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 “Karaite” 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.¹

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.

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. 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. 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?”

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


\[4\] 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.
BOOK”; the latter, understanding that being considered Jewish in Christian countries came with a number of disadvantages, starting with special taxes and twenty-five year conscriptions and ending with mass murder, denied their connection to the Jewish people all together.5

Another important contribution to Karaite self-understanding is F. Astren’s dissertation.6 Looking at the major Karaite historiographers from the tenth to the eighteenth centuries, Astren has demonstrated that Karaite historical writings both responded to the needs of the day and also reflected the larger historiographical context in which they were written. Astren shows how the standard present-day Karaite explanation of the Karaite-Rabbanite split, namely that it was an outgrowth of the persecution of the sages by Alexander Jannaeus described in b. Qid. 66a, was first introduced into Karaite historiography by Elijah Bashyazi (d. 1490), the last great Karaite decisor. This theory underwent a number of developments until it found one of its fullest expressions in the works of Simhah Isaac Lutzki (d. 1766). Lutzki describes in detail a second temple group called the saddiqim (“the righteous ones”), who preserved the true religion of the Jewish people and who later developed into the Karaites. Any connection between the latter-day Karaites and the second temple Sadducees, a connection assumed both by Rabbanites and by some early Karaites, is denied by these later Karaite historiographers.7 Through the eighteenth century, the absolute Jewishness of the Karaites is assumed by Karaite authors as an obvious fact.8

It would appear that some of Astren’s conclusions contradict those of his teacher Brinner. The seventeenth and eighteenth century historiographers whom Astren cites, and who were responsible for the theory of the second temple saddiqim, were “Karaites of Christendom,”

7 The Rabbanite account of Anan’s break with Rabbinic Judaism (n. 3, above) records that he gathered around him remnants of the second temple sectarians. Furthermore, in medieval Rabbanite writings, Karaites are often referred to as Sadducees.
8 Lutzki’s assumption of the Jewish status of the Karaites can be seen as well in his endorsement and advocacy of Kabbalah as authentic Jewish (and, thereby, Karaite) knowledge; see my “Simhah Isaac Lutzki, an Eighteenth-Century Karaite Kabbalist,” Bracha Sack Jubilee Volume (Hebrew) (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, forthcoming).
originating in Lithuania and Poland. Even though some of them were active in Ottoman Crimea, the context of their work was the Christian world and the Christian interest in Karaism and Karaite origins. We see, then, that the distinction between “Karaites of Christendom,” who denied their Jewishness, and “Karaites of Islam,” who affirmed it, is actually a late one, apparently a consequence of the Karaite discovery in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Czarist Russia that they no longer wanted to be considered part of the Jewish community. Until then, it was clear to all Karaites that they were a part of the Jewish people and that their claim to be the real Judaism was dependent upon proving their antiquity. Furthermore, as P. Miller has shown, the early nineteenth-century leaders of the Karaite movement to be exempted from Jewish disabilities were from Crimea, which one generation earlier had been part of the Muslim Ottoman empire.9

Up until the nineteenth century, then, all Karaites saw themselves as Jews who preserved the true Sinaitic religion, a claim maintained to this day by the so-called Karaites of Islam. Since, however, there were no identifiable Karaite literary remains before the eighth century and Anan’s Book of Precepts,10 Karaites had to take on faith the assumption of a second temple group of Jewish loyalists known as ʿsad-diqim who were the Jewish precursors of the Karaites. In the past, non-Karaite historians were generally skeptical of the Karaite claim that they were the descendants of this otherwise unknown sect.11 Observing the changes in the Karaite self-understanding through the centuries, they considered the theory of the ʿsad-diqim a late Karaite invention, an invention which served mainly to deny a relationship between the Karaites and the better documented Sadducees (since the Karaites disagreed with the Sadducean denial of an afterlife), while still maintaining a Karaite claim of antiquity.

