same

---

[13]. It is used frequently in this way in the inscriptions on the Bible codices discussed above and also in the writings of medieval Karaite scholars such as Salmon ben Yeruḥam and Judah Hadassi.

[14]. Cf. Bacher (1899: 118).

[15]. E.g. Baer and Strack (1879: xxxviii).

[16]. *Teshubot de Dunash ben Labrat*, ed. A. Sáenz-Badillos, Granada, 1980, 15*.

[17] MS Evr. Arab. I 2390, fol. 7a.

Mishael ben ʿUzzʿiel who composed a Masoretic treatise concerning the differences between the leading Masoretes Aharon ben Asher and Moshe ben Naphtali, known as *Kitāb al-Ḵilaf* 'The book of differences' (Lipschütz 1964; 1965). Fragments are extant also of a book of differences between the Masoretes written at roughly the same period by the Karaite Levi ben Yefet, also know as Levi ben al-Ḥasan, who was the son of the Karaite translator and exegete Yefet ben ʿEli (Lipschütz 1964, 3).

Several modern scholars have argued that some of the Masoretes themselves were Karaites, in particular Aharon ben Asher, who was one of the most prominent Masoretes towards the end of the Masoretic period in the 10th century. In all cases, however, the arguments are based on indirect or doubtful evidence.

Pinsker (1860, 34) says that all the Masoretes should be 'suspected' of being Karaites since they spent their time occuped with vocalization and accents of the Bible and there is no evidence that they showed any interest in the Talmud.

Klar (1954, 276–319) identified the name 'Ben Asher' in a manuscript at the head of Saadya Gaon's polemical poem against the Karaites אשא משלי, and claimed that this proved that Saadya's Karaite opponent, against whom the poem was addressed, must have been the Masorete Aharon ben Asher. Zucker (1958) and Dotan (1977) have convincingly argued against this on the grounds of the contents of poem, which are inconsistent with such an identification, especially the attribution of anti-Talmudic pronouncements to the opponent.

Some scholars (e.g. Graetz 1881, 366; Klar 1954, 276–319) have claimed to be able to identify Karaite doctrines in Masoretic treatises attributed to Aharon ben Asher and in the extant 'poem of the vine' that is attributed to his father, Moshe ben Asher, but again these are not at all clear and have also been rebutted by Zucker (1958) and Dotan (1977). More recently Zer (2003) has argued that evidence for the Karaite persuasion of Aharon ben Asher can be found in the masoretic notes that he wrote in the Aleppo codex. One of Zer's central arguments is based on the masoretic note on כִּי־שְׁאַל־נָא לְדֹר רִישֹׁון (Job 8:8), which reads: אין כמהו במקרא חסר ולמה כי הדור הראשון לא נכללו כל המצוות שבתורה והוא מחוסר מצות הרבה לכן הוא מיוחד במקרא כי המצות לא נכללו אלא על יד משה אדונינו 'It (i.e. the word רִישֹׁון) is defective (in orthography) unlike any (other occurrence of the word) in the Bible. Why? Because in the first generation all the commandments that are in the Torah were not completed, but it lacked many commandments, therefore it (i.e. the word רִישֹׁון) is unique in the Bible, because the commandments were only completed by the hand of Moshe, our master.' Zer points out that Karaites held this doctrine of the gradual revelation of commandments. Erder (1994) has presented various medieval Karaite sources that adhere to this doctrine. There is, however, some degree of variation of thought in these sources. Moreover the view that commandments were given before Sinai is

also found in the Talmud and in the writings of Maimonides, although Maimonides maintains that only those revealed at Sinai are obligatory (Erder 1994, 137–39). The use of differences in full and defective orthography of the *ketiv* as a source of interpretation is a practice found in Rabbinic texts (Goldberg 1990), but it was not approved of by many medieval Karaites, who regarded the reading tradition (*qere*) to be the only legitimate source of textual authority. This is stated explicitly by al-Qirqisānī.[18] It would, therefore, be highly unusual for a Karaite Masorete to use this type of hermeneutics.

Yeivin (1962) draws attention to a peculiarity in the vocalization of the Aleppo codex whereby in words that have a *qere* with inversion of the letters of the *ketiv*, the vocalization signs are not marked in the order required by the *qere* but rather are marked on the letters of the *ketiv* in a different order from the word of the *qere* that they are intended to represent. In Ezek. 36:14, for example, the *ketiv* תכשלי has a *qere* with inversion of letters, which the codex Leningradensis represents תְּכַשְּׁלִי־, i.e. the vocalization reflects the form תְשַׁכְּלִי־ 'you will [not] bereave' with the vowels in the correct order. The Aleppo codex, however, represents this תְּכַּשַׁלִי־, with the vowels of the *qere* placed directly under the consonants of the form of the *qere*, with the result that the vocalization does not follow the order of vowels in the *qere*. Another example, this time a word with an accent, is in 2 Sam. 20:14, where the *ketiv* ויקלהו is represented by L וַיִּקָּהֲלֹוּ, reflecting the form וַיִּקָּהֲלֹוּ 'and the assembled', but the Aleppo codex vocalizes: וַיִּקָּלֹהֲוּ. Yeivin proposes that this unusual practice of vocalization in the Aleppo codex reflects the view of the vocalizer that the vocalization and accents were given at Sinai and are as old as the letters, with the consequence that the vowel signs were considered to be bound to the letters, i.e. if the letters are inverted, then the vocalization and accents were also inverted. Yeivin argues that this demostrates that the vocalizer, i.e. Aharon ben Asher, was a Karaite, because the Karaites held the view that the vowels and the accents were given at Sinai. There is not, however, clear evidence of such a doctrine being held by the Karaites, to my knowledge, before Judah Hadassi (12th century), who states in his work *Eškol ha-Kofer* that that the original Tablets given to Moses at Sinai had the vowels and accents 'for without the five vowels which are [represented by] the vowel signs a word could not be articulated nor could it be understood without the pronunciation of the vowels and accents.'[19] Earlier Karaites, however, did not express this doctrine. The Karaite list of grammatical terms published by Allony (1964) and dated by him to the Masoretic

---

[18] The relative passages of al-Qirqisānī's work are discussed below.

