



A THEOLOGIAN AARON BEN ELIYAH (1300-1369): ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT SPIRITUAL LEADERS OF NICOMEDIAN KARAIM COMMUNITY

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The Term Karaim

Karaim in Hebrew and Russian, *Karaites* in English and French, *Karaimler* and *Karaylar* in Turkish and other Turkic languages are but different names to designate an ancient religious group\community of the followers of Torah of Moses (*Tevrat Musa* in Turkish) or Old Testament alone, who – similar to Samaritans, – separated themselves from the (Orthodox) Jews many centuries ago.

Unlike their spiritual opponents –the Rabbinic (Orthodox) Jews– the Karaim do not recognize the so-called Oral or second Torah, arguing that God revealed Himself to the Sons of Israel in the one and only text – the Torah of Moses which was written down in the Pentateuch.

If there are several theories about the origins of the early Karaim prior to the 8-10th century it is quite common today in research to consider Karaim as a religious movement of a scripturalist (i.e. Torah of Moses alone/Hebrew Scripture alone) nature, which emerged from different previously existed groups, sects and even possibly tribes converted to Karaism in the large areas of Persia and Babylon, Middle East, Byzantium-Turkey, Caucasus and the Crimea.

Karaim in Byzantium-Turkey

In his pioneer study 'Karaites of Byzantium' (1959) Zvi Ankori, one of the first researchers of the Karaim in that area designates the formative years of Karaism in the territory what is today the modern day Turkey as 970-1100.

In spite that there are two major monographs – that of Zvi Ankori himself and that of Daniel Lasker's 'From Judah Hadassi to Elijah Bashyatchi: Studies in Late Medieval Karaite Philosophy', Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2008. as well as some research done by Turkish scholars, the state of research of the Karaim in Turkey is still somehow poor, which is also mentioned by Meira Polliack in her preface to one of the most fundamental books on Karaism 'Karaite Judaism' (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2003).

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Karaim in Nicomedia

The current conference is dedicated to the history of Nicomedia that is why our paper will present our current knowledge about the Karaites of that city. Nicomedia (Izmit) is an important city in today Turkey as well as it was an important city at the past. Nicomedia as the hub of nearly all Anatolian roads was a natural gateway to the Bosphorus and the carrying trade of the city, its commerce, its importance as the royal capital attracted Karaim to settle in the city and its suburbs. Even though we do not have direct evidence of presence of Karaim in the formative years of Karaism in Nicomedia some non-direct sources suggest so.

In his 'Karaitic Encyclopaedia' published in Frankfurt-on-Main 1995, Nathan Schur in two articles 'Nicomedia' and 'Aaron ben Elijah of Nicomedia' presumes that the Karaite community existed there already in the 13th century (and possibly earlier), and that the standard of learning and education of some of its members was of a high order.

All it means that although we do not know much about Karaite presence in the city we have some knowledge about one of the most influential Karaite philosophers and theologians ever Aaron ben Elijah of Nicomedia who happened to live in the city.

Aaron ben Elijah (appr. 1300-1369) of Nicomedia was indeed one of the most influential Karaite philosophers, scholars, theologians and poets.

Aaron ben Elijah was a proponent of a Karaim version of the Muslim philosophical school of *kalam*, namely of the *madhab/school of thought of Mu'tazila*. That is why in order to understand what was so special about him in the history of Karaism in general and in the history of Nicomedian Karaim theological school in particular one should place this theologian in the context of his epoch and even to start a bit earlier.

As it was mentioned earlier Aaron ben Elijah, being Karaim, belonged to the Karaite version of the Muslim Mu'tazila *madhab/school* of theology.

According to the definition given by Brill's Encyclopedia of Islam, the Mu'atazila is the name of a religious movement founded at Basra, in the first half of the 2nd Hijra/8th century CE by Wasil b. 'Ata' (d. 131/748), subsequently becoming one of the most important theological schools of Islam. The origin of this term -which has the sense of 'those who separate themselves, who stand aside'- remains enigmatic.

According to the Routledge Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature, members of the Mu'tazili school preferred to be known as the 'Champions\People of Monotheism and Justice' (ahl *al-tawhidwa-al-'adl*). They were proponents of a rationalist attitude towards theological discourse and they claimed that the obscurantism and absence of reasoning of most of their fellow Muslims prevented from Muslims to keep the true Monotheism and Justice. Willing to make Islam's case strong against the challenges of other religious traditions, the Mu'tazilis used the tools of reasoning borrowed from Greek and Hellenistic sources in the service of Islam.

