

Diversity and Rabbinization

Jewish Texts and Societies
Between 400 and 1,000 CE

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Gavin McDowell, Ron Naiweld and Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra (eds), *Diversity and Rabbinization Jewish Texts and Societies between 400 and 1000 CE*. Cambridge Semitic Languages and Cultures 8. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0219>

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L'École Pratique des Hautes Études has kindly contributed to the publication of this volume.

Semitic Languages and Cultures 8.

ISSN (print): 2632-6906

ISSN (digital): 2632-6914

ISBN Paperback: 9781783749935

ISBN Hardback: 9781783749942

ISBN Digital (PDF): 9781783749959

ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 9781783749966

ISBN Digital ebook (mobi): 9781783749973

ISBN Digital (XML): 9781783749980

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0219

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6. KARAITES AND SADDUCEES

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The rabbinic literature of the Middle Ages ostensibly testifies that the Karaites were the followers of the Sadducees. In fact, this claim has nothing to do with history, but with polemics, as it reveals the hostile attitude of the Rabbanites towards the Karaites. Moses Maimonides can serve as an example for this phenomenon. In his commentary to m. Avot 1.3, Maimonides refers to the Karaites as Sadducees. Avot quotes Antigonus of Sokho, who had said: “Be not like servants who serve their master for the sake of a reward, but rather like those who serve without thought of receiving a reward.” As is well known, Avot de-Rabbi Nathan, commenting on this passage, claims that Zadok and Boethus were disciples of Antigonus. As their disciples did not understand what their teacher had taught them, they came to the conclusion that reward and punishment in the next world did not exist, and they also denied resurrection.¹ Maimonides relied

1 *Aboth de-Rabbi Nathan*, ed. by Solomon Schechter (Vienna: Lippe, 1887), 26 (Hebrew). See also Avot R. Nat. B 10 on the same page. On the differences between the two versions, see *Avoth de-Rabbi Nathan—Solomon Schechter Edition: With References to Parallels in the Two Versions and to the Addenda in the Schechter Edition*, ed. by Menahem Kister (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1997), 32–34, 155–56 (Hebrew); *ibid.*, 269–70, points out that both versions attribute the founding of the sects to the disciples, while medieval sources attribute the founding of the sects to Zadok and Boethus themselves. The notion that the Sadducees did not believe in resurrection was rooted in antiquity, as we find it also in the New Testament (e.g., Mark 12.18–27).

on Avot de-Rabbi Nathan (or another source) in his commentary on the Mishnah:

This Sage had two disciples: the first was Zadok and the second Boethus. When they heard him make this statement, they came out from him and said to one another: "Behold, the rabbi has already explained clearly that there is no reward and punishment there, and there is no hope there at all" [...] They joined forces, abandoned the Torah, and formed two sects. The Sages called them 'Sadducees' and 'Boethusians' [...] and each of them caused his faction to understand that he believed in the text of the Torah, but challenged the tradition (*al-naql*—the Oral Law), saying it was an inauthentic tradition [...] Since then, the accursed sects have sprung up, congregations of heretics who are called in this land of Egypt 'Karaites'. The Sages call them 'Sadducees' and 'Boethusians', and they are the ones who began to question Oral Law and to interpret (*ta'wil*) the Scriptures each as he sees fit, without listening to the Sages at all.²

One should remember that Maimonides' commentary on the Mishnah was written in Arabic. He begins with the tradition concerning the Sadducees' denial of the world to come and adds that those Sadducees, who in his time are called Karaites, deny the Oral Law (*naql*) and interpret the Bible as each one sees fit. As to the word 'interpret'—he uses the word *ta'wil*, and not *tafsir* to underline that the Karaite interpretation has nothing to do with the literal meaning of the Bible. Maimonides took the last paragraph of his commentary from the tradition he had found in midrashic literature. Needless to say, it has nothing to do with history.

In his *Guide of the Perplexed* (1.71), Maimonides refers to the Karaites when he discusses the influence of the *Mu'tazila* Muslim theological movement on Judaism in the Geonic period:

As for that scanty bit of argument regarding the notion of the unity of God and regarding what depends on this notion, which you will

2 Moses Maimonides, *Commentary on the Mishnah*, ed. by Yizhaq Shilat (Jerusalem: Ma'aliyot, 1994), 4; source in Arabic, 126 (Hebrew). On Maimonides' attitude to the Karaites, see Gerald J. Blidstein, 'The Karaites in Maimonides' Law', *Techumin* 8 (1987): 501–10 (Hebrew).

find in the writings of some Geonim and in those of the Karaites—it should be noted that the subject matter of this argument was taken over by them from the Mutakallimūn of Islam and that this bit is very scanty indeed if compared to what Islam has compiled on this subject. Also, it has so happened that Islam first began to take this road owing to a certain sect, namely the Mu‘tazila, from whom our coreligionists took over certain things walking upon the road the Mu‘tazila had taken.³