[19] כי בלי חמשת הקולות שהם מלכי הנקוד לא תולד המלה ולא תעמוד בפה ולא יודע מה היא כי אם בנועם נקודים וטעמים (Hadassi 1836, 70a).

period only states ואותיות בנקודות ונקודות במסורות 'letters are [known] by vowels and the vowels are known by the *masorot*'. One cannot infer from this, as Allony does (1964, 333, 349), that the author believes that the original Tablets were inscribed with the vowels and accents. The Karaite al-Qirqisānī (10th century) states that the vowels are subordinate to the letters and are not part of the 'holy' script.[20] At approximately the same period as Hadassi expressed the doctrine that the vowel points were given to Moses at Sinai, the same view was expressed by several Rabbanites, e.g. David Qimḥi (*Sefer Miḵlol*, ed. Lyck, 1862, 73) and Moses ben Isaac of England.[21] There is no evidence that the doctrine was specifically Karaite. It seems to have arisen due to the chronological distance between the scholar in question and the period in which the pointing and accentuation were first developed rather than due to any doctrinal *Tendenz.*

We may conclude, therefore, that there is no incontrovertible evidence that Aharon ben Asher or his family were Karaites. The medieval sources refer to several generations of Masoretes, some of them belonging to the same family. They indicate that the family of Aharon Ben Asher had been involved in masoretic activies over five generations. Aharon Ben Asher lived in the 10th century and so Asher 'the elder', who is stated to be the great-great-grandfather of Aharon, is likely to have lived in the second half of the eighth century C.E., before the emergence of Karaism on the historical scene in Palestine (Kahle 1959: 75-82; 1927, vol. 1, 39). Some of the Masoretes, furthermore, were closely associated with the Rabbanite Jewish authorities, e.g. Pinḥas Rosh ha-Yeshiva ('head of the academy'), who lived in the ninth century, and ʾAḥiyyahu ha-Kohen he-Haver ('member of the academy').[22] The 'academy' (*yeshiva*) was the central body of Rabbanite Jewish communal authority in Palestine. Some close parallels to the format and phraseology of the masoretic notes can, in fact, be found in Midrashic literature composed before the Islamic period (Martín Contreras 1999, 2002, 2003). As has already been remarked above, there are references already in Rabbinic literature to the existence of 'Bible scholars' (*baʿale ha-miqra*), who are likely to the forerunners of the Masoretes.

All this suggests that Karaite scholars joined forces with an existing stream of tradition of 'Bible scholarship' in Rabbanite Judaism, enhancing it and developing it. The evidence suggests that this took place mainly towards the end of the Masoretic period in the second half of the 10th century and the 11th century. Their particular contribution to the Tiberian Masoretic tradition was (i) to sponsor the safekeeping of the model Masoretic codices produced by the Masoretes and, particularly in the

---

[20] *Kitāb al-ʾAnwār* (ed. Nemoy 1939), 554.

[21] Cf. Bacher (1974, 83–84) and Chiesa (1979, 5–8).

[22] See the document published by Mann (1970, 2:43–44).

11th after the cessation of the activities of the Tiberian Masoretes, the production of accurate copies of Masoretic bibles; (ii) the production of some Masoretic treatises and (iii) the development of the para-masoretic philological activity of grammar.

As we have seen, the inscriptions on several of the Bible codices that were dedicated to Karaite communities indicate that they were to be used as models for scribes to consult. The inscription on the Aleppo codex indicates that the manuscript should be made available to both Karaites and Rabbanites for this purpose. Several of the inscriptions also indicate that the codices should be used for liturgical reading by the Karaite communities on sabbaths and festivals. This is found, for example, in the Aleppo codex (כדי שיוציאוהו אל המושבות והקהלות שבעיר הקודש בשלשה רגלים חג המצות חג השבועות וחג הסוכות לקרות בו 'in order that they bring it [the codex] out to the settlements and communities in the holy city on the three pilgrimage festivals, the festival of Passover, the festival of Weeks and the festival Tabernacles to read in it' (Kahle 1927, 4)), the Cairo Codex of the Prophets (זה הדפתר שמנה נביאים שהקדיש אותו יעבץ בן שלמה בירושלים ... לקראין העושים המועדים על ראות הירח יקראו בו כלם בשבתות ובחדשים ובמועדים 'This is the codex, the Eight Prophets, which Ya'beṣ ben Shlomo consecrated in Jerusalem ... for the Karaites who celebrate the feasts at seeing the moon, for them all to read on Sabbbath days, at new moons and at the feasts.' (Kahle 1947, 112–14),[23] Cod. 34 of the II Firkovitch collection (יאסף זה המקרא אל אחת המושבות שיהיה בה קהלות הקראיין בשבתות ובמועדים במדינת מצרים לקראת הקהל בו בכל שבת ומועד ברוך 'This bible should be taken to one of the settlements in which there are Karaite communities on sabbaths and festivals in the city of Cairo so that the congregation can read it each sabbath and blessed festival' (Kahle 1927 no. 13, pp. 74-77)). The use of masoretic codices for liturgical reading distinguished the Karaites from the Rabbanites, who continued to use scrolls for this purpose (1979).

The introduction of the codex in the Islamic period for the writing of Jewish scripture is likely to have been influenced by the use of the codex for the writing of the Qurʾān. This is reflected in the medieval Hebrew term for codex, viz. מצחף, which is clearly a loan of the Arabic term *muṣḥaf* (Khan 2013, 6–7). The use of the codex by the Karaites for liturgical reading can be interpreted as a reflection of a further rapprochement to the Islamic environment. The Rabbanites, by contrast, remained more conservative and restricted the codex to non-liturgical use.

---

[23] The Cairo Codex of the Prophets was preserved down to modern times in the Karaite synagogue in Cairo. The consecration to the Karaites of Jerusalem should be dated to the 11th century. This manuscript also has a colophon attributing it to the Masorete Moshe ben Asher, the father of Aharon ben Asher, with the date 895 C.E.. There is now a consensus that the manuscript was written later, most likely in the 11th century, and this a later copy of an earlier colophon. For the arguments regarding its dating, see Cohen (1982), Glatzer (1989, 250–59), Lipschütz (1964, 6–7).

An even greater degree of rapprochement of the Karaites with the Muslim environment is reflected by an extant corpus of Hebrew Bible manuscripts that were written by Karaites in the Middle Ages in Arabic transcription.