Weiss, the author of the article adds that 'although an orthodox theology formulated principally by the Ash'ari school would challenge these Mu'tazili positions on equally rationalist grounds, the Mu'tazili school proved to be a major stimulus to theological thought and continues to represent a heritage valued and to some extent utilized by Muslim thinkers'.

Principles of Mu'tazila

Based on the Mutasilite writings of Muslims, Jews, Qara'im, and Christians of the Middle Ages, i.e. all those who were involved in Mu'tazilite discourse, it is possible to formulate the five basic tenets or principles of Mutazilism:

The first is the Divine unity, *al-tawhid* (in Arabic)/*yichud* (in Hebrew),

The second is the Divine justice, *al-'adl* (in Arabic)/*sedeq* (in Hebrew),

The third is the Divine promise and threat, *al-wa'dwa-al-wa'id* (in Arabic)/*sakharwa-onesh* (in Hebrew),

The fourth is the place between the two places, *al-manzilahbayn al-manzilatayn* (in Arabic)/*beynsadiq la-rasha'* (in Hebrew),

The fifth is commanding the good and prohibiting the evil, *al-amr bi al-ma'rufwa-al-nahy 'an al-munkar* (in Arabic)/*sur me-ra' wa-'ase tov* (in Hebrew),

After the nearly complete disappearance of Mu'tazili theology among Muslims and Jews with the rise of Muslim and Jewish Orthodoxy, they were Karaites who still adhered to the principles of Kalam in general and Mu'tazili in particular.

It is also very important to stress that Aaron ben Elijah of Nicomedia had important predecessors among Karaim Mu'tazila and was in fact one of the last really important Mutazila among Karaim in general and those of Turkey in particular. He continues to use rationalistic arguments from his Karaim predecessors of earlier period, for example these of Jerusalem scholars of 11 century, such as Yusuf al Basir and Yeshuah ben Yehudah, who in turn were loyal pupils of the greatest Muslim mutazili scholar, Kadi Abd-al-Jabbar.

As Daniel Frank argues in one of his article about Karaim, Aaron ben Elijah belongs to the so-called post-Maimonidean period of Karaism and was an adherent of Muslim Kalam school even when the school was not popular anymore among the Muslims.

Aaron ben Elijah's views are summarized in three books which till present days are in use among Karaim.

In the first book, *Etzhayyim* (1346; "Tree of Life"), Aaron ben Elijah tries to create a Karaim *Mutazila kalam* counterpart to Maimonides' Aristotelian philosophy. It was a kind of 150 years delayed Karaim answer to the Maimonides' 'Guide to the Perplexed'.

Modelled on the Maimonides own 'Guide to the Perplexed', Aaron ben Elijah's 'Ets Hayyim is the first major Karaim work of religious philosophy written in Hebrew. Similar to Maimonides, Aaron ben Elijah claims that religious philosophy was an original component of the religion of the sons of Israel. But while Maimonides uses Aristotelianism as the speculative system, Aaron ben Elijah is a staunch proponent of the Mut'azila kalam. Where Maimonides harshly criticizes kalam (Guide to the Perplexed, for example 1: 73-6), Aaron defends Mu'tazilite teachings or sometimes tries to harmonize them with Aristotelianism.

Prof. Aaron Maman clearly shows in his article 'Karaites Hebrew' that Byzantine Karaim attempted to create their own Hebrew vocabulary based on Torah language and different from that of Talmudic Orthodox Jews – the Rabbanites.

And it is important to stress that Aaron ben Elijah tries to use such a specific Karaim vocabulary in Hebrew as well. Even though critical to the Jewish Orthodox attitude to the Torah, Aaron ben Elijah's 'Ets Hayyim is more a Mutazile kalam response to Aristotelianism rather than the usual Karaim critique of Jewish Orthodoxy.

In his second book, Gan Eden (1354; "The Garden of Eden"), Aaron ben Elijah sought to write down the Karaim code of law where through reasoning and scripturalism he attempts to create a different code of practical law from that of his Jewish orthodox opponents. As the usual Karaim way, he tries to base his laws on Bible rather than on the Talmud of the Jews.

The third book of Aaron ben Elijah, Keter Torah (1362; "Crown of Law"), is a commentary on the Torah of Moses, based on the so-called Peshutoshel Miqra, a more literal interpretation of the text based on plain meaning of the words, reason, common sense and Hebrew linguistics.

Aaron ben Elijah also composed poems and hymns which were included later in Karaim prayer book. Among Karaim of his own and later generations his books were of great authority. There is no doubt however that further research about the Karaim in Turkey in general and those in Nicomedia in particular is required.

I would like to thank all the organizers of the conference for the opportunity to shed some light on the history of my Karaim people -in Turkey in general and in Nicomedia\ Izmit in particular.