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“MORE DIDACTIC THAN LYRICAL”: MODERN VIEWS ON KARAITE HEBREW POETRY

Riikka Tuori

The Byzantine Karaite scholar Aharon ben Yosef (c.1250–1320) compiled the first standardized Karaite *Siddur*. As opposed to the early Karaite movement, which considered the Book of Psalms as the only legitimate source of liturgy,¹ he decided to include liturgical poems of his own creation into the *Siddur*. This inspires the historian Steven B. Bowman (1985: 141) to note in passing:

Nor was he [Aharon ben Yosef] averse to including his own verses, though these tended to be *more didactic than lyrical* [italics mine].

While perusing various academic studies on Karaite Jews it is difficult not to notice that such partly veiled critical remarks – or overt disapproval – on Karaite Hebrew poets and their poetic talents are frequent. Despite the immense historical scope of Karaite poetic activity, ranging from the tenth century Mourners of Zion in Palestine until modern-day Israel, the aesthetic value of any Karaite poem seems to be under suspicion.²

In this article I will illustrate the situation by discussing modern academic views on Karaite Hebrew poetry.³ First, I will supply a brief overview of prior research on this relatively unfamiliar subject to define its place in the field of the literary

1 Many early Karaites criticized the Rabbanite liturgical use of non-biblical texts, see, e.g. Daniel al-Qūmisī (Persia and Palestine, ninth century): “הקבץ ישראל בצומות וביום כפורים שמו בפייהם דברים: “הרבה, פיוט אשר אין חפץ בו, ולא ממורות מן תהלות (quoted in Mann 1922: 474). Later Byzantine Karaite exegetes, Aharon ben Elijah (c.1328–1369) in his *Gan ‘eden* and Eliya Bashyachi (c.1420–1490) in his *Adderet eliyahu*, also discuss the inclusion of poetry into the less controversial nonstatutory poetry (Mann 1922: 465; Tanenbaum 2002: 227). The choice of biblical passages added to early liturgical collections was based on a specific Karaite interpretation of the Bible (Wieder 1957: 288).

2 It should be noted that although I will here concentrate only on the reception of Karaite poetry in modern research, it is by no means the only aspect of Karaite Judaism that has received such criticism. Lasker (2000: 28) observes sharply that very few people have taken the trouble to study Karaite literature but nonetheless rarely disguise their disdain towards it. Tsoffar (2006: 29–30) briefly reviews the history of Karaite scholarship with a critical eye, taking as an example Nemoy’s *Karaite Anthology* (1952: 71, 84, 133, 237–238), also cited in this article.

3 Karaite Jews have written poems in languages other than Hebrew. Eastern European Karaites, for example, wrote secular poetry in their Turkic vernacular, Karaim, Hebrew being preserved for the holy sphere.

and historical study of Hebrew poetry. Second, I will attempt to answer the following questions: How has Karaite Hebrew poetry been defined in previous research, and which historical factors may be at work behind modern views on the aesthetic aspects of Karaite poetry? Poems are not organized in chronological order, nor will they be differentiated by genre (liturgical versus secular poetry, for instance) or poetic form. Rather, all Karaite poets writing in Hebrew are within the scope of this article, although the bulk of the poets discussed are medieval.⁴

THE STUDY OF KARAITE HEBREW POETRY: AN OVERVIEW

Whereas the study of Hebrew poetry includes many branches (the study of Palestinian, Babylonian, Italian, Ashkenazi, Spanish, Yemenite poetry, etc.),⁵ Karaite Hebrew poetry as a distinct field has only recently begun to receive serious academic attention. The general history of Hebrew poetry may be roughly divided into the following periods,⁶ each clearly defined by its use of distinct poetic forms (such as metre, rhyme and strophic structures):

1. Biblical poetry (the Book of Job, Proverbs, the Book of Psalms, including also certain poetic texts elsewhere in the Bible, such as the Song of Moses (Dt. 32:1–43)),
2. Early liturgical Hebrew poetry (piyyuṭim): third to eleventh centuries,
 - a. pre-classical period of anonymous poets (Palestine, Babylonia),
 - b. classical period: Yannai and El'azar Qillir (Qalir), between the fourth and eighth centuries,
 - c. post-classical period: Babylonia and North Africa, and later Italian and Franco-German (Ashkenazi) schools, from the eighth century onwards,
3. Andalusian (Hispano-Hebrew) poetry and its various offshoots from the tenth century onwards (e.g. Yemenite, Byzantine, and Ottoman Hebrew poetry),
4. Italian Hebrew poetry, from the ninth century onwards,
5. Period of Jewish Enlightenment (*Haskala*), eighteenth century to nineteenth centuries,
6. Modern Hebrew poetry (Eastern Europe, Israel) from the nineteenth century onwards.

The nineteenth-century German-Jewish intellectual movement *Wissenschaft des Judentums* initiated the modern study of medieval Hebrew poetry. Scholars such

4 On the definition of “medieval” in the study of Hebrew poetry, see Pagis 1979: 125; it may include Hebrew poems up to the eighteenth century.

5 For an up-to-date overview of the recent study of Hebrew poetry, see David & Sáenz-Badillos (2007: 270–277).

6 Harshav (2008: 22–25) defines these historically overlapping periods of poetic activity as “areas”.

as Leopold Zunz⁷ included Karaite poems and poets in their historical inventories of Jewish poets and liturgical poetry. One of the first scholars to pay explicitly attention to Karaite Hebrew poetry was Simḥa Pinsker, who published a large collection of early Karaite Hebrew (and Arabic) poetic works in his *Liqqute qadmoniyot* (1860, Vienna). The interpretation, classification, and analysis of the poetic fragments discovered in the Cairo Geniza in the 1890s have dominated the field for more than a century, undoubtedly due both to the immense number of fragments and the historical significance they hold.⁸ Several Karaite poetic works were also discovered in the Geniza.⁹

During the last sixty years, seminal work has been conducted in the philological and literary field of medieval Hebrew poetry. Ḥayyim Schirmann (1954; 1999) edited poems and provided surveys on the history of the major poets in Muslim and Christian Spain, France and Italy. Ezra Fleischer (1975)¹⁰ produced a comprehensive history of liturgical poetry, and its various genres. Dan Pagis (1976) issued a parallel study on secular medieval poetry. Modern study of medieval Hebrew poetry may be roughly divided into two distinct categories, reflecting the prestige accorded to the Andalusian branch: the study of liturgical poetry and poetic fragments found in the Cairo Geniza on one hand, and the study of secular Andalusian poetry on the other (Rosen & Yassif 2002: 253).¹¹ After decades of painstaking philological and textual research, other tendencies have risen: aesthetic, structural, and even psychological and cognitive aspects of medieval Hebrew poetry have received attention.¹²

Since the emergence of the Karaite movement in ninth-century Babylonia,¹³ various Karaite poets have arisen from historically detached groups of Palestinian, Egyptian, Byzantine, Turkic, Crimean, and Polish-Lithuanian communities.

