CHAPTER 14

Representations of a New 'Mental Time' in Karaite Exegetical Sources

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1 Introduction

By the tenth century CE, Arabic culture was intensely literate. Genres with strong oral roots such as Arabic poetry and Tradition (Ḥadīṯ) were committed to writing and circulated as fully written texts. The dogma of *iʿjāz al-qurʾān*, which cemented the Qurʾān's status as an exemplar of Arabic literature in its finest (heavenly-endowed) form, was in place, as was the understanding that all fields of science, especially, linguistics and rational philosophy serve as auxiliary genres in the study of the Qurʾān and its exegesis. The Arabisation of the near-eastern Jews (and Christians), namely, their adoption of the Arabic language and culture was completed by the tenth century CE. This is apparent in the standard Judeo-Arabic script in which many genizah documents are penned. In other words, whereas the Jews spoke and wrote Arabic in various forms long before the tenth century CE, it was during this century that they adopted a standard measure for writing classical Arabic in Hebrew letters.[1]

The historian Jacques Le Goff (1924–2014 CE), in his book *Pour an autre Moyen Age: temps, travail at culture en Occident* (1977; English version: *Time, Work and Culture in the Middle Ages*; 1982) introduced ethnology to the study of the European Middle Ages. Among his various contributions Le Goff developed the concept of mental time (deriving from collective psychology and behavior) as a time out of joint with other (chronological or material) historical time scales. In other words, he showed how historical thinking, in the sense of thinking about the past, is not necessarily linear. We can be living physically in one time yet thinking of ourselves, or experiencing life, in the context

1 On this orthographical stabilisation and further bibliography see M. Polliack "Arabic Bible translations in the Cairo Genizah collections", in *Jewish Studies in a New Europe: Proceedings of the Fifth Congress of Jewish studies in Copenhagen 1994, under the auspices of the European Association for Jewish studies*. Haxen, U., Trautner-Kromann, H. and Goldschmidt Salamon, K.L. (eds.). Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel, 1998, pp. 595–620.

of another (much earlier) time. This is especially true of medieval societies (and by extension, perhaps, more traditional societies). Le Goff illuminated how, in the medieval Christian west, history and memory, past and present, ancient, and contemporary did not constitute binary oppositions. They only gradually drifted apart, thus enabling a prolonged mental experience of the past, as in some way merging with the present.[2] Though Le Goff concentrated on the experience of time in western European historical thinking, his concept of mental time is universal, and in my view at least, one may apply it loosely to non-European, Near Eastern medieval sources, as a fruitful theoretical concept. In these sources, we find a similar process of gradual distancing from the past through growing awareness of its distinctiveness from the present. Still, the past is not altogether binary to the present in the writings of Jewish and Muslim medieval thinkers, as would be typical in many of their modern views of history. The Karaite Bible exegetes lived mainly in Jerusalem of the tenth–twelfth centuries CE, yet they also lived, mentally, in biblical times, and though they thought biblical times were different to theirs, they still tended to see their lives as issuing naturally from ancient forms of thinking and experience.[3]

In this short contribution in honour of the Cairo Genizah Research Unit's fiftieth anniversary, I have chosen to point out three instances of mental time as reflected in medieval Karaite sources. These instances also underlie, in my view, how the rise of literacy in the everyday life and mentality of the Jews of

2 For further discussion of Le Goff's understanding of medieval historical thinking in contradistinction to the modern, see Patrick H. Hutton, *History and Theory*, 33/1 (1994): 95–107 (review of *History and Memory* by Jacques Le Goff). Hutton emphasizes how in Le Goff's view "historical thinking emerged historically out of a rising awareness of differences between past and present realities" (p. 98) and how distancing the past and gaining a critical view of it was an extremely gradual process which began only in the late Middle Ages yet cementing only in modern historical thinking. The medieval sense of history is partly evoked by the French term *longue durée* (literally, "long duration"), introduced by the historian Fernand Braudel, as a standard term of reference in the work of the Annales School of historians which influenced Le Goff. "The term *longue durée* is used to indicate a perspective on history that extends further into the past than both human memory and the archaeological record, so as to incorporate climatology, demography, geology, and oceanology, and chart the effects of events that occur so slowly as to be imperceptible to those who experience them, such as the changing nature of the planet, or the steady increase in population in a particular area" (from 'Longue Durée' in Ian Buchanan, *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*. Oxford: University Press: 2010. https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100114325;jsessionid=64ED8DDB08DCF2FEE9974CA6BD16C8EA, accessed 1 February 2024).