Most of the known manuscripts containing Karaite transcriptions of Hebrew into Arabic script are found in the British Library (Hoerning 1889; Khan 1987, 25–33; 1993), the Firkovitch collections of the National Library of Russia in St. Petersburg (Harviainen 1993a; 1993b; 1994; 1995; 1996a), and in the Cairo Genizah collections (Khan 1990).[24] These manuscripts emanate from Palestinian circles of Karaites or Karaites in Egypt who had migrated to Egypt from Palestine after the capture of Jerusalem by the Crusaders in 1099. The majority of them were written in the 10th and 11th centuries. One of the transcriptions in the British Library (Or. 2554) has a colophon which states that it was written in Ramle in 395 A.H. (1004-5 C.E.). Several of the other manuscripts of the British Library corpus are written with the same form of script and orthography. These include Or. 2548. Or. 2550, Or. 2551 fol· 31-56, Or. 2551 fols. 57-101, Or. 2581A fols. 31-46. It would appear that these manuscripts all come from the pen of the same scribe. The manuscripts were preserved down to modern times mainly in Egypt. This applies, of course, to the material from the Cairo Genizah. The British Library corpus comes from a collection of mainly Karaite manuscripts that were purchased by the library from the bookseller M. W. Shapira of Jerusalem in 1882. The main source of Shapira's manuscripts and also the manuscript acquired by Abraham Firkovitch appears to have been the Karaite community of Cairo. A number of transcription fragments preserved in the Cairo Genizah were originally parts of manuscripts acquired by Shapira and now in the British Library, which shows that these British Library manuscripts must have come from Cairo (Khan 1990, 3–4). Some of the transcriptions in the British Library and Firkovitch collection may have been acquired also from the Karaite community of the Iraqi town of Hīt on the Euphrates (Hoerning 1889, v; Harviainen 1991; 1996b; 1998)

The transcriptions represent a convergence with the external form of the Muslim Arabic Qur'an and also with the concepts of authority associated with the transmission of Muslim scripture. Unlike the Masoretic Bible codices, which were used by both Rabbanites and Karaites, these transcriptions were exclusive to the Karaites.

The authoritative written form of Muslim scripture was fixed in the early Islamic period. This was known as the Uthmanic text, since it was based on a codex (*muṣḥaf*) authorized by the caliph Uthman in the first century A.H./7th century C.E.

---

[24] Gottheil (1905, 647) mentions the existence of an Arabic transcription of part of the book of Daniel in the Khedevial Library of Cairo (now the Egyptian Library).

To be precise, what was authorized was the *rasm* of the Uthmanic text, i.e. the shape of the letters, though not the diacritical points. In early Qur'an manuscripts the diacritical points of the Arabic letters are, in fact, frequently omitted. Although the *rasm* became fixed, this could potentially be read in various ways and a variety of reading traditions (*qirā'āt*) existed. The *qirā'a* was regarded as the authoritative core of the text of scripture, which was based on the matrix of the *rasm*. It was crucially important, therefore, to establish principles for determining which *qirā'āt* were authoritative.

The early generations of Qur'an readers felt a considerable amount of freedom in determining the reading of the Uthmanic fixed consonantal text. They often adopted one reading of the consonantal text rather than another on the basis of their judgment of its grammatical 'correctness,' unconstrained by any other criteria (Nöldeke, Bergsträsser, and Pretzl 1938, 120; Beck 1946, 188). By the time of the Abbasid period, however, in the middle of the second century A.H., the freedom allowable in the choice of Qur'anic readings began to be narrowed down. This was achieved by the introduction of two conditions for the selection of a reading, in addition to the requirement that it be grammatical and in conformity with the fixed consonantal text: the condition that the reading must be based on the normative usage of prestigious readers of earlier times, and that the reading must be agreed upon by a majority of readers. The two conditions were not necessarily mutually exclusive; they were both aspects of the concept of a generally agreed practice. The sources of authority for establishing the correct reading of the consonantal text of the Qur'an which are recognized by Sībawayh (d. 180 A.H./796–797 C.E.) are those of the majority (*qirā'at al-'āmma*) and the model of former authoritative sources (*al-sunna*). He, in fact, identifies the one with the other, as is shown by his statement: *al-qirā'a lā tuḵālaf li'annahā al-sunna* 'The reading [of the majority] is not to be disputed, because it is the normative usage.'[25] This expresses the view that the majority reading has religious sanction, since it is the normative ideal usage of the community. This notion of *sunna* and its merging with consensus is found also in the doctrine of the ancient schools of Islamic jurisprudence before al- Shāfi'ī (d. 204 A.H./820 C.E.) (Schacht 1950, 58–81). Al-Farrā' (d. 207 A.H./822 C.E.) also regards the agreement of the majority of the readers and the traditions of the ancients as sources of authority for establishing the correct reading. When referring to these, he generally uses the terms *'ijtimā'* and *'āṯār*.

Throughout the third century A.H., the so-called 'majority principle' was widely used to establish the authoritative *qirā'a* of the Qur'anic text. This was due mainly to the work of 'Abū 'Ubayd (d. 224/834) and 'Abū Ḥātim (Sahl ibn

---

[25] *Kitāb*, ed. H. Derenbourg (Paris, 1881), 1:62₂₂.

Muḥammad) al-Sijistanī (d. 255/ 869). The application of the 'majority principle' in the selection of readings excluded those of small minorities. In cases where there was no agreement by a clear majority, ʾAbū ʿUbayd, ʾAbū Ḥātim and others restricted their notion of 'majority' to that of the readers of specific centres, such as Medina and Kūfa, or Medina and Mecca, or to that of specific readers, such as Nāfiʿ and ʿĀṣim.

By the fourth century A.H., under the instigation of Ibn Mujāhid (d. 324/936), the 'tradition principle,' whereby authority was given to the tradition of specific readers, began to replace the 'majority principle.' Ibn Mujāhid established seven canonical traditions of reading, which were endorsed by the ruling ʿAbbāsid régime.[26] These still fulfilled the requirements that they should conform to the *rasm* of the authoritative text, that they should be grammatically correct, and that they should be broadly authenticated. At a later period the seven canonical traditions came to be accepted on the basis of their authoritative pedigree alone, in the manner of the principles of establishing the authority of *ḥadīth* (traditions of the sayings of the prophet Muḥammad). Ibn Mujāhid himself applied some degree of critical assessment of the content of the traditions, notably in their degree of grammatical correctness (Nasser 2015).