7 *Literaturgeschichte der synagogalen Poesie*, Berlin, 1865.

8 Most of these fragments are undated and anonymous, making their analysis quite an arduous and time-consuming task (Harshav 2007: 600).

9 See Zulay 1941. Other Karaite literature was found as well; on Karaite *ketubbot*, see Olszowy-Schlanger 1998.

10 The extended second edition was published in 2007 (see the references below).

11 In the Andalusian tradition the themes and ideas of liturgical poetry depend on the time of the recital and placement of the poem in the synagogue liturgy. In secular poetry, the poet is more liberated to express his personal feelings. (Pagis 1976: 3)

12 Rosen & Yassif (2002: 258) divide the study of Hebrew poetry into four categories: 1. historical-literary research, 2. comparative research, 3. aesthetics, poetics, and rhetoric, 4. application of contemporary theories.

13 'Anan ben David, who is often uncritically announced as the founder of the Karaite movement, lived in eighth-century Iraq. The crystallization of the Karaite movement occurred probably during the ninth century, when various anti-rabbinic groups with different motivations merged together. See Gil 2003: 114–115.

The early representatives of the Karaite movement, the Mourners of Zion in ninth- and tenth-century Iraq and Jerusalem,¹⁴ specialized in writing lamentations (*qinot*), closely following the Palestinian piyyuṭic tradition. Collections of lamentations were used in the Karaite mourning rituals concerning the destruction of the Temple and exile. Several piyyuṭim by Salmon ben Yeruḥam (Sulaym ibn Ruḥaym, 10th c.) and Yeshu‘a ben Yehuda (Abū al-Faraj Furqān ibn Asad, late 11th c.), have been studied by Haggai Ben-Shammai (1994; 1998), using both Cairo Geniza fragments and Salmon ben Yeruḥam’s commentary on the Book of Lamentations.

Most major scholars of Karaitica have dealt at least with some aspects of Karaite poetry; Samuel Poznanski (1896) and Jacob Mann (1931), for instance, have published annotated medieval Karaite poems. Leon Nemoj translated Karaite Hebrew poems into English in his *Karaite Anthology* (1952), among other texts, a hymn by Yefet ben ‘Eli (10th–11th centuries, Jerusalem) and poems by Moshe Dar‘ī¹⁵ (13th c., Egypt). The attention invested into the Byzantine scholar Kalev Afendopolo (c.1464–1530) by scholars such as Bernstein (1951) and Saraf (1977) has concentrated on his exceptional *dīwān*, *Gan ham-meleḳ*. While the writing of secular poetry had already diminished in post-Andalusian Hebrew poetry, Afendopolo’s secular poems glorify the drinking of wine and include erotic imagery. Peculiarly, according to Bernstein (1951: 34), Afendopolo was one of the first to include erotic themes in his Hebrew poems, influenced perhaps by his Turkish surroundings, decades before the famous Rabbanite poet-mystics Israel Najara (c.1555–1625) and Yiṣḥaq Luria (1534–1572).

Leon Weinberger has collected Karaite poems in his *Rabbanite and Karaite Liturgical Poetry in South-Eastern Europe* (1991). This work, which includes an English review of Karaite poetry, contains two hundred and thirty-seven poems written by various Byzantine and Crimean Karaite authors. Weinberger has analysed the metrical and strophic features and rhyme schemes of the poems and has supplied concise footnotes. In his 1998 volume, *Jewish Hymnography: A Literary history*, Weinberger deals briefly with principal Karaite synagogue poets

14 Ankori (1959: 24) has defined this period of exegetical activity as the “Golden Age” of the Karaites. On the Karaite Mourners of Zion (*avele ṣiyyon*), see Gil 1992; Erder 2004.

15 The author of secular poems, influenced by Yehuda hal-Levi’s poetry (Habermann 1970: 86). Pinsker (1860: טו, מו) made an effort to prove that he lived before Yehuda hal-Levi, but these claims are groundless. He endeavours to prove the antiquity of Karaite poets using the Arabic metres even before Dunash; his other examples include Mevoraḳ ben Natan and Levi ben Yefet (p. טו): “אלא הקראים לבד שוכני מערב היו הראשונים שספחוהו אל גבולם, וכמו שחיינו דעתנו בראשית דברינו שהשתדלו לקבל קצת מנהגי הישמעאליים”. According to Weinberger (2000: 2–3), this inaccuracy in dating Moshe Dar‘ī is due to Abraham Firkowicz (1787–1874), the controversial Crimean Karaite, who may have falsified the dates on Dar‘ī’s manuscripts. Nemoj (2007: 174) has also pointed out the influence of Abraham Firkowicz on Pinsker’s thought.

and the language and style of their poems.¹⁶ In addition, he has published a critical edition (2000) of the above-mentioned Moshe Dar'ī's poems.¹⁷

Later Karaite poetry (especially the Crimean and Eastern European branches) has not received the same amount of interest as early Palestinian and Byzantine Karaite poetry. Some brief discussions do exist. Karaite poems written in other languages than Hebrew have received some preliminary attention. Nemoy (1980) has studied modern Karaite Arabic poetry written in Egypt, and Mikhail Kizilov (2009) has recently analysed the Karaim (Turkic) poems in Tadeusz Kowalski's collections.