3 Karaite historical thinking has been specifically discussed in the following work: M. Polliack,

the Islamic world, affected the development of new conceptions of Scripture, primarily amongst the Karaites, but also among Rabbanites. In my view, Karaite Judaism, which emerged and became consolidated in the Near East during the ninth–eleventh centuries CE, was in part a mental response to the challenge of literacy, to a large extent, though not of course, as its singular motivation. The Cairo Genizah sources further teach us that this challenge, primarily posed by the ideals of Islamic society and Arabic culture, was one with which the learned Jewish elites clearly identified, as when producing, exchanging, and owning books.[4]

In several works, I have argued that the conceptualisation of the Hebrew Bible as a product of written (as opposed to) oral communication is basic to the Karaite-Rabbanite polemic. It reflects a society that identifies oral communication with uneducated social strata and written or literate communication with the educated man of letters. This type of identification was not part of the pre-Islamic Rabbinic world. The ancient Jewish Sages were undoubtedly educated in Jewish sources, and highly literate in Hebrew and Aramaic (some of them also knew Greek). Their mental world was as sophisticated as that of their medieval counterparts, yet their mentality was not one of literacy; they considered oral communication no less important and worthwhile than written communication. Jewish Rabbinic tradition, which crystallized during the first century BCE to the sixth century CE, did not deem oral communication to be a sign of illiteracy, even when engulfed by a highly literate Greco-Roman and Christian culture. During the Islamic period and certainly from the tenth century CE onwards a mental shift takes place, as we find in genizah documents and other sources; there is a growing identification of oral communication with illiteracy and a clear preference for written communication. This development explains the critical Karaite stance towards Oral Law (*torah še-be-ʿal peh*). It also explains why "normative" Judaism, namely, traditional Rab-

"Historicizing Prophetic Literature: Yefet ben ʿEli's commentary on Hosea and its relationship to al-Qūmisī's 'Pitrōn'", in *Pesher Nahum: Texts and studies in Jewish History and Literature from Antiquity through the Middle Ages Presented to Norman* (*Nahum*) *Golb*. Kraemer, J.L., Wechsler, M.G. and Golb, N. (eds.), Chicago, Illinois: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2012, pp. 149–186. Also cf. the more recent works of M. Zawanoska, "Reconstructing the Past and Conceptualizing the Jewish 'Other': How the Babylonian Geonim Contributed to the Creation of the Founding Myth of Karaism." *History of Religions*, 62/1 (2022): 73–108; and J.H. Andruss, *Jewish Piety in Islamic Jerusalem: The Lamentations Commentary of Salmon Ben Yerūḥīm*. Oxford University Press, 2023.

4 For a detailed discussion see M. Polliack, "The Karaite Inversion of "Written" and "Oral" Torah in Relation to the Islamic Arch-Models of Qur'an and Hadith", *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, 22/3 (2015): 243–302.

binic Judaism, which continued to base itself on modes of oral learning and to uphold them, also, though more gradually and more reluctantly, began to adopt new modes of writing on the Hebrew Bible. These modes included linguistic-contextual exegesis, as apparent in the works of Saadya Gaon and the Spanish Judaeo-Arabic exegetes. Hence, in tune with the Karaite interpreters, Rabbanite commentators also found themselves asking questions about the "textuality" of Hebrew scripture.[5] In doing so, Karaites and Rabbanites formulated their ideas, for the first time in the history of Jewish exegesis, around the concept of written language, and the understanding that the Hebrew Bible was a literary product.

The Karaites were the ones who gave the new mentality the most open or free expression, as already pointed out in the seminal work of Rina Drory, who claimed they spearheaded this development.[6] Hence, we find a keen interest in the literary and linguistic aspects of the biblical text expressed in the writings of Karaites such as Abū Yūsuf Yaʿqūb al-Qirqisānī (d. 960 CE) and Yefet ben ʿEli (d. c. 1009 CE), in terms which remind us of modern "textual theory" or "text criticism". Drory pointed out three types of queries in this respect, namely:

(1) What is the connection between the biblical text and the "real" world? In other words, is the Hebrew Bible describing real events or "inventing" them?
(2) What kind of narrative techniques are employed in the Hebrew Bible?
(3) How does the biblical text build up meaning?

Though the Karaite exegetes did not formulate these questions in the above literary jargon, they were clearly engaging with them, and tried to answer them (and other related questions as well). Their mental time became thus distinguished from traditional modes of thinking on the Hebrew Bible as the revealed "Word of God" to be interpreted through open-ended *midrašic* exegesis, prevalent amongst their Rabbanite counterparts. This was the result of their early embracing of a literate consciousness ushered in by Islam. Let me add to Drory's insights by exemplifying these three queries in the following:

5 See my article (above) and further cf. M. Polliack, "Deconstructing the Dual Torah: A Jewish response to the Muslim model of Scripture", in *Interpreting Scriptures in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Overlapping Inquiries*. Cohen, M.Z. and Berlin, A. (eds.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, pp. 113–130.