The *mu‘tazili* influence on the Karaites is well known, and it is attested to here by Maimonides. The Muslim theologian from the tenth century, al-Mas‘ūdi, was aware of *mu‘tazili* influence on the Karaites.⁴ The *Mu‘tazila* was known for its belief in reward and punishment and resurrection. Under the influence of the Muslim *Mu‘tazila*, the Karaites developed an entire doctrine of the world to come, where people are rewarded and punished according to their actions in this world. They believed in the resurrection of the dead, which they considered part of the reward awaiting the righteous.⁵ Maimonides’ statement in the Mishnah commentary that the Karaites in Egypt are the Sadducees who did not believe in reward and punishment cannot be reconciled with his statement in the Guide. What he said in the Mishnah commentary, referring directly to the Karaites, was polemic. What he wrote in the Guide was the truth.

Even in the Middle Ages there were a few Rabbanites who admitted that the Karaites were not the Sadducees. One of them was Ibn Kammūnah: “The Karaites are not Sadducees or Boethusians, although there happens to be agreement [*muwāfaqa*

3 Moses Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. by Shlomo Pines, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), I, 176–77.

4 Ali ibn al-Husayn al-Mas‘ūdi, *al-Tanbīh wal-ishrāf*, ed. by M. J. de Goeje (Leiden: Brill, 1894), 112–13.

5 On the influence of the *Mu‘tazila* on the Karaites on these issues, see Haggai Ben-Shammai, ‘Major Trends in Karaite Philosophy and Polemics in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries’, in *Karaite Judaism: A Guide to the History and Literary Sources*, ed. by Meira Polliack (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 339–62.

ittifāqiyya] among them in negating some of the Oral Law [*naql*]; this is because the Karaites believe in the resurrection of the dead, reward and punishment, and the world to come.”⁶ Before Ibn Kammūnah, R. Judah ha-Levi (Kuzari 3.65) distinguished between the Sadducees and Karaites, although he also traced the emergence of the Karaite movement to the Second Temple period.⁷

Like the Rabbanites, the Karaites also referred to Jewish sects in antiquity. They had some information about the Sadducees and a ‘Caves Sect’. Like other scholars, I am in doubt as to how far we can rely on the boundaries that the Karaites set between those two sects.⁸ As in the case of rabbinic literature, the Sadducee sect mentioned in Karaite sources cannot be considered a historical sect, since the Karaites used this term to designate two different sects that existed in ancient times: the ‘Sadducees’ mentioned in the literature of the rabbinic Sages, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the ‘Qumran sect’ (Zadokites, or Sons of Zadok). Since the Karaites were unable to distinguish between the two, they attributed the halakhah of the ‘Zadokites’, namely Qumran halakhah, to the Sadducees mentioned in rabbinic literature.

One of the laws that the Karaite sage Qirqisani attributed to Zadok is the prohibition of marrying one’s niece: “Only on one issue, namely the prohibition of marrying a niece, does [Zadok] substantiate his ruling and, moreover, through an analogy (*qiyās*) to the prohibition of marrying an aunt (paternal or maternal sister).”⁹ The analogy that Qirqisani attributes to Zadok is the

6 Leon Nemoy, ‘Ibn Kammūnah’s Treatise on the Differences between the Rabbanites and the Karaites’, *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 36 (1968): 107–65 (146).

7 Judah ha-Levi, *The Book of Refutation and Proof on the Despised Faith: The Book of the Khazars*, ed. by David H. Baneth and Haggai Ben-Shammai (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1977), 138–39 (Hebrew).

8 André Paul, *Écrits de Qumrân et sectes juives aux premiers siècles de l’Islam* (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1969), 92–96.

9 Ya’qūb al-Qirqisāni, *Kitāb al-anwār wal-marāqib*, ed. by Leon Nemoy, 5 vols. (New York: Alexander Kohut Memorial Foundation, 1939–1943), I, 11.

same analogy invoked by the Damascus Document (CD V.7–11) prohibiting marriage to a niece:

And they marry each one his brother's daughter or sister's daughter. But Moses said: "To your mother's sister you may not draw near, for she is your mother's near relation" (Lev. 18.13). Now the precept of incest is written from the point of view of males, but the same law applies to women. So, if a brother's daughter uncovers the nakedness of a brother of her father she is [forbidden] close relationship.¹⁰

The similarity between this halakhah that Qirqisani had attributed to Zadok and the halakhah of the Damascus Document, which Solomon Schechter found in the Cairo Genizah, was one of the factors that led him to publish this Genizah document under the name *Fragments of a Zadokite Work*.¹¹ Schechter, unlike Qirqisani, did not attribute the prohibition of marrying a niece to the Sadducees, but to the Zadokites. Following the discovery and publication of the Qumran scrolls, it has been confirmed that Schechter was right. Most of the halakhot and theology that the Karaites had attributed to the Sadducees are in fact much nearer to the Zadokites, meaning the authors of the Qumran scrolls.¹²