---

9 P.E. Miller, Karaite Separatism in Nineteenth-Century Russia: Joseph Solomon Lutski’s Epistle of Israel’s Deliverance (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1993).
10 Although Anan has generally been considered by both Rabbanites and Karaites as the pater ecclesiae, it is now clear that there were significant differences between Ananism and Karaism; see, e.g., H. Ben-Shamai, “Between Ananites and Karaites: Observations on Early Medieval Jewish Sectarianism,” Studies in Muslim-Jewish Relations 1 (1993) 19–29. Only in the tenth century did Karaites adopt Anan as one of their own; see M. Gil, “Karaite Antiquities” (Hebrew), A Century of Geniza Research (ed. M.A. Friedman; Te’udah 15; Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1999) 71–107.
11 See S. Posnanski’s introduction to M. Sultanski’s Zekher ʿSad-diqim (Warsaw: Ha-Ṣefiráh, 1920) 5–69.
The situation changed, however, 100 years ago with the discovery of the Cairo Genizah and the publication by S. Schechter of the so-called Zadokite Fragments, also known as the Damascus Document or Covenant. Scholars disagreed about the provenance of the treatise, and even though L. Ginzberg was obviously correct at the time in ascribing it to "an unknown Jewish sect," there were certain aspects of the document that recalled Karaite practices. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls fifty years ago has furthermore complicated the issue of Karaite origins. No one can doubt that there are many similarities between the Scrolls, including the Damascus Covenant, and medieval Karaite writings. Although the Dead Sea sectarians were not apparently known as Saddiqim, Schechter had referred to the authors of the Damascus Covenant as Zadokites, based on the many references in the fragments to the Sons of Zadok. Currently, while not admitting that the eighteenth-century Karaite historiographers had any actual knowledge of the group that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls, some historians have sought to reassess any possible relationship between the second temple sectarians of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the medieval Karaites.

There are two basic possibilities for explaining the similarity between the Scrolls and medieval Karaite writings. One view maintains that the Karaites are the direct biological or spiritual descendants of the Dead Sea sect, whose writings were preserved (underground as it were) from the first until the eighth or ninth centuries until the flowering of what is known today as Karaism. Karaism is not, therefore, a medieval aberration but rather an ongoing expression of an alternate Judaism that has existed at least from second temple times. The other possibility is that some Scrolls were discovered in the ninth century, as is recorded by the Catholicus Timothy, and their contents influenced the newly formed sectarian movement. If this is the case, then any connection between the Dead Sea Covenanters and the Karaites is merely accidental, and the Karaite movement is, indeed, solely

---

13 F. Astren, "The Dead Sea Scrolls and Medieval Jewish Studies: Methods and Problems," DSD 8 (2001) 105-23, mentions a third possibility, namely that the ideas of the Dead Sea sect survived (and were transmitted), even though the sectarians did not. He rejects this possibility as extremely unlikely.
a medieval phenomenon.\textsuperscript{15} No consensus as to which explanation of the similarities between the Scrolls and Karaim has yet to develop and, in the absence of further documentation, it is unlikely to do so. Nonetheless, whatever opinion one has about the connection between the Scrolls and the Karaites, it now appears clear that the central Karaites assertion, namely that there existed in second temple times a group that disagreed with the Sadducees in matters of theology and with the Pharisees in matters of halakhah, is true.\textsuperscript{16}

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the connections between those Scrolls and Karaim, has not gone unnoticed by contemporary Karaites. After years of assuming the existence of undocumented second temple ancestors, the Karaites could now point to documentation for this group, demonstrating, presumably, not only the untested Jewish status of the Karaites, but also their antiquity. In the absence of convincing proof that the relationship between the Scrolls and Karaim is accidental, what once appeared to be an historiographical invention by Elijah Bashyazi, developed by successors such as Simḥah Isaac Lutzki, could now be argued with a measure of historical respectability.

The enthusiastic adoption of the Dead Sea Scrolls as evidence of Karaites antiquity is characteristic specifically for that group of sectarians called by Brinner “Karaites of Islam,” who had traditionally seen themselves as part and parcel of the Jewish people. It would, however, be more correct today to refer to this segment of Karaim as the “Karaites of Israel,” since that is whither most Karaites of Islam have removed themselves in the light of the Israel-Arab conflict, leaving behind

\textsuperscript{15} M. Pollack has recently cast doubt on some of the evidence of the relationship between the Scrolls and Karaita literature, especially Karaita biblical exegesis; see “On the Question of the Pesher’s Influence on Karaita Exegesis” (Hebrew), \textit{Fifty Years of Dead Sea Scrolls Research} (eds G. Brin and B. Nitzan; Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 2001) 275–94.