Above I have briefly presented the outlines of the relatively recent scholarship on Karaite Hebrew poetry. But what is the essence of a Karaite Hebrew poem? Is it any different from a Hebrew poem written by a Rabbanite Jew? While the Karaites wrote plenty of original poetry, they included many Rabbanite poems in their various editions of their Prayer Book¹⁸ and occasionally credit some of these indisputably Rabbanite poems to Karaite authors.¹⁹ Therefore it is sometimes difficult to identify the background of a poem published even in authentic Karaite sources. In his *Toledot hap-piyyuṭ ve-hash-shira* (1970: 84–95), A.M. Habermann briefly discusses the essence of Karaite poetry. Significantly, he does this immediately after discussing another "sectarian" branch, that is, Samaritan poems.²⁰ Habermann's focus is for the most part on the early Karaites, although he does mention some later Crimean Karaite poets.²¹ Unfortunately, he does not make any distinction between these historically quite distant Karaite groups. What is relevant for this discussion is his illustration (1970: 86–87, 91) of a number of common features in the language of (probably early) Karaite poems:

16 See Weinberger 1998: 408–431.

17 Weinberger has written many other articles on Karaite poets (1984; 1990; 1992; 1994).

18 Apparently the reverse never took place (Gottlob 1865: 32). For one possible exception of a Karaite poem published in a Rabbanite collection, see Weinberger (1991: 15): a poem published in the Rabbanite collection of *zemirot*, *Shirim u-zmirot ve-tishbaḥot* (Constantinople, 1545, no. 131). It is published also in the Vilna *Siddur*, vol. IV, p. 52, פאר חתני, by "Tishbi rofe".

19 Some of Abraham ibn Ezra's poems are ascribed to the Karaite Abraham ben Simḥa has-Sefaradi, a sixteenth-century Karaite *payetan*. Gottlob (1865: 32–36), Idelsohn (1932: 313) and Kollender (1996: 81) have paid attention to this phenomenon.

20 Although later Habermann (1970: 89) notes that Karaites are in fact "closer" to Rabbanites than Samaritans. Cf. Israel Davidson (1970 I: xx), who justifies his inclusion of Karaite poems in the Thesaurus for their similarity "in structure and characteristics", directly after declaring the reasons why Samaritans and non-Jewish Hebrew poems are omitted: "שירי השומרונים חשבתי כדבר שהוא מחוץ לסוג הספר הזה, וכמו כן לא הכנסתי את השירים העבריים בכתובים בידי חכמי אומות העולם, אבל שירי הקראים ופיוטיהם אספתי, כי שרים הם לפיוטים שלנו בבנינים ובתכנים."

21 Early Karaite poets Habermann mentions are Mevoraḳ ben Natan hal-Levi (10th century, probably Egypt, see also 1970: 89–90), Sahl ben Maṣṣliḥ (10th century, Jerusalem), Yefet ben 'Eli, and Moshe Dar'ī (1970: 86). He (1970: 88–89) also briefly pays attention to the pilgrimage rituals of the nineteenth-century Crimean Karaites Yosef Shelomo ben Moshe and his son Abraham (published in the Vilna *Siddur*, 1890–1892, vol. IV, pp. 247–248).

1. The use of certain words: אֶחָיו 'our brothers'; אִמּוֹ 'our mother', i.e. Zion; עַד מָוֵי 'until when', אֵיפֹ 'where',
2. Polemics against the Rabbanites,²²
3. Lists of Karaite scholars embedded in the poetry,²³
4. Descriptions of Karaite manners and habits,²⁴
5. The tendency to repeat a word or a phrase for emphasis,²⁵
6. Love expressed towards the Holy Land (especially among the early Karaites, the Mourners of Zion) and Hebrew language, typical also in Rabbanite poetry.

Habermann's list may be described as rather superficial, although some of his observations remain relevant. Most features in his list are so general that it is indeed difficult to identify a Karaite poem. When carefully examining the number of biblical quotations, allusions and even themes in any medieval Hebrew poem, regardless of its background, it becomes obvious that for most poets the main source of inspiration is the Hebrew Bible. Later influences, too, unite the two movements: Karaites and Rabbanites alike were familiar with the poetic works of such esteemed Spanish Rabbanite poets as Yehuda ha-Levi and Abraham ibn Ezra. Often the only way to recognize an anonymous poem as being Karaite is the existence of certain conspicuously Karaite traits or customs depicted in the contents of the poem (no. 4 in Habermann's list). If such information is absent, identification may turn out to be quite impossible.

22 Polemical poems exchanged between rivalling Jewish groups were very common during the first centuries of Karaite existence (e.g. the 10th-century Salmon ben Yeruham's *Milhamot adonay* against Sa'adya ha-Gaon, see more below).

23 Often the acrostics hide names of the author, his relatives and friends.

24 Such as a specific allusion to a certain Karaite custom, which diverges from Rabbanite tradition. One example suffices here. In rabbinic Judaism the New Year is celebrated for two days, but since there is no biblical background for prolonging the celebration for a second day, the Karaites rejected the custom. The Polish-Lithuanian Karaite Zerah ben Nathan (Lithuania, c.1578–1663) calls this rabbinic custom mere "idle talk" (no. 43, 7:3: בַּד יוֹמִים לִילוּתִים). See the Vilna *Siddur* 1892: 121–122.

25 As Gottlobler (1865: 32–33) and Kollender (1996: 82–83) have noted, the *zemirot* for Sabbath, written by Abraham ibn Ezra (*Ki eshmera shabbat*) and Yehuda ha-Levi (*'Al ahavateka eshte gev'i*) in their Karaite versions contain a repetition in the refrain (for example in *Ki eshmera shabbat* the first part of the refrain is duplicated: *ot hi / ot hi le-'olam*). Similarly many original Karaite *zemirot* for Sabbath written for instance by Polish-Lithuanian Karaite authors contain such a repetition (see the Vilna *Siddur*, p. 102, a *zemer* by a seventeenth-century Karaite Abraham ben Yoshiyahu from Troki, Lithuania). The repetition breaks the metrical pattern of the poem, and it remains inexplicable why it is employed. According to Gottlobler (1865: 32–33) the rationale may be the employment of a fixed melody. The origin of this tradition is unclear.

THE STUDY OF KARAITE HEBREW POETRY: AN AESTHETIC BIAS?

All things considered, Karaite Hebrew poetry has not received as much attention as it perhaps should have, or the attention paid to it has been superficial and sketchy. Two reasons may be found for this lack of academic interest. First, the size of Karaite communities both in the Middle East and in Europe has always been relatively small. As such, they constitute a fairly insignificant minority. While earlier Karaism represented a daunting intellectual opposition to Rabbanism, it had lost its status as a powerful rival by the eleventh century (Lasker 2001: 98). Still, as Lasker (2001: 99) has noted, the Rabbanites have constantly seen in Karaism an "active contestant" and a "theoretical threat"; theoretical in the sense that many pre-modern Rabbanite Jewish intellectuals, who expressed fierce condemnation or, in some instance, even fear of Karaite religious thoughts, had never actually encountered a real living Karaite.²⁶ Is the modern inattentiveness, at some deeper level, connected to the early rabbinic bias felt towards the Karaites, despite its ostensible "insignificance"?