The Karaites' understanding of the Sadducees is specious not only because, like the Rabbanites, they were ignorant about the history of the Jewish sects during the Second Temple period, but also because, like the Rabbanites, they had their reasons for hiding the facts they knew. Qirqisani admits that he learned

10 *The Dead Sea Scrolls. Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek Texts with English Translations Volume 2: Damascus Document, War Scroll, and Related Documents*, ed. by James H. Charlesworth (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), 21.

11 Solomon Schechter, *Documents of Jewish Sectaries: Fragments of a Zadokite Work* (with a prolegomenon by J. A. Fitzmyer) (New York: Ktav, 1970), xviii–xxii.

12 Qirqisani also could not distinguish between Sadducean laws and other sectarian laws concerning the holidays of Sukkot, Passover, and Pentecost. See Yoram Erder, 'Precedents Cited by Anan for Postponement of Passover that Falls on the Shabbat', *Zion* 52 (1987): 153–75 (Hebrew).

about Zadok from rabbinic texts (and admits he was not happy about that). In fact, he was relying on the rabbinic tradition that claimed Zadok was a disciple of Antigonus of Sokho and the founder of the Sadducee sect.¹³ It is not surprising that Qirqisani hid the theological beliefs that this tradition attributes to Zadok from his readers. The reason is clear: everything that Zadok contested, according to this tradition, was endorsed by the Karaites, who adopted *mu'tazili* terminology. Here lies what I have called 'The Karaites' Sadducee Dilemma'.¹⁴ They adopted some Qumran halakhot, which they identified as Sadducean halakhot. At the same time, they could not accept the Sadducean denial of resurrection, reward, and punishment, which they had learned from rabbinic sources.

If Schechter is right, and Qirqisani and other Karaites had the Damascus Document in their hands, they would have known a *peshet* (interpretive commentary) referring to Ezek. 44.15. This *peshet* emphasizes the important role of 'the Sons of Zadok' at the End of Days:

And he built them a sure house in Israel, such as never stood from the earliest times until now. Those who hold fast to it are to have eternal life, and all [human] glory is theirs, as God swore to them through the hand of Ezekiel the prophet, saying: "The priests and the Levites and the Sons of Zadok who kept the watch of my sanctuary when the children of Israel strayed from me, they shall present to me fat and blood" (Ezek. 44.15). "The priests" are the penitents of Israel who departed from the land of Judah, "the Levites" are those who accompanied them, and "the Sons of Zadok" are the chosen ones of Israel, those called by name (*Qeriei ha-Shem*), who stand in the End of Days. Here are the details of their names in their generations and the time[s] of their standing and the number[s] of their troubles and the years of their residence, and detail[s] of their works (CD III.19–IV.6).¹⁵

13 Qirqisani, *Kitāb al-anwār*, I, 11.

14 Yoram Erder, 'The Karaites' Sadducee Dilemma', *Israel Oriental Studies* 14 (1994): 195–226.

15 Charlesworth edition, II, 17–19.

The Sons of Zadok in this paragraph, as in other Qumran scrolls, are those whom the Karaites considered Sadducees. This could have intensified their confusion between the two Second Temple groups.

While I stress the distinction that should be made between the Zadokite (Qumran) halakhah and the Sadducean halakhah, upon the publication of the Qumran scroll 4QMMT (*Miqṣat Ma'asei ha-Torah*), the theory was proposed by Jacob Sussman and Lawrence Schiffman that the Qumran sect was effectively a Sadducean offshoot due to the similarity between the Qumran halakhot and the Sadducean halakhot mentioned in rabbinic literature.¹⁶ One of Sussman's arguments is based upon the Karaite view that the two sects were similar,¹⁷ but our discussion has shown that this Karaite view is erroneous and therefore cannot serve as proof that the two sects resembled each other.¹⁸ I accept the viewpoint that denies the identification of the Qumran sect with the Sadducees.¹⁹

The Karaites not only attributed halakhic issues to the Sadducees, they also referred to Sadducean theology which, however, is closer to the positions found in the Qumran literature. The Karaite Yefet ben Eli explains that the fashioners of the Golden Calf in the desert did not deny the belief in the unity of God, but instead claimed that a secondary deity governed the world. It was for this secondary deity that the Golden Calf was intended. According to Yefet, this belief in a secondary deity was a Sadducean belief. The Sadducees believed that this deity was called Prince Mastema:

16 Jacob Sussman, 'The History of Halakha and the Dead Sea Scrolls: Preliminary Observations on *Miqṣat Ma'asei ha-Torah* (4QMMT)', *Tarbiz* 59 (1989): 11–76 (Hebrew); Lawrence. H. Schiffman, 'The New Halakhic Letter (4QMMT) and the Origins of the Dead Sea Sect', *Biblical Archaeologist* 53 (1990): 64–73.