We find eloquent evidence for the Karaites' convergence with Muslim thought regarding the transmission of scripture in the writings of the Karaite author al-Qirqisānī (first half of the tenth century C.E.). In a number of passages in his work *Kitāb al-ʾAnwār w-al-Marāqib*, he expresses his opinion about the basis of authority of Hebrew scripture. He makes it clear that the authority lies in the text represented by the reading tradition (*qere*) and not in that represented by the written tradition (*ketiv*). Moreover the reading tradition derives its authority from the agreement of the entire community (*ʾijmāʿ*) and not from the authority of the sages or that of any specific group of people. The *ketiv* of the Hebrew Bible can be read in several different ways and the correctness of one reading rather than another can only be established by *ʾijmāʿ*. Furthermore in many cases reading the text on the basis of the written tradition blatantly results in the wrong meaning (ed. Nemoy 1939, II.23.6). For example, the frequent word נַעַר in the Pentateuch would be read as 'boy' rather than 'girl' if the *ketiv* is followed. The word שברתי in שִׂבַּרְתִּי לִישׁוּעָתְךָ (Psa. 119.166) would have to be read with a *šin* as שִׁבַּרְתִּי if the *ketiv* is the basis of the reading and the meaning would be 'I have broken' rather than 'I hope'.[27]

Al-Qirqisānī was aware of the fact that there were some differences in reading between the communities of Palestine and Iraq (ʾahl al-Shām wa-ʾahl al-ʿIrāq). In

---

[26] Ibn Mujāhid, *Kitāb al-Sabʿa fī al-Qirāʾāt* (ed. Cairo, 1972).

[27] In Rabbinic tradition the *ketiv* of the letter שׂ was regarded as being /š/ and its reading as /s/ was considered to be the *qere* of this *ketiv*, i.e. the letter *sin* did not exist in the *qere* (Steiner 1996).

such cases the reading of the community of Palestine must have the supreme authority, even though the community of Iraq was larger. By the term ʾahl al-Shām al-Qirqisānī was referring to the Tiberian tradition of reading.

The position of al-Qirqisanī with regard to the biblical text, therefore, is as follows. The authoritative text of the Bible was represented by the reading tradition, which was validated by the ʾijmāʿ of the entire nation (al-ʾumma) in most of its details. Where there was no overriding consensus in the nation as a whole with regard to certain aspects of the tradition, it is the reading (qirāʾa) of the Palestinians (ʾahl al-shām) that was the correct and authoritative one. That is to say, the correct tradition in all its details is established by the ʾijmāʿ of the ʾahl al-shām rather than that of the nation as a whole. This has clear parallels to the overriding authority attributed to orally transmitted reading traditions (qirāʾāt) of the Qurʾan and also to the notion that ʾijmāʿ was a key determinant of the authority of a reading tradition.

Al-Qirqisanī's advocacy of ʾijmāʿ as a source of authority may have been further reinforced by the influence of by Muʿtazilī thought, which had a major impact on medieval Karaite thought in general at this period.[28] The Muʿtazila rejected tradition as a source of law but accepted the validity of ʾijmāʿ.[29] The Muʿtazilī theologian ʿAbd al-Jabbār (320/932 to 414-16/ 1023-25) considered traditionalism (taqlīd) to be an unsatisfactory way of acquiring knowledge, since it involved the uncritical acceptance of a report without demanding proof or evidence.[30] He maintained that ʾijmāʿ, on the other hand, had probative value (ḥujjiyya). The probative value followed from the existence of ʾijmāʿ. It does not require any proof that the information it conveys is true.[31]

The adoption of the reading tradition as the overriding basis of authority had the consequence that the Hebrew Bible could not be considered to offer two sources of authority, one on the basis of the way it is read and the other on the basis of the way it is written. The interpretation of the Scripture on two levels, one according to

---

[28] It is well known that the Karaites were influenced by many doctrines of Muslim Muʿtazilī theologians. For Muʿtalizī ideas elsewhere in al-Qirqisānī's *Kitāb al-ʾAnwār*, cf. Ben-Shammai (1984, 27ff.).

[29] al-Shāfiʿī, *Kitāb al-ʾUmm* (Bulaq, 1321-25/1903-07), 7:252-253; cf. Schacht (1950, 41, 258–59). Also Ibn al-Murtaḍā, *Kitāb ṭabaqāt al-muʿtazila*, ed. S. Diwald-Wilzer (Beirut, 1961), pp. 81₉, 95₂-₄; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *Kitāb faḍl al- ʾiʿtizāl wa-ṭabaqāt al-muʿtazila*, ed. Fuʾād Sayyid (Tunis, 1393/ 1974), p. 186.

[30] *Al-Muġnī fī ʾabwāb al-tawḥīd wal-ʿadl* (Cairo, 1380-89/ 1960-69), 12:123-126; *Šarḥ al-ʾuṣūl al-ḳamsa*, ed. ʿAbd al-Karīm ʿUṯmān (Cairo, 1384/1965), p. 61.

[31] *Muġnī*, 17:199 (*fa-ʿammā istidlāl ʿalā ṣiḥḥat al-ʾijmāʿ min jihat al-ʿaql fa-baʿīd* 'As for the demonstration of the validity of ʾijmāʿ by reason, [this] is unnecessary'.). Cf. Bernand (1969; 1972). A similar fideistic acceptance of the probative validity of ʾijmāʿ and the rejection of traditions is expressed by ʾAbū al-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī, who was the pupil of ʿAbd al-Jabbār, cf. *Kitāb al-muʿtamad fī ʾuṣūl al-fiqh* (Damascus, 1384/1964), pp. 457-540. Elsewhere ʿAbd al-Jabbār states that ʾijmāʿ is supported by the Qurʾān and *sunna*, cf. *Šarḥ*, p. 89. The extreme rationalist Muʿtazalī al-Naẓẓām and his school, however, had misgivings about the reliability of ʾijmāʿ, on the grounds that information has to be supported and ascertained before it can form the basis of ʾijmāʿ, i.e. ʾijmāʿ is only the consequence of truth, not the source of truth, cf. ʿAbd al-Qāhir ibn Ṭāhir al-Baġdādī, *Kitāb ʾuṣūl al-dīn* (Istanbul, 1928/1346), pp. 19-20.

the *ketiv* and one according to the *qere* was a practice that is found in Rabbinic sources. As shown by Naeh (1992; 1993), this was a phenomenon that developed in the Talmudic period. It is reflected by the Talmudic dictum יש אם למקרא ויש אם למסורת 'The reading has authority and the traditional text has authority.' The details of the spelling of the written text, in particular the distribution of full and defective orthography, were used as a source for interpretation in various Rabbinic texts (Goldberg 1990). According to the Midrash Genesis Rabbah, for example, there is exegetical significance as to why the second instance of the name Efron is spelled without a *waw* in the verse Gen. 23.16 whereas the first instance of the name in the verse and elsewhere in Gen. 23 has a *waw*:

וַיִּשְׁמַע אַבְרָהָם אֶל־עֶפְרוֹן וַיִּשְׁקֹל אַבְרָהָם לְעֶפְרֹן אֶת־הַכֶּסֶף אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר בְּאָזְנֵי בְנֵי־חֵת אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת שֶׁקֶל כֶּסֶף עֹבֵר לַסֹּחֵר:

'Abraham agreed with Ephron; and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver which he had named in the hearing of the Hittites, four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weights current among the merchants.' (Gen. 23.16).