The second reason is related to the previously dominant paradigm in the study of Hebrew poetry, according to which the Andalusian Hebrew poetic form and style are the epitome of aesthetic perfection. The aspiration to a new type of beautiful Hebrew poetry was set in motion in tenth-century Muslim Spain, where the prestige accorded to classical Arabic and the Qur'an influenced the Jewish literati. This epoch has since been recognized as the "Golden Age" of Hebrew poetry and been defined by its revolutionary innovation of adapting Arabic metres into Hebrew prosody, as well as by its ambition to embrace biblically "pure" language.²⁷ As an offspring of this literary tradition, the Spanish poet and exegete Abraham ibn Ezra (1089–1164) attacked the language of early liturgical poetry (Eastern *piyyuṭim*),²⁸ denouncing its obscure midrashic allusions packed with non-biblical words, grammatical errors, and neologisms. Later, countless Jewish commentators, who idealized the linguistic purity of the Golden Age, agreed with ibn Ezra.²⁹ Indeed, such feelings have persisted until the present

26 Lasker's article (2001) analyzes Karaism as the "other" in Judaism, and the use of the word "Karaite" as an insult even to those who were not Karaites.

27 The ideal was biblical Hebrew, but not in prosody or verse forms, i.e. the poetic form did not imitate biblical but Arabic poetry (Harshav 2007: 598).

28 In his commentary on Ecclesiastes 5:1.

29 Yehuda al-Ḥarizi (1165–1225), for instance, described his school of poets in Christian Spain as "mere followers" of the Andalusian school (Pagis 2007: 266; Pagis 1979: 132; see al-Ḥarizi 2001: 180, tr. David Simha Segal).

day.³⁰ Never again did Hebrew poetry reach such a zenith of quality; this is the conviction of many modern scholars, too. Ismar Elbogen aptly concludes in his work on Jewish liturgy (1993: 261):

In Spain sacred poetry attained its fullest flowering and its most perfect expression; never again did there appear so many religious poems that were perfect in form and content.

Later Hebrew poetry, although formally imitating Andalusian poetry, is not generally considered to pass its role model. Imitative style is constantly interpreted by commentators as a sign of stagnation.³¹ Since a large bulk of Karaite poetry is formally dependent on Andalusian models, this will be of interest in the following discussion.³²

On the other hand, such schools of Hebrew poetry, which do not conform to the expected high standards of Andalusian Hebrew prosody, have been neglected in research. Since Italian and Ashkenazi poets formally followed the early liturgical (piyyuṭic) tradition (Harshav 2007: 597),³³ they were included in many later lists of what was “to be avoided”, following the influence of Abraham ibn Ezra.³⁴ Susan Einbinder (2002) has studied Jewish medieval martyrological poetry written in eleventh- and twelfth-century France and Ashkenaz. This type of poetry was an offspring of the early Palestinian piyyuṭic branch, where the expected elegance of Andalusian regular metrical patterns arranged in stanzas is practically non-existent. In comparison with the Hispano-Hebrew masterpieces,

30 On later commentators, see Joseph Solomon Delmedigo (1591–1655) in his *Sefer elim* (reprinted in Geiger 1840: 14–16); Firkowicz 1838.

31 Pagis (1979: 132) calls attention to the need to discuss the poetry of Christian Spain as forming a school of its own, instead of it being only an “inferior, epigonic sequel to the poetry of Muslim [Andalusian] Spain”. Quoted also in Rosen & Yassif (2002: 260–261). See also Tov’s (1986: 38) harsh words on Hebrew poets of the post-Andalusian era as concentrating solely on form and language and the guarding of poetic rules, instead of the contents, as compared to the mythical masters of the Golden Age: “במשך למעלה מ-500 שנים, מאז אמצע המאה ה-12 עד ימי שבתי צבי, היו משוררים רבים באשליה שהם הם ממשיכי דרכם של שמואל הנגיד, אבן גבירול, ר’ יהודה הלוי, ובני דורותיהם. אך מה גדול הוא המרחק מול שירתם הגדולה של משוררי ספרד הקלאסיים, שכלליה ומוסכמותיה של הפואטיקה הערבית היו להם רק כלי חיצוני ליצוק בהם את הניגון רוחם ואמונתם. אין להעמיד באותה מעלה את המשוררים מתקופת ספרד הנוצרית וודאי לא את אלה שמן הדורות שלאחר הגירוש, שהכלי נעשה להם עיקר.”

32 See e.g. the Karaite *Siddur*, printed in Vilna 1890–1892, where a large number of poems written by various Karaite authors conform to Andalusian rules.

33 In this tradition, the metre is based on a fixed number of words or stresses in each line. On the poetic form of Italian and Ashkenazi poetry and its relation to early piyyuṭim, see Fleischer 1975: 433 ff.

34 Furthermore, most poems by these early European authors were not found among the discoveries of the Cairo Geniza. They survive scattered in printed collections and manuscripts in various libraries and archives. Consequently, their research has never reached the recognition nor the level of study of poetic fragments found in the Cairo Geniza, representing the Eastern tradition of the Andalusian branch. (Fleischer 1975: 432)

this poetry was not considered good literature, a notion which Einbinder (2002: 8) interprets as a clear case of "aesthetic bias".³⁵ No doubt Andalusian Hebrew poetry is easily understood by any diligent student of biblical Hebrew, while the early piyyuṭim and the later offshoots require more efforts to decipher the complicated midrashic allusions. If the poetry under scrutiny either does not conform to the poetic rules of Andalusian poetry or "merely" imitates it, is it always necessarily aesthetically below Andalusian exquisiteness? This question pertains also to the attitudes expressed in the modern study of Karaite Hebrew poetry, which will be the topic of the next section.

