

Yaqub al-Qirqisani: a staunch scripturalist?

Karaite literal understanding and scripturalism
under Islamic rule

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Abstract

Karaism is a Jewish movement that is distinct from mainstream Rabbinic Judaism, as it considers the Hebrew Bible as the single source of authority. Rabbinic Judaism considers the Hebrew Bible *and* the Talmud and Midrash as an authoritative foundation for laws and regulations. Karaism rejects the Rabbinic laws as written down in the Talmud and Midrash. As a result of the Karaite adherence to the written text of the Hebrew Bible, the movement was labeled as 'scripturalist'. The tenth century C.E. saw a peak in polemics between Karaite and Rabbinic scholars. One of the Karaite scholars in this polemical discourse was Yaqub al-Qirqisani. In addition to other topics, Al-Qirqisani wrote guidelines for the interpretation of Hebrew Scripture. This study analyses these guidelines in al-Qirqisani's work 'Principles of Biblical Exegesis' (938 C.E.) to define the nature of al-Qirqisani's scripturalism in the context of its Islamic and Rabbinic environment in the tenth century. The analysis demonstrates that al-Qirqisani's scripturalism does not represent a strict literal adherence to Scripture. Rather, al-Qirqisani's methods represent a rational approach towards Scripture, set against a background of contesting claims to authority.

Introduction

'The Law of the Lord is perfect' (Ps. 19:8)

This Biblical phrase symbolizes the central position that the 'Law of God' held in the tenth century Jewish Karaite community¹. By then, the movement had spread out from Babylonia and Persia and established itself in Jerusalem, where it remained for the next two centuries. The Karaite movement emerged from a variety of Jewish groups with diverse political and religious motivations. In many cases, these motivations related to Rabbinic political control and theological viewpoints. Like Rabbinic Judaism, Karaism existed under Islamic rule and was therefore exposed to Arabic thought, literature and language, as well as Islam, and

¹ As cited by the Karaite scholar Yaqub al-Qirqisani, in the preamble of his commentary on the Torah. Yaqub al-Qirqisani, *Book of Parks and Gardens*, trans. Leon Nemoy, *Karaite anthology. Excerpts from early literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 57.

Islamic politics.² The Karaites particularly endorsed the 'Law of God' in its written form, the Hebrew Bible, and considered it as the single source of Jewish religious law. They did not accept the Rabbinic received tradition, or 'Oral Law', as authoritative. Rabbinic Judaism considered this Oral Law as part of God's revelation to Moses at Sinai. It includes interpretations and adaptations of the written Torah.³ To Rabbinic Judaism, both the written and Oral Torah serve as a basis for the body of regulations and laws known as the Halacha.

The Karaite adherence to the written Hebrew Bible resulted in a split between the Karaite movement and Rabbinic Judaism. The tenth century saw a peak in polemical works of both Rabbinic and Karaite scholars.⁴ Because of its alleged strict adherence to the written Hebrew Scripture, the Karaite movement in all its diversity, was labeled 'scripturalist' for centuries to come.

The topics of research in Karaite studies vary from historical research into the origins of Karaism, or rather 'notions' of Karaism, as shown in the studies by Fred Astren and Leon Nemoj, to the supposed influences or borrowings from the Islamic environment, as for example in the research by Michael Cook, Yoram Erder or Haggai ben-Shammai. In addition the relation with Rabbinic Judaism is a subject of study, in which up to first half of the 20th century the Karaite movement was considered to be a sect, or schism.⁵ In these studies, however, Karaite 'scripturalism' was not studied extensively in its own right. The closest affiliation with 'scripturalism' or rather literal interpretation may be found in the studies by Meira Polliack and Marzena Zawanowska on the translation practices of tenth century Karaites.⁶ However, one question in this discussion remains open: What *is* Karaite scripturalism? Is it indeed a strict literal interpretation of Scripture? Is this interpretation

² Meira Polliack, "Concepts of Scripture among the Jews of the Medieval Islamic World" in *Jewish concepts of Scripture. A comparative introduction*, ed. Benjamin D. Sommer (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 80.

³ H.L. Strack and G. Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, transl. Markus Bockmuehl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 15, 32.

⁴ Fred Astren, *Karaite Judaism and Historical Understanding* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 74.

⁵ Bernard Revel, "The Karaite Halakah and its relation to Sadducean, Samaritan and Philonian Halakha" (PhD diss., Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning, 1911), 1.

⁶ Meira Polliack, *The Karaite Tradition of Arabic Bible Translation. A linguistic and Exegetical study of Karaite translations of the Pentateuch from the tenth and eleventh centuries CE*. (Leiden: Brill, 1997); Marzena Zawanowska, *The Arabic translation and commentary of Yefet ben Eli the Karaite on the Abraham Narratives (Genesis 11:10-25:18)*, (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

superior to all other interpretations? How is scripturalism related to contextual factors, such as politics, history and social factors?