only a handful of Karaites in Muslim countries. And it is in the State of Israel that the need for Karaitе identification as Jews is most acute, as is true for other marginal groups (such as Indian and Ethiopian Jews), which have joined their fate to that of Israel even when their Jewish identity and status has been questioned by the Israeli Rabbinate. Furthermore, since some Karaitе customs are reminiscent of Islam (such as the removal of shoes before prayer, the use of genuflection in prayer, and the absence of chairs in the synagogue), Karaites are sensitive to the accusation that they are merely an Islamicized form of Judaism. Given the contemporary political and military conflicts between Jews and Muslims, Israeli Karaites are even more anxious to deny any Islamic connection with their religion, a connection implied as well in the Rabbanite account of Anan’s revolt. As we shall see, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls has been a boon for the self-perception of present-day Karaites in the State of Israel. Eastern European Karaites who have denied any connection to Judaism, and who have more or less ceased to exist, have obviously been less intrigued by this discovery.

Before turning to expositions of Karaitе history by present-day Karaites, it might be useful to look at popular evidence of Israeli Karaitе interest in the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Karaitе community in Israel, officially named Universal Karaitе Judaism, used to publish a bulletin, entitled Biṭṭa'on Bnei Miqra’, which appeared approximately four times a year. This bulletin included news about the community; instructions for observing the holidays; announcements of births, bar and bat mitzvahs (even though classical Karaitism has no concept of bar mitzvah, let alone bat mitzvah), weddings, and deaths; recipes;
crossword puzzles; references to Karaism in the press, along with the Karaite reaction to these references which, from their point of view, are usually inaccurate; and advertisements. There were also often feature articles, such as lengthy discussions of sightings of the new moon and the calculation of the calendar. An examination of thirty-four issues of this bulletin from the early 1990s indicates that the theme of the connection between the Dead Sea Scrolls and Karaism was of constant interest to the publishers of this bulletin.

The first reference to the Scrolls appears in an article entitled, “We and the Hidden Scrolls.”20 It is written by the Karaite spokesman, and co-editor of the Bi’tta’on, Dvir Yosef, with the help of then Chief Karaite Rabbi Ḥayyim Levi (since deposed in a calendrical dispute but still active in the community). The article starts out by saying that it is a reprint of an article which had appeared in a Karaite publication from 1964, but then new material is added. The context of the discussion seems to be the debate going on in 1990 about the publication of the Scrolls, fed by the suspicion that the scholarly group that had been responsible for publication of the Scrolls was hiding valuable information for theological reasons. The journal Ba-Mahaneh is cited as asking: “Are there details in the unpublished Scrolls which could be embarrassing for the Rabbinic establishment in Israel or for the Vatican?”21 The secrets that the scholars were presumably trying to hide are alluded to at the end of the article. “Around 400 of the 800 Scrolls are still not published and more is hidden than is known. We must remember that Rabbenu Benjamin Nahawandi, the celebrated judge-exegete-philosopher-thinker had in his hands a scroll of the book of Habakkuk (“Pesher Davar”). There is no doubt that it was handed down to him from his ancestors, and not as they try to explain.” In other words, the Scrolls obviously hold evidence of the antiquity of the Karaites, evidence that is being repressed.

The article ends with the following: “In conclusion, all the research which has been done till this day concerning this subject proves beyond a doubt with demonstrative proof that our community is ancient and its path is the correct path in scriptural exegesis (accord-

---

20 "эр חסידי בני מערה," Bi’tta’on Bnei Miqra’ 7 (June 1990) 2, 13.
21 Ba-Mahaneh is a weekly magazine devoted to military affairs, but usually it has articles of general interest as well. The article to which reference is made appeared in Ba-Mahaneh 34 (9 May 1990) 20–23. I wish to thank Mr Dvir Yosef for providing me with this article.
ing to the correct, textual plain meaning) and in observation of the commandments of the Torah. Until now they have tried to hide the importance of these Scrolls for the People of Israel and for Karaism in general, but the truth will be revealed and the veracity of our sages, peace be upon them, will be proven even more.”