KARAITE HEBREW POETRY: MODERN CRITIQUES

Early remarks made by Rabbanite scholars concerning the Karaites are coloured by religious disputes between the two factions. The Babylonian theologian and head of the rabbinic academy Sa'adya ha-Gaon (882–940) fiercely opposed Karaism.³⁶ Later, the Spanish poet and philosopher Yehuda ha-Levi (c.1075–1141) in his *Sefer haq-kuzari* takes an anti-Karaite stance.³⁷ Attacks explicitly against Karaite poetry took place already in early Rabbanite writings. The following statement was written by Abraham ibn Daud (1110–1180), the Spanish Rabbanite historian, in his *Sefer haq-qabbala*:

they [the Heretics, i.e. the Karaites] never did anything of benefit for Israel, nor produced a book demonstrating the cogency of the Torah or work of general knowledge *or even a single poem, hymn or verse of consolation* [אפילו שירה] [אחת או פיוט אחד ונחמה אחת]. "They are dumb dogs who cannot even bark. [Is 56:10]" [italics mine]³⁸

Ibn Daud refutes all the literary accomplishments of the "heretics", including their poetic works. Ankori (1959: 359, n. 9) is of the opinion that ibn Daud could not have aimed his critique against all the available Karaite literary works. The accusation does not hold against the prolific Karaite literary activity of the time,

35 "In sum, an aesthetic bias has prevented scholars from seeing the liturgical poetry from Rhenish or northern French communities as either beautiful (meriting attention for its literary excellence) or cultured (defined largely as a secular term)" (Einbinder 2002: 8).

36 See Poznanski 1898. Sa'adya even wrote a polemical poem, אשא משלי, against the Karaites, which incited the Karaite Salmon ben Yeruḥam's poetic response (Frank 2004: 6). See more below.

37 Later Karaites did not bear any grudge against ha-Levi; they employed many of ha-Levi's ideas on the history of the Karaites, not to mention ha-Levi's immense poetic influence on the Karaites. See Astren 2004; Lasker 1989.

38 English translation by Cohen (1967: 99–100; see the original Hebrew text on p. 72). The section is also quoted in Ankori (1959: 359, n. 9).

known also to ibn Daud himself. Most likely ibn Daud refers only to a tiny group of Spanish Karaites,³⁹ who soon vanished without trace. His refutation of Karaite poetic skills simply reflects the threat the Karaite movement represented to normative Judaism in twelfth-century Spain. Peculiarly, even after Karaism had lost its status as a vigorous competitive movement against rabbinic Judaism, criticism against Karaite poetry did not cease. I will next elaborate these modern views on Karaite Hebrew poetry.

3.1 Karaite liturgical poetry: Mere biblical phrases?

Even though Karaites have written liturgical poetry for centuries, their liturgy is persistently portrayed as mere collections of biblical verses with a few compulsory prosodic adjustments. In his work on Jewish liturgy, Idelsohn (1932: 314) discusses the nature of Karaite liturgy:

The Karaites discarded the structure of the rabbinic liturgy, but did not succeed in creating a structure of their own. In fact, their liturgy *lacks all structure and form*. It rather gives one the impression of an *accumulation of Biblical paragraphs and verses*. There seems to be no beginning, middle, or end, but a *formless mass of scriptural passages* in which the main ideas of Praise, Petition, Israel, Zion, Temple, Sin and Forgiveness are thrown together. [italics mine]⁴⁰

This attitude reflects the Rabbanite views of Karaite liturgy, which differs considerably from rabbinic liturgy in its heavy use of biblical quotations and *florilegia*.⁴¹ Examples such as this abound in early academic works on Karaism.⁴²

According to Lasker (2001: 99), these images arise from the early history of the movement. The Karaite friction originated from the need to “return” to the biblical Scriptures. Initially, as discussed by the Karaite scholar Ya‘aqov al-Qirqisānī (10th c., Iraq), the only sanctioned liturgical source was the Hebrew Bible, especially the Book of Psalms (Frank 2003: 563). The movement conducted fierce internal arguments over whether to include texts outside the Hebrew Bible

39 On the brief existence of ‘Ananites and Karaites in Spain, see Lasker 1992.

40 Elsewhere Idelsohn (1932: 313) does express positive views on Karaite marriage rituals: “The Wedding service is very impressive [...] The ceremony is interspersed with several delightful songs.”

41 The use of oriental melodies in Karaite liturgy, too, may have deterred some of the Ashkenazi Jewish visitors and critics of the service. For example, Frank (2003: 586) cites a Polish *maskil* Abraham Samuel Hirschberg visiting the Karaite service in Jerusalem and being dismayed by the “oddness” and “dullness” of the liturgy as compared with the familiar rabbinic Jewish service.

42 See for instance the astonishing finality of Margouliouth (1906: 505) in his definition of Karaite liturgy: “No one acquainted with the brightness, beauty, and spontaneity of thought and expression which characterize the Liturgy of the Synagogue can possibly bestow a large amount of admiration on the Services of the Karaites.”

in their liturgy (see more above, n. 1). The more the movement receded (or was pushed) into the margins of Judaism, the more it absorbed influences from the Rabbanites. One of the early innovations, initiated by the reformer of the *Siddur*, Aharon ben Yosef, included the liberated use of liturgical poetic texts *outside* the biblical corpus.⁴³

Tanenbaum (2002: 227–228) remarks in her study on philosophical elements in Hebrew medieval poetry that the Byzantine Karaites willingly absorbed the Andalusian poetic style, since it reminded them of their scripturalism.⁴⁴ Similarly, Frank (2003: 572) holds that the emergence of Karaite *Siddur* was due to the "natural" aversion of scripturalism to Rabbanite liturgical works. Although Tanenbaum's and Frank's conclusions may very well be close to accurate, Karaism as a whole is portrayed as a religion based on rigid literalism, while rabbinic Judaism, as one would expect, embraces intellectually more "advanced" ways of textual interpretation. In reality, multiple Karaite interpretational traditions have existed in different surroundings and historical conditions.⁴⁵ The prevailing impression of Karaites taking the Bible only in its literal value is simply exaggerated.⁴⁶ Karaite halakhic understanding was in constant dialogue with rabbinic literature; it never existed in a biblical "bubble" bound by strict scripturalism (Astren 2004: 17). What more, the early Karaite adherence to the Bible as the only source of the liturgy does not necessarily entail that all non-biblical texts are banned from the later, "post-Aharon ben Yosef" forms of Karaite liturgy. Numbers speak for themselves: Frank (2003: 566, n. 33) counts over thirty original authors of liturgical piyyuṭim in the Karaite *Siddur* (Vilna, 1890–1892), written during the twelfth to the eighteenth centuries.