The writings of Yaqub al-Qirqisani in the first half of the tenth century demonstrate the interest in similar questions. One of these works is specifically dedicated to the definition of the principles that need to be considered when interpreting the Biblical text. This work by al-Qirqisani, 'The principles of Biblical Exegesis', forms a preamble to a commentary on the book of Genesis, and has not been studied comprehensively.⁷ I will use this preamble to gain insight into the nature, or character, of the sense of scripturalism as represented by al-Qirqisani. The main question in this thesis is therefore:

What is the nature of Karaite scripturalism portrayed in Yaqub al-Qirqisani's 'Principles of Biblical Exegesis' (938 C.E.)?

First, I will give a short overview of al-Qirqisani and his writings, after which I will discuss the definition of the term 'scripturalism'. For example, does this term merely relate to authority? On the other hand, if authority revolves around an alleged literal interpretation, it is worthwhile to investigate what it is that makes this 'literal'. As a methodological framework, I will introduce a modern categorization, to help to put forth a basic and workable definition of literal understanding. Therefore, this thesis rests on two premises: First, there is the concept of *scripturalism*, or *literalism*, which I will use interchangeably, which is linked to the notion of authority. Secondly, there is the concept of *literal understanding*, which is linked to the meaning that is assigned to a text.

The chapter 'Karaism' provides an overview of the history and features of Karaism. These features include elements that are similar to Islamic theology and rational philosophy. A second theme in this part are the discussions on the Rabbinic chain of tradition and oral tradition. These debates form the background to the question of the role of authority in Karaite scripturalism. For example, is this authority tied to a specific group of scholars, to one exclusive interpretation, or a specific body of Scripture? The history, the environment as well as the development of Karaism form an influential factor in the role of authority in Karaite scripturalism.

⁷ Meira Polliack, ed., *Karaite Judaism. A Guide to Its History and Literary Sources*. (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 371. However, Hartwig Hirschfeld edited a version of this preamble with limited commentary: Hartwig Hirschfeld, *Qirqisani Studies*, (Oxford, 1918).

The second part of the thesis focuses on literal understanding. The Islamic terminology and concepts attested in Karaite as well as Rabbinic understanding of literal sense are explained in this section. This includes a brief insight into the linguistic methods employed by Karaites, and especially by al-Qirqisani. Finally, the tension between these competing understandings of scripturalism and liberalism as applied to Karaism are examined through a Karaite text, the 'Principles of Biblical Exegesis' by al-Qirqisani.

Although important and a source for further research, the aim in this study is not to trace the exact mechanisms and procedures in the derivation of literal understanding in Karaism. Rather, the outlines of the Karaite, and in specific al-Qirqisani's, mechanisms of literal understanding are used to gain insight in the question why Karaites believed that this literal meaning is privileged compared to rival understandings. Finally, the nature of al-Qirqisani's sense of scripturalism should not be taken *pars pro toto*. The close investigation of individual sources, however, can attribute to the awareness that one should be careful in characterizing Karaism merely as 'scripturalist' as a whole.

Yaqub al-Qirqisani

Little is known about the life of Abū Yūsuf Ya'qūb ibn Ishāq ibn Sama'wayh al-Qirqisānī. His surname, Qirqisani, indicates that he was either from Circassia, located in the vast plain now known as northwestern Iraq, Syria and Turkey, or from Karkasan, a small town near Bagdad. As part of his scholarly education he travelled in the Near East and northern India.⁸ Al-Qirqisani lived in the first half of the tenth century, although the exact year of his birth and death are not known.⁹ He is described as the leading Karaite philosopher in the first half of the tenth century.¹⁰ His principal works are Kitāb al-riyād wal-hadā'iq, the Book of Gardens and Parks from 938 C.E. and Kitāb al-anwār wal-marāqib, the Book of Lights and Watchtowers dating from 937 C.E.¹¹

The central text in this thesis, an essay on the rules of Biblical exegesis is usually considered a part of the work Kitāb al-riyād wal-hadā'iq, and is referred to as 'Principles of

⁸ Leon Nemoy, *Karaite Anthology: Excerpts from the Early Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 42.

⁹ Astren, *Karaite Judaism and Historical Understanding*, 73.

¹⁰ Polliack, *The Karaite Tradition of Arabic Bible Translation*, 65.

¹¹ Nemoy, *Karaite Anthology*, 44. Also Hirschfeld, *Qirqisani Studies*, 4.

Biblical Exegesis'. Kitāb al-riyād wal- hadā'iq (KR), includes commentaries on the non-legal portions of the Torah. Besides commentaries on the book of Genesis, the book of Job and the book of Ecclesiastes, the book also contains treatises on the oneness of God, on Mohammed's claim to prophecy and the art of translation.¹² However, the book has only been preserved in an abridged form¹³, known as the 'short commentary'. The essay is a part of the commentary on the book of Genesis, (*Tafsir Bereshit*). The text originally consisted of 37 prepositions, of which 24 have survived in a manuscript preserved in the British Museum.¹⁴ In this essay, al-Qirqisani provides an insight into the main principles of interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, possibly created in response to his contemporary Rabbinic opponent Sa'adyah ben Joseph al-Fayyumi (882–942 C.E.), known as Sa'adyah 'Gaon'.¹⁵

The manuscript 'Principles of Biblical Exegesis' is written in Arabic. A summary of the prepositions has been provided by Hirschfeld, and the first six prepositions as well as the introduction have been translated into English by Leon Nemoy. The book in its entirety forms a sequel to the earlier work Kitāb al-anwār wal-marāqib (Book of Lights and Watchtowers). Kitāb al-anwār wal-marāqib (KA) has an encyclopedic and systematic character and contains thirteen sections with in total almost 500 chapters. The topics in this work range from historical, philosophical, legal, ritual to exegetical subjects.¹⁶

¹² Ibidem, 45.