Number 8 (Sept. 1990), has the following article entitled: “An Interesting Meeting with Scholars from the United States.”22 The article describes the visit at the Karaite center in Ashdod of Professor Rabbi (sic!) Schiffman and his wife (who, in fact, was not there that day) and Dr Philip Miller of Hebrew University College (sic!) in New York.23 Most of the article summarizes Miller’s research into Eastern European Karaism, but the connection between Schiffman and the Scrolls is mentioned a few times, and Prof. Schiffman is described as explaining to Chief Rabbi Ḥayyim Levi about the Scrolls. In addition, we are told that “Dr. Philip (sic!) said that if his wife were with them, certainly she would want to be a Karaite, and the same was the case with Mrs. Schiffman who was surprised by the level of logic in our tradition and our religion.”24

Number 13 (Aug. 1991) contains an article entitled “Karaism and the Dead Sea Scrolls.”25 Compiled by Dvir Yosef, this report is a collection of citations from articles by Yoram Erder, an Israeli scholar who has published widely on the subject of Karaite origins and the relationship between second temple apocryphal writings and early Karaite literature. Erder claims that even if Karaites became familiar with Scrolls in Eretz Yisrael as a result of the discovery mentioned by Timothy (thus vitiating the Karaite claim to antiquity), earlier Karaites had already encountered such literature in Babylonia and Persia, implying, thereby, that there were continuous traditions linking second temple sectarian and the medieval founders of Karaism. Erder’s work is thus of great interest to the Karaites, since it appears to confirm their claim to direct second temple antecedents.

Numbers 1726 and 1827 (June and Sept. 1992) of the Bitta’on include

22 P. 6 (picture on p. 7).
23 Prof. Lawrence Schiffman of New York University is not a rabbi; Dr Miller is the librarian of the Klau Library of Hebrew Union College in New York City.
24 An accompanying picture shows Schiffman and Miller, along with a woman who is identified as Mrs. Schiffman, but is not (Dr Miller informs me that the woman is Sylvia Friedman, a day-school librarian from North Miami Beach). Furthermore, Prof. Schiffman has confirmed to me that, indeed, his wife had not been there that day.
26 P. 7 (picture on p. 6).
27 Pp. 10–11.
an account of a lecture on the Dead Sea Scrolls and Karaism by attorney Mordechai Levi. The lecture apparently was a summary of what the Dead Sea Scrolls are and a list of similarities between the Scrolls and Karaism. The end of the article, however, mentions the discovery of the Damascus Covenant in the Cairo Genizah and calls for any reader who has information about the Karaites to send this information to the Karaites.

As noted above, the *Bitta’on* often refers to media reports about Karaism and Karaites. One issue, Number 27 (May 1994),28 discusses how a BBC television crew came to Israel to make a program about the Dead Sea Scrolls and ended up filming Israeli Karaites. After the broadcast of the show, the bulletin29 repeats much of what had been written in earlier issues, in addition to quoting Scrolls scholars who had appeared on the BBC program.

This survey of the Karaites’ bulletin demonstrates that the Israeli Karaites are quite anxious that the Israeli Karaites community see itself as descendants of the Dead Sea sectarians as part of their larger agenda of arguing for the intrinsic Jewishness of the Karaites. Obviously, the greater the links that can be established between the second temple period and the medieval Karaites, the greater the claim to Karaites antiquity.30

We now turn to present-day Karaites scholarship. Ever since the establishment of a Karaites community in Israel in the 1950s, the Karaites community has published books for the use of its members. Most of these books have been reprints of classical Karaites' books—prayerbooks, biblical commentaries, and law codices. There has been very little independent scholarship. Two authors, however, have tried to create new literature for the Karaites, a literature that would meet the needs of Israeli Karaites. Those two authors are the previously mentioned former Chief Rabbi Ḥayyim Levy and Rabbi Joseph

28 P. 14.
29 *Bitta’on Bnei Miqra’* 30 (March, 1995—the cover has the date 1994, but the Hebrew date indicates that it should read 1995) 15–17.
30 It should be noted that in personal conversations with Israeli Karaites rabbis I have heard the claim that basically all non-Pharisaic, non-Sadducean expressions of second temple Judaism, such as the writings of Philo, should be considered proto-Karaism. On the relationship between Philo and Karaites, see B. Revel, *The Karaites Halakhah and Its Relation to Sadducean, Samaritan, and Philonite Halakhah* (Philadelphia: Dropsie College Ph.D. Dissertation, 1913); reprinted in Birnbaum, *Studies*, 1–88.
Al-Gamil. The works of both men demonstrate an interest in the Dead Sea Scrolls, even if neither one seems to have studied the actual Scrolls themselves.