43 On the gradual acceptance of other Rabbanite customs, such as the lighting of Sabbath candles and the re-organization of the annual reading cycle of the Torah, see Ankori 1959: 251; Attias 1992: 289–298.

44 "appealed to their scripturalistic tendencies" (Tanenbaum 2002: 228). Elsewhere Tanenbaum (2002: 219, 228) refers to the Karaite liturgy and view on yom teru'a (New Year, i.e. *rosh hash-shana*) as "sectarian". This adjective is somewhat pejorative, at least in modern linguistic usage (see, e.g. the entry in *The Oxford English Dictionary*). Both in popular and academic literature, the word "sect" is often used to describe the Karaite movement (see, e.g. Weinberger 1998: 18, where Karaism is defined as a "Jewish sect"). Ben-Shammai (2003: 22) has recommended using a more neutral term, "movement". A felicitous discussion on the use of the term "sect" as derogatory and antagonistic, see Olszowy-Schlanger (1998: 7–8). Also Cohen (1978: 129, especially n. 1) discusses the unfortunate manner of imposing sectarianism as the essence of the Karaite movement.

45 On the convoluted history of Karaite exegesis beginning from the Babylonian mythical founder 'Anan ben David and reaching until the growing Rabbanite influences of Byzantine Karaites (modelled especially after Abraham ibn Ezra's exegesis), see Frank 2000: 110–128.

46 A good example of the Karaite non-literal understanding of the Bible is that they do not use *tefillin*. According to Lasker (2001: 99), the Karaites understand the commandment in Deut. 6:8 as allegorical, while the Rabbanites view it as a literal command.

3.2. Polemicists and bad poets?

Salmon ben Yeruḥam (10th c., Iraq/Jerusalem) wrote his *Milḥamot adonay* against Sa'adya ha-Gaon, in rhyme. One of the earliest modern scholars of Karaism, Samuel Poznanski (1896: 685; 1908: 221) depicts his poetic style as “wretched rhyme-prose” and its tone as “snarling”. One of the most productive modern researchers of Karaism, Leon Nemoy (Nemoy & Akhiezer 2007: 693), moderately agrees with Poznanski:⁴⁷

Salmon's principal work, *Milhamot Adonai*, written in Hebrew, is a rhymed *attack* on the Rabbanites and on Saadiah. Even for an age characterized by abusive polemics, the language of the book is *unusually vehement*, and the author treats Saadiah more as a personal enemy than a theological adversary. In his subject matter, Salmon merely repeats the arguments of older Karaite polemicists, but the violent language and *quasi-poetic form* are all his own.
[italics mine]

Nemoy begins his account with the violent style of Salmon's work and ends it by calling the style “quasi-poetic”; rendering its rhymed prose as second-rate literature. Elsewhere Nemoy (1952: 71) gives some credit to Salmon's style:

Certainly Salmon *had no genuine poetic gift*, his quatrains are the fruit of his considerable learning in biblical, Karaite, and Rabbanite lore *rather than the product of inspiration*. Yet his style is, on the whole, *fluent and easily understood*, and the epistle [*Milhamot adonay*] makes *interesting and informative reading*.
[italics mine]

According to Nemoy, Salmon is not much of a poet, since “genuine” talent is missing. Reminiscent of Bowman's words on Aharon ben Yosef's poetic skills (as “more didactic than lyrical”), he emphasizes that Salmon did not act out of inspiration while versifying his poems. Ironically, Israel Davidson, the editor of the *Milḥamot adonay*, had reached the conclusion that Salmon is the *crème de la crème* of Karaite poets.⁴⁸ Certainly, these different evaluations do not exclude one another: Salmon being the best *Karaite* poet does not elevate him to the brilliant level of the Rabbanite poets.

The prevailing opinion holds that even the best of Karaite poets, such as Moshe Dar'i (13th c., Egypt), though undeniably fine, are somewhat deficient in creativity and originality. Schirmann (2007: 434) passes his judgment on Dar'i:

47 The revised *Encyclopedia Judaica* article has been edited by Golda Akhiezer in 2007.

48 Davidson is quoted in Nemoy 1952: 71.

In general, Darī's *technical dexterity surpassed his poetical gifts*. While the language and structure of his poems are in the best tradition of the Spanish school, the contents often betray a *lack of individuality*. [italics mine]

Nemoy (1952: 238–239) notes that despite his productivity, the Byzantine Karaite Eliya Bashyachi (c.1420–1490), the author of the Karaite legal codex *Adderet eliyahu*, is utterly unskilled as a poet:

He was a prolific poet, *although without any real poetic talent* [italics mine].

Both Nemoy and Schirmann praise the amount of *technical labour* Karaite poets have invested in their poems. Still, *poetic talent* seems to be a rare Karaite quality. Somewhat amusingly, Nemoy (1952: 274) observes that not only are the poems written by Karaites poor, but they actually do not even know how to appreciate good poetry, written, naturally, by certain Rabbanite poets of worth:

The poetic quality of the hymns composed by Karaite poets is on the whole *inferior* to the hymnology of the Rabbanite prayer book, and *even their choice of Rabbanite pieces is not always the best possible*. [italics mine]

Hebrew works of the Byzantine Karaites are frequently criticized for their unintelligible language.⁴⁹ Yehuda Hadassi (12th c., Constantinople) wrote his encyclopaedic work on Karaite belief, *Eshkol hak-kofer*, in rhymed prose. Haim Ben-Sasson (2007: 189) laments the difficulties of Hadassi's style by juxtaposing it with the stylistic superiority of the Byzantine Rabbanites:

His Hebrew style, however, *unlike that of his Rabbanite contemporaries*, is *awkward* and *not easily understandable* and the rhymed arrangement often makes it *obscure* [italics mine].

As opposed to Ben-Sasson's more favourable stance towards the contemporary Byzantine Rabbanites, Abraham Danon (1925: 291) observes the Karaite linguistic "degeneration" as part of the general social conditions of the Jews in the Byzantine Empire of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In his brief evaluation of Yehuda Hadassi, Danon reaches the following conclusion:

As a natural result of this oppression, *the Byzantine Karaites and Rabbinites lost all their aesthetic interests, and also their taste for science and poetry*, as may be seen

49 The critique was given even by later Byzantine Karaites themselves, who struggled with the language (Astren 2004: 221).

from the style of Hadassi's writings, which merit the severe criticism passed on the poems of the Grecian Jews by Judah Alharizi [italics mine].⁵⁰

Danon's approach to Karaite Hebrew literature as forming an essential part of the general Hebrew literature of the time may be described as more balanced than Ben-Sasson's highly biased view, which was aimed solely against the Karaites.