17 Sussman, 'History of Halakha', 59–60.

18 See Erder, 'Karaites' Sadducee Dilemma', 215–20.

19 Emile Puech, *La croyance des Esséniens en la vie future: Immortalité, résurrection, vie éternelle?*, 2 vols. (Paris: Lecoffre, 1993), I, 17–20.

[The Children of Israel] said: “This is thy God, O Israel, who brought thee up out of the land of Egypt” (Exod. 32.4). In all probability, the Children of Israel believed in a single Creator, who created an angel to whom He entrusted the world in order to govern it and implant in it wisdom and understanding. This [belief] corresponds to the Sadducean belief in Prince Mastema.²⁰

J. T. Milik already hypothesized that Yefet’s reference to Prince Mastema was based on the book of Jubilees (Jub. 11.5, 11; 17.16; 18.9, 12; 48.2, 9, 12, 15).²¹ According to the New Testament (Acts 23.6-8), the Sadducees did not believe in angels. The Karaite Daniel al-Qūmisī, who had adopted much of the Qumran terminology, also denied the existence of angels. Qirqisani explains that he did so in protest against the assertion of his predecessor Benjamin al-Nahāwandī, who believed in a secondary God, basing his belief on the writings of the Caves Sect.²² Another theological issue mentioned by Yefet has to do with the way the Sadducees commented on the Bible. In his commentary on the phrase “he that stealeth” (Zech. 5.3), he accused the Sadducees of “stealing from the word of God” by the omission of certain words from the scriptural text:

Some say that “he that stealeth” (Zech. 5.3) is he who stealeth from the words of God. This refers to people who have stolen from the Scriptures and changed its meaning [...] There were those who omitted words from the editor’s version, such as the Sadducees, and there were those who attempted to interpret the Scriptures incorrectly and determine laws that were against the Torah and stole words from the Scriptures in support of their claims.²³

20 Yefet ben Eli, *Commentary on Exodus*, 32.1–4, MS. St. Petersburg, RNL Yevr.-Arab., I, 42, ff. 177b–178a.

21 *The Books of Enoch: Aramaic Fragments of Qumran Cave 4*, ed. by J. T. Milik (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), 331, n. 1.

22 Qirqisani, *Kitāb al-anwār*, 330.

23 Yefet ben Eli, *Commentary on Zechariah*, 5.3, MS. BL. Or. 2401, f. 169b.

Much has been written on the retelling of the Bible found in the Qumran texts and in the Enoch literature.²⁴ It seems that Yefet here is accusing the Sadducees of rewriting the Bible. Returning to the issue of halakhah, the similarity between the halakhot of al-Nahawandi and Qumran supports the supposition that the Caves Sect, which, according to the Karaite and Muslim sources, influenced al-Nahawandi, should be identified with the Qumran sect. On the other hand, the commentaries of Yefet ben Eli demonstrate that he knew this ancient halakhah very well, but was reluctant to adopt it.²⁵ The mainstream Karaites not only refrained from adopting the Qumran halakhah known to them, but also rejected the Sadducean halakhah mentioned in rabbinic literature. According to the Talmud, there was a dispute between the Talmudic Sages and the Sadducees over the inheritance law pertaining to a sole-surviving daughter whose brother had predeceased his father but left behind a daughter. According to our sources, this dispute is contingent upon how one interprets what the Pentateuch recounts about the offspring of Seir the Horite, found in Gen. 36, even though the issue of inheritance is not mentioned anywhere in this chapter. Yefet interprets Gen. 36 in an utterly different way from the rabbinic Sages, but at the same time he denies the Sadducean halakhah.²⁶ Although the Karaites attributed the ancient literature of the ‘Sons of Zadok’ to the Sadducees, they did not hesitate to distance themselves from their halakhah and theology.

24 See Lawrence H. Schiffman, ‘Dead Sea Scrolls, Biblical Interpretation in’, in *Encyclopedia of Midrash*, ed. by Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery Peck, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2004), I, 47–54.

25 Yoram Erder, ‘Understanding the Qumran Sect in View of Early Karaite Halakhah from the Geonic Period’, *Revue de Qumran*, 26 (2014), 403–23.

26 Yoram Erder, ‘Karaite and Sadducee Inheritance Law in Light of Yefet ben Eli’s Commentary on Genesis 36’, in *The Festschrift Darkhei Noam: The Jews of Arab Lands*, ed. by Carsten Schapkow, Shmuel Shepkaru, and Alan T. Levenson (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 6–25.

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