In 1982, Rabbi Levy published a mimeographed booklet under the title "Qīṣṣur ha-ʾAderet," intending it to be a guide to Karaite practice, "presented as pedagogical material in easy and understandable language according to the book of commandments ʾAderet ʾEliyyahu of the final decisor our Rabbi Elijah ben Moses Bashyazi, the memory of the righteous for a blessing, and other books of halakhah." Rabbi Levy establishes at the beginning of this booklet that "the generally accepted opinion among almost all our sages, peace be upon them, is that the name of the fathers of the Karaites from the Second Temple period was ʾsaddiqim, and this was because our faith is based on honesty and righteousness (ʾḥād)!" The attempt to identify the Karaites with the Sadducees is rejected since the Sadducees denied reward and punishment, eternity of the soul, and resurrection. After a long exposition of Karaite law, the author turns to the history of the split between true Judaism and rabbinic Judaism, an exposition based on the historiography of Simḥah Isaac Lutzki. The ṣaddiqim are again mentioned with a footnote denying any connection to the Sadducees. The footnote continues: "It should be noted that in the past decades a number of scholars, basing themselves on, among other things, the Damascus Covenant which was discovered in the Cairo Geniza in the synagogue of our community in Old Egypt, and on the hidden scrolls of the Judean desert sect—some of these scrolls were in the hands of Rabbeinu Benjamin Nahawendi known as 'Pesher Davar'—and on the basis of the Falasha Book of Jubilees, have expressed the opinion that the identification of the ṣaddoqim of the Talmud... and the ṣaddoqim mentioned by Josephus (as suggested by the scholar A. Geiger and as been accepted by the historians Klausner, Dubnov, and others) is a false identification." Instead, suggests Levy on the basis of works by B.-Z. Katz and S.R. Driver, the ṣaddoqim and the Sicarit of the Mishnah and the Talmud were actually the Zealots of Josephus' fourth philosophy, "who were stricter in their observance of the commandments than the Pharisees." As further indication of the relation between the Scrolls and the Karaites, Levy mentioned the works of

---

31 In the past three years, Al-Gamil has begun publishing many volumes of Karaite compositions which had previously been available only in manuscript.
32 H. Levy, "Qīṣṣur ha-ʾAderet" (Ramleh [no publisher listed], 1982) 4.
Wieder, Paul, Heller, Nemoy, and Schiffman which are said to indicate "a direct relationship between the Karaitism and the sect of the Judean desert."33

The only contemporary Karaite attempt at a comprehensive history of the Karaites is J. al-Gamil’s Toledot ha-Yahadut ha-Qara’it. Beginning with the Patriarchs and going through the revelation at Mt Sinai, the conquest of the Land of Israel, the building and destruction of the two Temples, and the attempts at Jewish reconstruction after the destruction of the Second Temple, al-Gamil’s history sounds like any other pious Jewish retelling of the story of the Jewish people. For instance, the fall of Masada and the stirring speech by Eliezer ben Yair are quoted as signs of Jewish bravery and heroism. The only difference, of course, is the distinction between the Saddiqim and the Pharisees, with the latter playing the role of the villains in the story. What is interesting is that al-Gamil puts the split between the two groups as before the persecution of Alexander Jannaeus, a persecution said to be inspired by Queen Shlomzion at the behest of her brother Shim’on ben Sheṭaḥ.