The lack of *waw* (*ketiv ḥaser*) indicates that Efron will suffer want because he was envious and mean in accordance with the verse:

נִבֳהָל לַהוֹן אִישׁ רַע עָיִן וְלֹא־יֵדַע כִּי־חֶסֶר יְבֹאֶנּוּ

'A miserly man hastens after wealth, and does not know that want will come upon him.' (Prov. 28.22)

In some cases such Midrashic texts exhibit a terminology and style of presentation that constitute embryonic Masoretic notes regarding differences in orthography of similar words (Martín Contreras 1999; 2002; 2003). As has been remarked above, exegetical comments based on differences in orthography are indeed found embedded within the Masoretic notes in some of the Tiberian codices, e.g. the comment on the orthography of רִישׁוֹן (Job 8:8) in the Masorah of the Aleppo codex discussed by Zer (2003).

If the *qere* is the only source of authority, as is the opinion of al-Qirqisānī, then variations in orthography cannot be a legitimate source of authoritative exegesis, as in the comment on Job 8:8 in the Aleppo codex. Furthermore, convergence with the Islamic model of scriptural authority would logically have resulted in the inconsistency between the *ketiv* and the *qere* being considered problematic. One of the key requirements of authoritative Qurʾanic reading traditions at that period was that they conform to the *rasm* of the written text. This was clearly not the case in Hebrew scripture, in which the difference between *ketiv* and *qere* is sometimes very substantial, including reading whole words that are not written and writing whole words that are not read. The Hebrew Bible required a written *rasm* that corresponded to the reading tradition. The Karaite transcriptions of Hebrew Bibles

represent the resolution of this tension by the abandonment of the traditional Hebrew written text and the provision of an acceptable *rasm*. The new *rasm* was created on the model of Islamic scripture in Arabic script. In addition to the use of Arabic script the manuscripts of the transcribed Bible exhibit a convergence with the Arabic Qur'an in codicological features, such as the use of red ink to mark vocalization, the occasional use of Arabic vocalization signs and the insertion of ornamentation at various points on the page that resemble what is found in contemporary Qur'an manuscripts. Moreover some manuscripts even use the Arabic word الله to represent the reading of the Tetragrammaton.

A few of the extant Karaite Bibles in Arabic script exhibit what is essentially a letter for letter transliteration of the Hebrew orthography rather than a phonetic transcription in Arabic orthography. It is likely that these are among the oldest manuscripts. The Hebrew *matres lectionis*, for example, are reproduced in Arabic script where they would not be appropriate according to Arabic orthography, e.g.

لامور לֵאמֹר (BL Or 2541, fol. 18v, 11 || L לֵאמֹר: Ex. 13.1 'saying').

راش ראֹשׁ (BL Or 2541, fol. 30v, 13 || L רֹאשׁ־ Ex. 17.9 'top of').

هليله הַלַּיְלָה (BL Or 2541, fol. 16v, 9 || L הַלַּיְלָה Ex. 12.29 'the night').

Conversely Arabic *matres lectionis* are not used when they are lacking in the Hebrew text even where they would be required in Arabic orthography to represent long vowels, e.g.

هعم הָעָם (BL Or 2541, fol. 17r, 9 || L הָעָם־ Ex. 12.33 'the people').

حن חֵן (BL Or 2541, fol. 17r, 2 || L חֵן־ Ex. 12.36 'favour').

It is important to note, however, that such texts represent the *qere* in places where there is a conflict of *qere* and *ketiv*, e.g.

ويلونو וַיִּלּוֹנוּ (BL Or 2541, fol. 26v, 4 || L וַיִּלּוֹנוּ ק [וילינו כ] Ex. 16.2 'and they (mpl.) murmured').

تلينو תַלִּינוּ (BL Or 2541, fol. 29r, 8 || L תַלִּינוּ ק [תלונו כ] Ex. 16.7 'you (mpl.) will murmur').

Moreover, there is a tendency to eliminate the inconsistency that is found in the distribution of the *matres lectionis waw* and *yod* of the Hebrew *ketiv*, to which exegetical significance was attached in Rabbinic sources. This is seen in the fact that in many contexts where *waw* and *yod* are inconsistently used in the Hebrew *ketiv*, the Arabic text more regularly uses the corresponding Arabic *mater lectionis*, *wāw* and *yāʾ*. This results in the Arabic *matres lectionis* being used in many cases where the Hebrew *ketiv* has defective orthography, e.g.

غذوله גְדֹלָה (BL Or 2541, fol. 17r, 2 || L גְדֹלָה Ex. 12.30 'great (fsg)').

בְּשִׂמְלוֹתָם בسملوثم (BL Or 2541, fol. 17r, 12 || L בְּשִׂמְלֹתָם Ex. 12.34 'in their garments').

וְשָׁלִשִׁים وشليشيم (BL Or 2541, fol. 21v, 5 || L וְשָׁלִשָׁם Ex. 14.7 'officers').

מֵאֵילִם مايليم (BL Or 2541, fol. 26r, 13 || L מֵאֵילִם Ex. 16.1 'from Elim (nl)').

These early Karaite Bibles, therefore, attempted to produce a *rasm* that corresponded to the reading tradition and had an internal consistency.

The majority of extant Karaite Bibles in Arabic script, however, use a transcription system that is based essentially on the orthographic practices of Classical Arabic. These use *matres lectionis* to represent all long vowels, as is the practice in Arabic orthography. This appears to be a later development. Indeed a few manuscripts exhibit a hybrid system of orthography, which include features both of Hebrew orthography and Arabic orthography. These represent a transitional stage of development between the Hebrew type of orthography and the Arabic type of orthography, e.g.