In the case of the Karaites, polemical style appears to equal "bad" style:⁵¹ Salmon writes "vehemently" against the Rabbanites; at the same time, his poetic style is condemned as fake and constrained. Could it be that modern condemnations of style are stirred by the polemical contents of a Karaite work?

3.3 Inferior imitators: Where lies the value of Karaite verse?

There is wide consensus among scholars that Karaites freely accepted poetic inspiration from Andalusian Hebrew poetry (Frank 2005: 90; Weinberger 1998: 413). Ṭoviyya ben Moshe⁵² (11th c., Constantinople) is credited with using Andalusian metres even before contemporary Byzantine Rabbanites (Weinberger 1998: 412).⁵³ In fact, most later Hebrew poets, Karaites and Rabbanites alike, tend to imitate the style of such eminent poets as Yehuda ha-Levi and Shelomo ibn Gabirol. Imitation, then, is true to a large degree, and scholars with a keen eye can detect it without much effort. Characteristically such poems are perceived as paler versions of the originals.

Danon (1925: 312) notes that Eliya Bashyachi wrote his *Meliṣat ham-miṣwoṯ*⁵⁴ for the Pentecost service imitating ibn Gabirol's *azharot*,⁵⁵ lists of positive and

50 The Spanish poet Yehuda al-Ḥarizi (1165–1225) in his *Sefer taḥkemoni* (written in versified prose, *maqāmāt*). See al-Ḥarizi (2001: 180–181, tr. David Simha Segal): on the seven conditions of poetry "[to] strip away foreign gloss, lest he resemble Greek Jews who blur Song's prism, muddying their poems with many a foreignism, making verse a shambles, weaving garnet with granite and jewel with brambles, such that their poems sont ganz perplexed, one line or Wort being étranger to the next". See also the rhymed dispute of al-Ḥarizi between a Karaite and a Rabbanite (Gate Seventeen).

51 The poetry written by Karaites is by no means their only literary accomplishment, which has been criticized for a lack of such elusive quality as "originality". The Byzantine Karaite Kalev Afendopolo, for instance, is defined as one of the best Karaite thinkers, who still "lacked originality" in his literary works (Zobel 2007: 431). What this originality essentially means remains vague and inexplicable.

52 The Karaite translator of Palestinian Arabic Karaite works into Hebrew.

53 Weinberger does not elaborate on his sources, but it is possible that the source is Pinsker's *Liqqute qadmoniyot*.

54 Even the poetic structure of the composition resembles ibn Gabirol's *azharot*; see the Vilna *Siddur*, vol. II: 239–245, also published in Weinberger (1991: 601–612).

55 Weinberger (1998: 413–414) illustrates the imitation by comparing Gabirol's and Elijah Bashyachi's strikingly similar poems.

negative commands. Tanenbaum (2002: 229–231) demonstrates clear parallels between the contents of a *tokeḥa* of Aharon ben Yosef⁵⁶ and its Andalusian models (Abraham ibn Ezra's poems and ibn Gabirol's *Keter malkut*). In addition, she discusses the Andalusian poetic influence and Neo-Platonic ideology embedded in Byzantine Karaite poetry, accentuating the innovative touch of the two Aharons.

Nevertheless, Karaite poets are often labelled inferior imitators.⁵⁷ Ankori (1959: 173, n. 13) discusses Yehuda Hadassi's use of second person masculine singular suffixes in his poetic prose. He analyses it as "regular mannerism" and "arbitrary", adding a point of comparison, which is almost impossible to surpass:

It may well be remembered that the great and *truly poetic* "Zionide" of Yehūdāh Hallevī employs the 2nd Pers. Plur. Fem. ending as the uniform rhyme of all its stanzas [*italics mine*].

Idelsohn (1932: 312) draws unfavourable comparisons between ibn Gabirol's *Keter malkut* and the later Turkish Karaite poet Yehuda ben Eliya Maruli's (d. 1593, Constantinople)⁵⁸ poetic work *Qol yehuda*:⁵⁹

A poem by Juda Meruli (vol. III, pp. 85 f.) seems to be a *rather poor substitute* for Gabirol's "Crown of Royalty" [*italics mine*].

The existence of a Karaite poem in the model of a cherished Rabbanite poem stirs automatic disapproval. Margouliouth (1906: 505) is of the opinion that imitation requires some degree of intellectual aptitude:

To produce a really good and striking imitation a degree of talent is required which almost borders on genius, but – so far as poetry and higher religious inspiration are concerned – the Karaites were, and probably still are, as a body *very far removed from the standard of their Rabbanite opponents* [*italics mine*].

Individual Karaite poets have rarely tried to camouflage their tendencies to imitate. At the heading of Yehuda Gibbor's (Constantinople, c.1460) *Minḥat yehuda*,⁶⁰ for instance, there is a reference to ibn Gabirol's *azharot* (שמור לבי מעונה). Should not this type of imitation be rather understood as homage to the original poet?

56 *Omnām zaḥalti wa-ḥalti we-nivḥalti*, in the *Vilna Siddur*, vol. III: 206–207.

57 What Kaufmann Kohler and Abraham Harkavy concluded (1900–1906: *Jewish Encyclopedia* in the Internet), still holds: "On the whole, Karaism *lacks the element of poetry and inspiration*, and is *merely imitative when it is not in opposition* [*italics mine*]."

58 Of the two namesakes the younger, Yehuda Maruli II, see Danon (1925: 329). Simḥa Lucki wrote a commentary on the poem (Mann 1931: 1422).

59 In the *Vilna Siddur*, vol. III: 85–95.

60 Published in the *Vilna Siddur*, vol. I: 342–395 (ספר מנחת יהודה בשיור וחרוז על כל פרשיות התורה).

Continuous assessment of Karaite poetry as imitative may have prevented a more profound prosodic and linguistic analysis of their poetry. It is more than likely that the Karaites borrowed from the Rabbanites, the latter forming the overwhelming majority, not least in sheer quantity of intellectual activity. It was the example of rabbinic liturgical embellishments that inspired Aharon ben Yosef to include his original poems in the Karaite liturgy. Furthermore, he rendered it possible for other competent Karaite poets as well. Perhaps it would be more reasonable to speak of “influences” rather than imitations while discussing such later works of Hebrew poetry.