6 See R. Drory, *The Emergence of Jewish-Arabic Literary Contacts at the Beginning of the Tenth Century*, Tel-Aviv: Publications of Porter Institute of Poetics and Semiotics, Tel-Aviv University [Hebrew], 1988.

2 Three Aspects of Karaite Text Criticism

2.1 *Is the Hebrew Bible Describing "Real" Events or "Inventing" Them and Does It Offer a "Reliable" Depiction of the Reality of Biblical Times?*

In the introduction to his commentary on Genesis, al-Qirqisānī offers 37 hermeneutic rules, some of which are clearly concerned with the question of whether the Bible contains a "reliable" depiction or transmission of the reality of biblical times. He asks, for instance, whether the Hebrew Bible, upon describing foreign or non-Israelite nations, cites their words in the original language (suggesting these nations might have spoken Hebrew) or translates their tongues into Hebrew; are there signs in the text, asks al-Qirqisānī, as to whether their words were transmitted in the original? (Principle 6.)

Al-Qirqisānī further asserts that the Bible mentions place names according to how these were known in the time of the Bible's composition or writing down (which took place, according to al-Qirqisānī, in Moses's time), and not according to how they were known in earlier historical times when some of the events occurred (Principle 11). Al-Qirqisānī further attempts to distinguish between fictive and non-fictive elements in the text (Principle 5). All these questions derive from a unique mental time that accentuates the difference between reality and the words used to describe it. The Karaite writers appear to deliberate a great deal over the reliable or unreliable depiction of reality in the biblical text, as if they are concerned to ward off criticism in this respect. Naturally, Islamic claims as to the Jews' distortion of God's Word fueled this concern. Yet, it would not have arisen had not a new kind of literary and historical consciousness emerged among the Karaite elite, regardless of Muslim polemic against the Jews.[7]

2.2 *Narrative Techniques*

The Karaites intensely engaged in deciphering biblical techniques in fashioning discourse and narrative. They envisaged a person or persons responsible for employing these techniques, whom they referred to by the Arabic term *mudawwin*, in other words, an authorial-narrator-editor of the biblical text.[8] This served them as a wide and flexible theoretical concept. The differentiation

7 For a discussion of al-Qirqisānī's principles, see L. Nemoy, *Karaite Anthology: Excerpts from the earliest literature*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952, 42ff.; cf. M. Zucker, "Towards Solving the Problem of the Thirty-two Middot and the "Mishnah" of Rabbi Eliezer", *Proceedings of the American Academy of Jewish Research* 23 (1954): 1–39 [Hebrew].

8 See further on this concept M. Polliack "The "voice" of the narrator and the "voice" of the

between the *mudawwin*'s voice and that of the characters is common in Yefet ben ʿEli's works, in particular. Here, I suffice with two examples. First, in commenting on Esther 1:1, Yefet explains the intention of the *mudawwin's* wording:

> By the statement "Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus" he (the *mudawwin*) is referring to all that which the scroll contains, the purpose of which is the recounting of what happened to Israel during his time, for all that which it mentions is connected with them—that is today, since it was the intention of the *mudawwin* to inform us of the matter on account of which Israel enjoined upon themselves (the continual observance of) the two days of Purim, it was inevitable that he should recount that which took place of their affairs (during the reign of Ahasuerus), from their first to their last [...] He then continues to link the report together (*silsilāt al-qawl*), in order to point out that the king prescribed that which Esther and Mordechai had in mind concerning the matter of the annihilation of Israel's worst enemies, and also (to show) what they received as a religious obligation on account of these two days.[9]

Yefet further suggests the *mudawwin* of Esther, whomever he might have been, finalized the text of the Book originally written by Esther, albeit containing all the essential episodes or scenes of the affair. The implication, therefore, is that the *mudawwin* added or subtracted, and perhaps, to a certain extent, refashioned, Esther's "Urtext" into a canonical book which explains the events behind the festival of Purim.