אִשָּׁאה اشاه (BL Or 2551 fol. 34v, 13 || L אִשָּׁה Deut 21.7 'wife').

רוֹאש رواش (BL Or 2539 MS B, fol. 115r, 1 || L רֹאשׁ Num. 6:18 'head')

In general the written transcription in the Karaite Bibles could not be read correctly without a knowledge of the reading tradition. This is shown by the fact that they often omit crucial details, such as diacritical points on the Arabic consonants. Moreover the spelling is often ambiguous. Each Arabic *mater lectionis*, for example, represents different qualities of Hebrew vowel.

In principle the traditional *ketiv* of Hebrew scripture could have been adjusted to conform to the *qere* without changing the script. Indeed this is found in some fragments of Bible manuscripts from this period that were written for private use and have been preserved in the Cairo Genizah.[32] The adoption of the Arabic script in the transcriptions reflects a convergence with the external form of the Qur'an, which was facilitated by the assignment of exclusive authority to the reading tradition.

The Islamic model required not only conformity of the reading to the *rasm* of the written text but also conformity of the reading to Arabic grammar. It was important for the Karaites, therefore, to legitimate the grammatical integrity of the Tiberian reading tradition. As has been remarked above, in the 10th century a tradition of Karaite Hebrew grammatical thought emerged. The main source of our knowledge of this Karaite grammatical tradition in its early stages of development in the 10th century is the grammatical commentary on the Bible by Yūsuf ibn Nūḥ known as the *Diqduq* (Khan 1998; 2000). Ibn Nūḥ does not offer a systematic description of Hebrew grammar but rather concentrates on points that he believed

---

[32] Goshen-Gottstein (1962, 39ff.), Díez-Macho (1971, 92), Yeivin (1980, 30–31).

may be problematic for the reader or concerning which there was controversy. One of the central concerns was to show that apparent inconsistencies in similar words can be explained as conforming to rational rules of grammar. This was often achieved by arguing that similar forms differing in small details were derived from different morphological bases. In the class of verbs which we refer to as final geminates, for example, there is variation in the position of stress in the past forms, e.g. קַלּוּ *qállū* 'they are swift' (Job 9.25) vs. וְקַלּוּ *wə-qallū́* 'and they are swift' (Hab. 1.8). According to Ibn Nūḥ this is not an arbitrary variation, but rather the forms with the penultimate stress are derived from a noun base whereas the forms with final stress have an imperative base. The Karaite grammarians were concerned only with the Tiberian reading tradition and did not take into account of the *ketiv.* Their work vouchsafed the grammatical integrity of the reading tradition.

The Arabic transcriptions of the Hebrew Bible represent an extreme case of convergence with the Islamic environment. As has been remarked, there was variation in the Karaite community as to the degree of convergence. During the period in which the transcriptions were made, Karaites used also Hebrew script for both Arabic and Biblical Hebrew. Likewise there is evidence that some Karaites maintained the Talmudic principle of יש אם למקרא ויש אם למסורת. The Karaite lexicographer David ben Abraham al-Fāsī (second half of the 10th century), for example, cites this as a legitimate principle of exegesis in the introduction to his lexicon *Kitāb Jāmiʿ al-ʾAlfāẓ* (ed. Skoss, I, 1-13).[33]

Of course convergence with the culture of the Islamic environment was not unique to the Karaites. Rabbanites scholars of the 10th and 11th centuries adopted the Arabic language in their writings and many elements of the Islamic intellectual tradition. This included a preference for the *qere* of the Hebrew Biblical. Saadya Gaon, for example, in principle follows the *qere* in his Arabic translations of the Bible and exegesis. The extent of the convergence, however, was to a lesser degree and this is reflected by the fact that they maintained Hebrew script in their writings.

References

Allony, Nehemiah. 1964. 'Rešimat Munaẖim Qaraʾit Me-Ha-Meʾa Ha-Šeminit'. In *Kitve Ha-X̱evra Le-X̱eqer Ha-Miqra Be-Yisraʾel Le-Zexer Dr Y.P. Korngreen*, edited by Asher Weiser and Ben-Zion Luria, 324–63. Tel-Aviv: Niv.

———. 1979. 'ספר התורה והמצחף בקריאת התורה בציבור בעדת הרבנים ובעדת הקראים'. *Beit Mikra* 78: 321–34.

---

[33] It was also accepted by the Byzantine Karaite scholar Judah Hadassi (12th century); cf. Bacher (1895, 113).

Bacher, Wilhelm. 1895. 'Jehuda Hadassi's Hermeneutik Und Grammatik'. *Monatsschrift Für Geschichte Und Wissenschaft Des Judentums* 40: 109–26.

———. 1974. *Die Anfänge Der Hebräischen Grammatik ; and Die Hebräische Sprachwissenschaft Vom 10. Bis Zum 16. Jahrhundert.* Amsterdam Studies in the Theory and History of Linguistic Science, v. 4. Amsterdam: J. Benjamins.

Beck, Edmund. 1946. 'Arabiyya, Sunna Und ʿĀmma in Der Koranlesung Des Zweiten Jahrhunderts'. *Orientalia* 15: 180–224.

Ben-Shammai, Haggai. 1984. 'The Attitude of Some Early Karaites towards Islam'. In *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, edited by Isadore Twersky, 2:3–40. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Ben-Zvi, Izhak. 1960. 'The Codex of Ben Asher'. *Textus* 1: 1–16.

Bernand, Marie. 1969. 'L'iğmāʿ Chez ʿAbd Al-Ğabbār et L'objection D'an-Naẓẓām'. *Studia Islamica* 30: 27–38.

———. 1972. 'Nouvelles Remarques Sur L'iğmāʿ Chez Le Qāḍī ʿAbd Al-Ğabbār'. *Arabica* 19: 78–85.

Chiesa, Bruno. 1979. *The Emergence of Hebrew Biblical Pointing: The Indirect Sources*. Judentum Und Umwelt 1. Frankfurt: Lang.

Cohen, Menahem. 1982. 'Has the Cairo Codex of the Prophets Indeed Been Written by Moshe B. Asher?' *Alei Sefer* 10: 5–12 (in Hebrew).

Díez Macho, Alejandro. 1971. *Manuscritos hebreos y arameos de la Biblia: Contribución al estudio de las diversas tradiciones del tecto del Antiguo Testamento*. Rome: Institutum patristicum Augustinianum.