Given the evidence of Biṭṭa’on Bnei Miqra’ and Levy’s reference to the Dead Sea Scrolls, we would expect to find a discourse by al-Gamil on the relationship between the Saddiqim and the Dead Sea sectarians. Surprisingly, the only mention of the latter is a full page illustration of a page from one of the Scrolls with no explanation, just the caption: "A page from the Scrolls of the Judean desert." My assumption is that the author of this rather poorly edited book intended to refer to the Scrolls, which is why he provided a picture of one of them. Yet, somehow between his intention and publication, citation of the Scrolls fell out, leaving behind only an illustration.34

Our survey of literature produced by the contemporary “Karaites of Israel” indicates that the relationship between the second temple Dead Sea Scrolls and Karaitism is a recurring theme in the Karaite self-perception and in Karaite attempts to assert their genuine Jewishness. This is understandably not the case with the contemporary “Karaites of Christendom,” who, as noted, generally have no desire to be considered as Jews. Since these Karaites have virtually disappeared, it

33 Ibid., 114–15, especially n. 1. This material was reprinted in a book entitled Sefer Toledot Hayyim (Ashdod [no publisher listed], 1994) 16–17; 23–24, n. 9.
34 See J. al-Gamil, Toledot Ha-Yahadut Ha-Qara’it (Ramleh: National Council of Karaite Jews in Israel, 1979). The illustration from the Dead Sea Scrolls is on p. 49.
might be presumptuous to talk about their self-perception and historiography, but there are two books, written by recently deceased European Karaite scholars, which indicate a different approach to the Dead Sea Scrolls than that of Israeli Karaites.

It is easy to evaluate the place of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the book *Karaïms in Poland* by A. Zajaczkowski, a Polish Karaite scholar. They are simply ignored. Brinner theorizes that the fact that the book was published in 1961 meant that it might have been too early for references to the Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in 1947. Indeed, N. Wieder’s *The Judean Scrolls and Karaism* appeared only in 1962. But even before then there was scholarly recognition of the significance of the Scrolls for Karaism, and some scholars at this time had assumed that the Scrolls were actually written by medieval Karaites. Since one would never know from Zajaczkowski’s book that there was any relation between Karaism and Judaism, it is not surprising that he ignores the Scrolls even if he knew about them. That would hardly fit into his view of Karaism as a medieval development.

The case of S. Szyszman is different. On the one hand, he has no desire to explain Karaite origins in terms of Judaism. On the other hand, his antagonism to Jews and to the State of Israel is so strong, that he leaves no stone unturned in his desire to denigrate Judaism. Thus, Szyszman devotes much of his book to extolling the spirit of Karaism as compared to Rabbinic Judaism. To do so, he rewrites history so that Karaism turns out to be a medieval expression of a much older religious outlook, one that, from his point of view, has no connection to what we know as Judaism.

Szyszman starts out by saying that it is unreasonable that a religion such as Karaism should spring forward solely from the mind of Anan. In Szyszman’s words, “Comment une religion aurait-elle pu être crée *ex nihilo* sans aucune foi, sans fondement idéologique, sans tradition et sans support dans la société?” The answer to this question is that

---

35 It was probably very difficult for Polish scholars in the 1950s to keep up with developments in the scholarly world since financial and political restraints interfered with the acquisition of western literature. Furthermore, Zajaczkowski’s English volume is based on works that he had previously published in Polish before the discovery of the Scrolls; see G. Ahiezer and D. Shapiro, “Karaites in Lithuania and in Volhynia-Galicia until the Eighteenth Century” (Hebrew), *Pe'amim* 89 (Autumn 2001) 22, n. 8.


biblical monotheism had a number of different forms, including that form which Szyszman calls Essenism, namely the religion of the Dead Sea Scrolls. That form is far removed from the particularistic, narrow form of biblical religion which turned into Rabbinic Judaism. To demonstrate his thesis, Szyszman relies on modern scholarship, such as the book by Wieder, which points out the parallels between the Scrolls and Karaism. As noted, however, in his discussion of Essenism, Szyszman is careful not to identify the Dead Sea sectarians as Jews. Karaism is ancient; the Karaites, however, are not.38

Our survey of the Karaite use of the Dead Sea Scrolls has shown that the fate of Karaite-written historiography matches the fate of the Karaites themselves. As the community dwindles, the number of Karaite authors has also diminished. Those Karaites who are left to maintain the old sectarian traditions continue, however, to argue for the ultimate justice of their cause. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls just fifty years ago have given contemporary Karaites one more tool for fighting their ancient battle. Whether further discoveries will cause additional refinements to the Karaite self-perception remains to be seen.

---

38 Karaïsme, 34–48. Szyszman also adduces Philo of Alexandria as additional proof of the antiquity of Karaite ideas; see ibid., index, s.v. Philon d’Alexandrie, where Philo is called a “philosophe helléniste.”