Instead of employing aesthetic tools, many scholars tackling Karaite poetry tend to concentrate on uncovering historical facts, such as dates and names in the headings of the poems or in the acrostics. Karaite poems are dismissed as being worth attention only on account of the historical details they contain. The rest is worthless. Jacob Mann (1931: 554–555, n. 7) puts it succinctly:

several headings of the Piyutim found in these MSS. are cited in the notes. They [Eastern European Karaite poems] are *of value* by reason of the dates indicating the time of their composition. [italics mine]

It suffices to mention two recent articles on one poem of a Polish-Lithuanian Karaite, Yosef ben Yeshu‘a (d. 1678).⁶¹ In this poem the Karaite author describes the Chmielnicki massacres in 1648. The poem has attracted attention for good reason, namely its historical details pertaining to previously unknown Karaite destinies during the Cossack revolts. Both articles contain a translation of the poem and a cursory overview on its prosodic features, but the main interest is in the historical aspects of the poem.

Even scholars outside the field of Karaite studies have considered Karaite poetry to be innately inferior. Meir Ydit (1971: 61), in his article on Karaite liturgy and its affinities with Reform service, decries Eastern European Karaite poems:⁶²

These piyyutim as well as those for weddings, circumcisions, for the Festivals, etc., are, however, of a *very poor poetic quality* if compared with those of the traditional Ashkenazi [*sic*] and Sefardi ritual [italics mine].

⁶¹ See Nosonovskii 1997; von Rohden 2004.

⁶² Ydit (1971) is referring to the material published in the Vilna *Siddur* (reprinted in Ramle, Israel, in 1962). This edition contains hundreds of original poems by Byzantine, Turkish, Polish-Lithuanian, and Crimean Karaites.

The poems of Eastern European Karaites do not please Tanenbaum (2002: 232) either:

A cursory perusal of the Karaite siddur reveals a series of three eighteenth-century piyyutim by Isaac bar Solomon with the incipits, "Yehidah ha-qedoshah ha-kelulah", "Yehidah asulah be-khavod kelulah", and "Yehidah mi-meqor sekhel asulah". Varying, predicatably, in literary quality, these poems nevertheless reflect the enduring impact of the two Aaron's receptivity to Spanish Rabbanite literature.

Only after a cursory glance the Eastern European Karaite poems may be characterized as *predictably varying in literary quality*. In modern research arguments like these have plainly been stated without much evidence or many examples from the actual Karaite literary products.

CONCLUSION

A student of Karaism becomes acutely aware that Karaite poets are rarely treated as individual Hebrew poets but rather as members of a "sectarian" group. The study invested in Karaite Hebrew poetry has been intermittent, the uniting factor being the curious and mysterious nature of "Karaiteness". Disputes and petty quarrels emerge as the main gist of Karaite literary works. Irrespective of the varying backgrounds of the authors, their poems are often nonchalantly discarded either as concoctions of biblical quotations or pale imitations of Rabbanite masterpieces. Even the best of Karaite poets have been portrayed as inherently inferior to the Rabbanites. Modern research has not been able to cut loose from the bitterness inflicted by centuries of Karaite-Rabbanite breach⁶³ nor to move beyond past insults and vehemence produced by this friction. On the other hand, accusations of imitation, obscurity or the gaucherie of Karaite Hebrew poetry follow the tradition of aesthetic bias on most post-Golden Age Hebrew poetry. As was shown in this article, during recent decades this bias has become increasingly recognized.

To return to the case of Bowman (1985), mentioned at the beginning of this article: he labels, in passing, the poems of Aharon ben Yosef as "didactic" rather than "lyrical".⁶⁴ This is unequivocally an aesthetic judgment: Aharon's poetry is

63 As noted also by Astren (2004: 98): "Reflecting their own personal Rabbanite backgrounds, Poznanski and Revel, among others, subjected parenthetical historical statements of medieval Karaite literature to denigration and ridicule."

64 Weinberger (1998: 18) holds the same opinion regarding Karaite poetry: "*Like their Rabbanite counterparts*, Karaite hymnists served a *didactic* function, instructing the laity in their religious obligations [italics mine]."

considered of lower value in beauty, something *merely* didactic, and as such is targeted towards the less erudite laymen. But is this aesthetic evaluation truly a fair one? In the Middle Ages most aspiring Jewish scholars wrote poetry in Hebrew; this was indeed required of every man of letters. Not all of these would-be poets could ever rise very high, nor were they expected to do so.⁶⁵ But, according to Fleischer (1975: 266), most of the Jewish poets did not intend their poems to be primarily didactic. Quite the opposite, their poems were supposed to bring forth the scholarly abilities of the poet. Notwithstanding the actual quality of their versifying skills, Karaite poets, too, would endeavour to compete with each other both in beauty and creativity. Whether this was a success or not, in future aesthetic re-appraisal of Karaite Hebrew poetry is essential. Not only is Karaite poetry of value due to its historical details and the social context where it was created, but also its formal and aesthetic aspects should be treated more fairly, despite the varying results. Late medieval Hebrew poetry may sometimes seem to be aesthetically the work of “rhymesters”, but that should not detain us from realizing their value.⁶⁶

I have not brought forth any examples from the vast and diverse corpus of Karaite poetry, and this has been a conscious choice. The purpose of this article is not to prove that certain Karaite poems are of higher quality than they actually are. The critique expressed by researchers on individual pieces of Karaite poetry may turn out to be well-earned and balanced. Lasker (2000: 28–29) and Polliack (2002: 295–296) have requested that the study of Karaite Judaism be brought to the mainstream of Jewish studies. I would continue the thought a bit further. Despite its “marginality”, poetry written by individual Karaite authors should not be evaluated as hastily as has been done. The vague concept of “aesthetic value” should be discarded and efforts directed at studying Karaite Hebrew poetry, not as an obscure and forgotten oddity of the past but as a valid and integral part of the history of Hebrew literature.

65 Often this kind of writing is labelled as versification, instead of the loftier word “poetry”.

66 Cf. Habermann (2007: 269) on Franco-German late medieval Hebrew poetry.

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