Dotan, Aron. 1997. *Dawn of Hebrew Linguistics: The Book of Elegance of the Language of the Hebrews*. Jerusalem: ha-Iggud ha-ʿOlami le-Madaʿe ha-Yahadut.

Dotan, Aron, 1928-. 1977. *Ben Asher's Creed: A Study of the History of the Controversy*. Vol. 3. Masoretic Studies ; Missoula, Mont.: Published by Scholars Press for the Society of Biblical Literature and the International Organization for Masoretic Studies,.

Eldar, Ilan. 1980. 'On Ben-Asher and Ben-Naftali'. *Lěšonénu* 45: 311–313 (in Hebrew).

———. 1994. *The Study of the Art of Correct Reading as Reflected in the Medieval Treatise Hidāyat Al-Qāri*. Jerusalem: Academy of the Hebrew Language (in Hebrew).

Erder, Yoram. 1994. 'Early Karaite Conceptions about Commandments Given before the Revelation of the Torah'. *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 60: 101–40.

Glatzer, Mordechai. 1989. 'The Aleppo Codex — Codicological and Paleographical Aspects'. *Sefonot* 4: 167–276 (in Hebrew).

Goldberg, Arnold. 1990. 'The Rabbinic View of Scripture'. In *A Tribute to Geza Vermes. Essays on Jewish and Christian Literature and History*, edited by Philip R. Davies and Richard T. White, 153–66. Sheffield: JSOT Press.

Goshen-Gottstein, Moshe. 1960. 'The Authenticity of the Aleppo Codex'. *Textus* 1: 17–58.

———. 1962. 'Biblical Manuscripts in the United States'. *Textus* 2: 28–59.

Gottheil, Richard. 1905. 'Some Hebrew Manuscripts in Cairo'. *Jewish Quarterly Review* 17: 609–55.

Graetz, Heinrich. 1881. 'Die Anfänge Der Vocalzeichen Im Hebräischen'. *Monatsschrift Für Geschichte Und Wissenschaft Des Judentums* 30: 348–67.

Hadassi, Judan ben Elijah ha-Abel. 1836. *Sefer 'Eshkol Ha-Kofer*. Eupatoriy: Mordecai Tirisken.

Harviainen, Tapani. 1991. 'Abraham Firkovitsh, Karaites in Hīt, and the Provenance of Karaite Transcriptions of Biblical Hebrew Texts in Arabic Script'. *Folia Orientalia* 28: 179–91.

———. 1993a. 'Karaite Arabic Transcriptions of Hebrew in the Saltykov-Shchedrin Public Library in St. Petersburg.' In *Estudios Masorericos. En Memoria de Harry M. Orlinsky.*, edited by Emilia Fernandez Tejero and María Teresa Ortega Monasterio, 63–72. Xtos Y Estudios «Cardenal Cisneros» de La Biblia Políglota Matritense (TECC 55). Madrid: Instituto de Filología del CSIC.

———. 1993b. 'Karaite Bible Transcription with Indiscriminate Use of Tiberian Pataḥ and Segol Vowel Signs'. In *Semitica. Serta Philologica Constantino Tsereteli Dicata*, edited by Riccardo Contini, Fabrizio Pennacchietti, and Mauro Tosco, 83–97. Pubblicazioni Del Gruppo Di Ricerca «Lessicografia Semitica E Lessico Ebraico» Finanziato Dal C.N.R. 6. Torino: Silvio Zamorani Editore.

———. 1994. 'A Karaite Bible Transcription with Indiscriminate Counterparts of Tiberian Qameṣ and Ḥolam (Ms. Firkovitsh II, Arab.-evr.1)'. In *Proceedings of the Eleventh Congress of the International Organization for Masoretic Studies (IOMS), Jerusalem June 21-22, 1993*, edited by Aron Dotan, 33–40. Jerusalem: The World Union of Jewish Studies.

———. 1995. 'A Karaite Letter-for-Letter Transliteration of Biblical Hebrew - MS Firkovitsh II, Arab.-Evr. 355'. *Textus* 18: 196–177.

———. 1996a. 'MS Arab.-Evr. 2 of the Second Firkovitsh Collection, A Karaite Bible Transcription in Arabic Script'. In *Studies in Hebrew and Jewish Languages Presented to Shelomo Morag*, edited by Moshe Bar-Asher, *41-*59. Jerusalem: Bialik Institute.

———. 1996b. 'The Cairo Genizot and Other Sources of the Firkovich Collection in St. Petersburg'. In *Proceedings of the Twelfth International Congress of the*

International Organization for Masoretic Studies, edited by E. John Revell, 25–36. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press.

———. 1998. 'Abraham Firkovich and the Karaite Community in Jerusalem in 1864'. *Manuscripta Orientalia* 4 (2): 66–70.

Hoerning, Reinhart. 1889. *British Museum Karaite MSS. Descriptions and Collation of Six Karaite Manuscripts of Portions of the Hebrew Bible in Arabic Characters; with a Complete Reproduction ... of One, Exodus I. 1 - VIII. 5, in ... Facsimiles*. London.

Ibn Mujāhid, ʾAḥmad ibn Mūsā. 1972. *Kitāb Al-Sabʿa Fī Al-Qirāʾāt*. Edited by Shawqi Ḍayf. Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif.

Kahle, Paul. 1927. *Masoreten Des Westens*. 2 vols. Texte Und Untersuchungen Zur Vormasoretischen Grammatik Des Hebräischen. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer.

———. 1947. *The Cairo Geniza*. Schweich Lectures of the British Academy. London: Cumberlege [for the British Academy],.

Khan, Geoffrey. 1987. 'Vowel Length and Syllable Structure in the Tiberian Tradition of Biblical Hebrew'. *Journal of Semitic Studies* 32 (1): 23–82.

———. 1990. *Karaite Bible Manuscripts from the Cairo Genizah*. Cambridge University Library Genizah Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

———. 1993. 'The Orthography of Karaite Hebrew Bible Manuscripts in Arabic Transcription'. *Journal of Semitic Studies* 38 (1): 49–70.

———. 1998. 'The Book of Hebrew Grammar by the Karaite Joseph Ben Noaḥ'. *Journal of Semitic Studies* 43 (2): 265–86.

———. 2000. *The Early Karaite Tradition of Hebrew Grammatical Thought : Including a Critical Edition, Translation and Analysis of the Diqduq of ʾAbū Yaʿqūb Yūsuf Ibn Nūḥ on the Hagiographa*. Studies in Semitic Languages and Linguistics. Leiden: Brill.