According to Michael G. Wechsler, "it is in the same vein apparently that Yefet implicitly identifies Esther 9:23–28 as a summarizing statement of the *mudawwin* rather than that of Esther when he writes *ad* 9:25: 'The *mudawwin* indicates that the Jews found rest from their enemies (only) when Haman as well as his sons had been impaled.' "[10]

Often throughout his commentary on the Torah too, Yefet systematically distinguishes between the "voice" (*qawl*, literally: 'saying, utterance') of the

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characters in the Bible commentaries of Yefet ben ʿEli", in *Birkat Shalom: Studies in the Bible, Ancient Near Eastern Literature, and Postbiblical Judaism presented to Shalom M. Paul on the occasion of his seventieth birthday*. Cohen, C. (ed.), Winona Lake: Penn State University Press, Vol. 2, 2008, pp. 891–915.

9 Michael G. Wechsler, *The Arabic Translation and Commentary of Yefet ben ʿEli the Karaite on the Book of Esther*, Leiden: Brill, 2008, pp. 167–169. See Wechsler's further discussion on the semantics of *mudawwin* in this work pp. 30–34.

10 Ibid, p. 303.

mudawwin and the direct speech of the characters in the story. A case in point concerns Sarah's words to Abraham, in which she explains her request that he should beget children from her Egyptian maid, Hagar, by admitting that "the Lord has prevented me from bearing children" (Gen 16:2). In his comment on this verse, Yefet compares Sarah's awareness of God's role in her predicament with similar interpretations of barrenness in the cases of Rachel (Gen 30:2) and Hannah (1Sam 1:6), as follows:[11]

> Similarly to this statement, Jacob, may he rest in peace, said (to Rachel): '(Am I in place of God), who withheld from you the fruit of the womb?' (Gen 30:2), **and the authorial-narrator-editor** [emphasis added] said (*wa-qᵃla al-mudawwin*; Gen 30:22): '(and God remembered Rachel and heard her) and opened her womb'. He (= the narrator) attributed the opening of the womb to Him (= to God) just as he referred its prevention from conception to Him. As he said concerning Hannah (1Sam 1:6): 'because the Lord had closed her womb'. And God, the exalted and lofty, included both aspects in one saying (Isa 66:9): 'Shall I, who cause to bring forth, shut the womb?'.

In this comment, Yefet clearly distinguishes between three types of voices in the biblical text: Firstly, the voice of the characters in the story, such as Jacob, which is related in the first-person direct speech form ("Am I in place of God, who withheld from you the fruit of the womb?"). Secondly, the voice of the *mudawwin*, who relates certain data concerning the characters, in the third person form ("and God remembered Rachel and heard her and opened her womb"). Thirdly, the voice of God speaking, in first person direct speech ('Shall I, who cause to bring forth, shut the womb?').

The writing process behind the transition of voices in the narrative span is not discussed by Yefet, nor does he make evident whether the narrator is responsible for quoting the actual words of the human characters, or God, or whether he "merges" in some way with the characters, subsuming their voice. Yefet's primary purpose in applying the distinction between voices remains exegetical in that he alerts the reader to the transition, in order to elucidate a textual feature in the narrative span. Certain sections of text are thus openly marked off as issuing from the *mudawwin*, representing his words, while other sections represent the words of the characters. Why is this so important to Yefet? The answer seems to lie, in my view, in his mental time. Yefet is

11 MS Cambridge, Trinity College (= CTC) 24 (folios not numbered).

troubled by the lack of smoothness or consistency in the Bible's "reportage" or "textualisation" of historical events, real events, real people, or real situations, due to his new sensibility to such matters. In explaining the textual mechanism behind these transitions, he wishes to show there is a logical explanation for the perplexing textual features of the Bible's way in relating "authentic" materials. Yefet's concern with the historical cohesion of the biblical text arises from common Islamic polemic against the Jews, namely, the claim that they distorted (*taḥrīf*) God's message, and hence their texts have been abrogated (*nasḵ*), as impaired or inauthentic, by the Qur'ān. Though he does not mention this openly, Yefet is in fact engaging with this claim. He appears sensitized to what may be criticized as the Hebrew Bible's lack of textual cohesion. This is a clear sign of his mental time, namely, a state of mind, which has shifted from the rabbinic-midrašic traditional reading of the Hebrew Bible as intrinsically multi-significant, regardless of its textual cohesion.[12]

2.3 *The Build-up of Meaning in the Biblical Text*

A major concept in the Karaite understanding of the build-up of meaning is that of the discourse gaps employed by the *mudawwin*. The Karaite grammarian Yaʿqūb Yūsuf ibn Nūḥ used the term *ʾiḵtiṣār* in designating the 'elision of letters in the morphological derivation of a word and the elision of words from a verse'.[13] Ibn Nūḥ's terminology is almost identical to Yefet's, namely, *kalimah muḵtaṣirah al-tadwin* refers to words that 'exist implicitly in the structure of the text but have been omitted in the explicit written form (*ʾuḵtuṣira fī l-tadwin*). The implicit presence of such words in the structure of the text is posited only if some structural feature in the text requires this.'[14] Yefet extended Ibn Nūḥ's grammatical theory to the literary sphere and further developed it, using the notion of elision to reconstruct wider textual units, i.e., as a form of discourse analysis. Thus *ʾiḵtiṣār*, in Yefet's usage, explains the narration process in which certain elements of a narrative span (or a prophetic utterance) are omitted or abridged from the explicit written form of the story (or prophecy), but remain implicit in its literary structure or pattern. It is as if this abstracted structure preserves the contours of an ideal or complete literary form, which was in the mind

12 For further examples of Yefet's identification of narrative technique in prophetic literature and other genres see M. Polliack, "The Unseen Joints of the Text: On the medieval Judaeo-Arabic concept of elision (*iḥtiṣār*) and its gap-filling functions in biblical interpretations", in *Words, Ideas, Worlds: Biblical essays in honour of Yairah Amit*. Brenner, A. and Polak, F.H. (eds.). Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012, pp. 179–205.

13 See G. Khan, *The Early Karaite Tradition of Hebrew Grammatical Thought*, Leiden: Brill, 2000, p. 147.

14 Ibid., p. 133; and further on pp. 134–135, 150.

of the author or compiler-editor of the biblical text. Yet, its explicit expression in the written text could never be complete, since its realisation in the text is partial, due to narration and rhetorical considerations, as well as limitations of space.[15] The Bible translator and interpreter is able, nevertheless, to reconstruct this full structure by comparing between its different realisations in the written text, within the same text-type or genre (i.e., comparisons between different texts within the prophetic, historiographic or narrative genres). In this manner, the interpreter may arrive at the specific significance or accurate *meaning* of the text as intimated by the expression of the abstract structure within the written form of the text. Al-Qirqisānī too discussed the linear structure of the biblical text and its interruption in several of his principles of interpretations (nos. 7–10), including gaps and their usage, and textual foreshadowing.[16]

3 Conclusion

In sum, the above examples demonstrate how Karaite exegetical sources came to reflect a unique mental time, namely, a form of historical thinking, which is beginning to dissociate itself, due to the encounter with Arabic literacy, from the ancient Rabbinic blurring between present and past. Judaeo-Arabic sources from the Cairo Genizah collections reflect how biblical exegetes in the High Middle Ages in the Near East distanced themselves from the ahistorical approach of ancient Rabbinic exegesis.[17] They asked questions about the possible connection between the biblical text and the "real" world. Especially, whether the Hebrew Bible included fictive elements that one can differentiate from non-fictive, historical events. This lead inevitably to the discovery of narrative techniques employed by the Bible's various authors-editors and to literary reflection on the ways the biblical text built up meaning. Though imbued with a biblical world view, and wanting to revive a biblical past, the Karaite exegetes understood this was not possible in practice since the biblical text

15 See further in Polliack, "The Unseen Joints of the Text" (note 12 above) and cf. Khan, *The Early Karaite Tradition* (note 13 above), p. 134.

16 See above note 7.

17 On the Rabbinic Sages' disinclination towards historical realism in biblical interpretation, see M.D. Herr, "The Conception of History among the Sages", Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, 1973, pp. 129–142 [Hebrew]. On the Sages' views on the "historicity" of the stories found in midrashic literature, see C.J. Milikowsky, "Midrash as Fiction and Midrash as History: What Did the Rabbis Mean?" in Ancient Fiction: The Matrix of Early Christian and Jewish Narrative, edited by Jo-Ann Brant et al., Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005, pp. 117–127.

had to be interpreted in new ways that suited their present. They tried to focus on grammatical meaning and the literal sense as a way of regaining confidence in the biblical message, yet they did not engage in midrašic gap-filling, which often deliberately merged the present and past. Rather, they engaged in such questions as formulated above, and tried to answer them (and other related questions as well). Their mental time had become transformed, when compared with the traditional modes of thinking on the Hebrew Bible prevalent amongst the Rabbinic Sages and their Rabbanite counterparts. In this respect Karaism was the beginning-of-the end of the drawn-out, elastic mental time of ancient Rabbinic exegesis. In the next five hundred years Jewish biblical exegesis would experience further critical breaks from this *longue durée*, such as taken by Abraham Ibn ʿEzra or Baruch Spinoza. The transition in Jewish mental time, at least on the hermeneutic level, resulted from the Karaites' early embrace of a new literate consciousness, due to their encounter with medieval Arabic thought and literature.

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