———. 2003. 'The Contribution of the Karaites to the Study of the Hebrew Language'. In *A Guide to Karaite Studies: The History and Literary Sources of Medieval and Modern Karaite Judaism*, edited by Meira Polliack, 291–318. Handbuch Der Orientalistik 73. Boston: Brill.

———. 2013. *A Short Introduction to the Tiberian Masoretic Bible and Its Reading Tradition*. 2nd ed. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias.

———. 2014a. 'The Medieval Karaite Tradition of Hebrew Grammar'. In *A Universal Art. Hebrew Grammar Across Disciplines and Faiths*, edited by Vidro, Nadia, Irene E. Zwiep, and Judith Olszowy-Schlanger, 15–33. Leiden: Brill.

———. 2014b. 'The Relationship of Hidayat Al-Qari' to the Karaite Grammatical Tradition'. In *Studies in Hebrew and Related Fields Presented to Ilan Eldar*, edited by Moshe Bar-Asher and Irit Meir, 277–283 (in Hebrew). Jerusalem: Karmel.

Khan, Geoffrey, María Ángeles Gallego, and Judith Olszowy-Schlanger. 2003. *The Karaite Tradition of Hebrew Grammatical Thought in Its Classical Form: A Critical Edition and English Translation of Al-Kitāb Al-Kāfī Fī Al-Luġa Al-ʿIbrāniyya by ʾAbū Al-Faraj Hārūn Ibn Al-Faraj*. Studies in Semitic Languages and Linguistics 37. Leiden: Brill.

Klar, Benjamin. 1954. *מחקרים ועיונים בלשון השירה ובפסרות*. Edited by Abraham Meir Habermann. Tel-Aviv: Maḥbarot le-Sifrut.

Lipschütz, Lazar. 1964. 'Kitāb Al-Khilaf the Book of the Ḥillufim: Mishael Ben Uzziel's Treatise on the Differences between Ben Asher and Ben Napthali'. *Textus* 4: 2–29.

———. 1965. *Kitāb Al-Khilaf: Mishael Ben Uzziel's Treatise on the Differences between Ben Asher and Ben Naphtali*. Kitvey Mifʿal Ha-Miqra Šel ʾUniversiṭah Ha-ʿIvrit. Jerusalem: Magnes.

Mann, Jacob. 1970. *The Jews in Egypt and in Palestine under the Fātimid Caliphs*. Vol. 2. New York: Ktav.

Martín Contreras, Elvira. 1999. 'Terminología masorética en la exégesis de Génesis rabba (secciones "Bere"sit' y Noah')'. *Sefarad* 59 (2): 343–52.

———. 2002. 'Noticias masoréticas en el midrás " Lamentaciones Rabbâ "'. *Sefarad* 62 (1): 125–41.

———. 2003. 'Noticias masoréticas en los midrasim halákicos más antiguos y su comparación con los midrassim exegéticos'. *Sefarad* 63 (1): 119–39.

Naeh, Shlomo. 1992. 'Did the Tannaim Interpret the Script of the Torah Differently from the Authorized Reading?' *Tarbiz* 61: 401–448 (in Hebrew).

———. 1993. 'En Em Lammasoret – Second Time'. *Tarbiz* 62: 455–462 (in Hebrew).

Nasser, Shady. 2015. 'Revisiting Ibn Mujāhid's Position on the Seven Canonical Readings: Ibn ʿĀmir's Problematic Reading of Kun Fa-Yakūna'. *Journal of Qurʾanic Studies* 17 (1): 85–113.

Nöldeke, Theodor, Gotthelf Bergsträsser, and Otto Pretzl. 1938. *Geschichte Des Qorāns*. 2, part 3 ed. Leipzig: Dieterichsche Verlagsbuchhandlung.

Ofer, Yosef. 1989. 'M.D. Cassuto's Notes on the Aleppo Codex'. *Sefunot* 68: 277–344.

Penkower, Jordan. 1981. 'Maimonides and the Aleppo Codex'. *Textus* 9: 39–128.

———. 1989. 'A Tenth-Century Pentateuchal MS from Jerusalem (MS C3), Corrected by Mishael Ben Uzziel'. *Tarbiz* 58: 49–74 (in Hebrew).

Pinsker, Simḥah. 1860. *Lickute Kadmoniot. Zur Geschichte Des Karaismus Und Der Karaïschen Literatur*. Wien.

Poznanski, Samuel. 1913. 'ראשית התישבות הקראימי בירושלים'. Edited by Abraham Moses Luncz. *Jerusalem* 10: 83–116.

Qirqisānī, Yaʿqūb ibn Isḥāq. 1939. *Kitab Al-Anwār W-Al-Marāqib*. Edited by Leon Nemoy. New York: The Alexander Kohut Memorial Foundation.

Schacht, Joseph. 1950. *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Steiner, Richard. 1996. 'Ketiv-Ḳerē or Polyphony: The שׂ-שׁ Distinction according to the Masoretes, the Rabbis, Jerome, Qirqisānī, and Hai Gaon'. In *Studies in Hebrew and Jewish Languages Presented to Shelomo Morag*, edited by Moshe Bar-Asher, *151-*179. Jerusalem: Bialik Institute.

Vidro, Nadezda. 2009. 'Verbal Morphology in the Karaite Treatise on Hebrew Grammar Kitāb Al-ʿUqūd Fī Taṣārīf Al-Luġa Al-ʿIbrāniyya'. Cambridge: University of Cambridge.

Vidro, Nadia. 2011. *Verbal Morphology in the Karaite Treatise on Hebrew Grammar: Kitāb Al-ʿUqūd Fī Taṣārīf Al-Luġa Al-ʿIbrāniyya*. Études Sur Le Judaïsme Médiéval 51. Leiden: Brill.

Yeivin, Israel. 1962. 'The Vocalization of Qere-Kethiv in A'. *Textus* 2: 146–49.

———. 1980. *Introduction to the Tiberian Masorah*. Masoretic Studies. Missoula: Scholars Press.

Zer, Rafael Isaac. 2003. 'Was the Masorete of the Aleppo Codex of Rabbinite or Karaite Origin?' *Sefunot* 8: 573–87.

Zucker, Moshe. 1958. 'Against Whom Did Seʾadya Gaʾon Write the Polemical Poem "Essa Meshali"?' 27: 61–82 (in Hebrew).