¹³ Manuscript BL MS Or. 2492.

¹⁴ Manuscript BL MS Or. 2557.

¹⁵ Polliack, *The Karaite Tradition of Arabic Bible Translation*, 65.

¹⁶ Hirschfeld, *Qirqisani Studies*, 3.

Defining 'Scripturalism'

The first question that arises in the investigation into Karaite scripturalism, is the meaning of the term scripturalism itself. What is understood by this term? A random search in dictionaries renders a few initial definitions: (1) 'the literal adherence to a body of scripture'¹⁷, or (2) 'a strict compliance with the literal interpretation of the Bible. Also called literalism.'¹⁸ Literalism, in turn, is described as: (3) 'adherence to the explicit substance of an idea or expression'¹⁹. Scripturalism, then, is somehow related to the literal meaning of utterances in some form or other. Some scholars however, seek to provide a more detailed definition by differentiating between the concepts *literal meaning* and *literalism*.²⁰ In the context of early Islam, Robert Gleave refers to *literal meaning* as 'the meaning the text is believed to have "in itself" solely by virtue of the words used and the rules of the language in which the text is written'. *Literalism* then, is 'the belief that this literal meaning is somehow privileged. It holds advantage over all other species of meaning in the interpretation process because it is considered to have a higher level of epistemological security than rival interpretations'.²¹ In this thesis, this differentiation between literalism and literal meaning forms the starting point for further analysis of Karaite scripturalism and al-Qirqisani's scripturalism in particular. To which degree did Karaite scholars indeed prefer the literal meaning of a text? What is their perception of literal meaning? Once the Karaite scholars determined the literal sense, why did they prefer this to a non-literal understanding? And does this automatically involve an absolute rejection of a figurative or allegorical meaning of an utterance? What exactly represents the body of Scripture that Karaites consider in defining this literal meaning?

¹⁷ "Scripturalism," Merriam Webster, accessed on April 26, 2017, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/scripturalism>.

¹⁸ "Scripturalism," accessed on April 26, 2017, <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/scripturalism>.

¹⁹ "Literalism," accessed on April 26, 2017, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/literalism>.

²⁰ Robert Gleave, *Islam and literalism*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012),1.

²¹ Gleave, *Islam and literalism*,1

At first glance, the idea of 'literal meaning' seems obvious. Commonly, the distinction between factual, neutral and accurate language versus language that is full of figurative or metaphorical terms, seems common-sense. However, on closer investigation it is difficult to establish a firm line between the literal and non-literal. Languages tend to change through their speakers, who assign different meanings to words in order to meet changing conditions over time. For example, new ideas are likely to be expressed in more familiar, metaphorical or figurative terms. After some time, the metaphorical character becomes less apparent, and the expression becomes more literal.²² It is particularly difficult to define when the use of words becomes literal rather than metaphorical. Therefore, some modern linguists, such as for example George Lakoff, deny the distinction between literal and metaphorical use of language altogether.²³ This view is opposite to the classical view on metaphors, which defines metaphors 'as something outside normal language and which requires special forms of interpretation from listeners or readers'.²⁴ In other words, in the classical view, there is a distinction between literal and non-literal use of language. Lakoff's view is part of one of the modern approaches in linguistics, that of cognitive semantics²⁵, whereas the classical view can be found in works of classical theorists as early as Aristotle.²⁶ This classical distinction between literal and non-literal is of interest here, as Karaites referred to this difference themselves. The discussions on literal and non-literal understanding from the eight to the eleventh centuries in Karaite-Islamic surroundings, were clearly marked by a distinction between the literal and the metaphorical. These debates between Karaite scholars and Rabbanites could only have taken place in an environment where the two parties had one common ground: The shared belief that a text has a primary embedded meaning.²⁷ The discussion rather evolves around the preference that is given to different layers of meaning, either the literal or the metaphorical. Dismissing Lakoff's view in this context, however, does not mean that modern concepts, developed since scholarship in the 19th century cannot be used to clarify early medieval scripturalism. In his study on literal meaning and

²² John I. Saeed, *Semantics*, (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 15.

²³ George Lakoff, "The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor," in *Metaphor and thought*, ed. Andrew Ortony, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993), 41,43.

²⁴ Saeed, *Semantics*, 359.

²⁵ Ibidem, 394.

²⁶ Lakoff, "The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor," 1.

²⁷ Gleave, *Islam and literalism*, 1.

interpretation in the Islamic legal theory, Gleave uses concepts from the field of philosophy of language. For example, he employs a typology developed by François Recanati to define different types of literal meaning. The main reason for Gleave to resort to modern theories, such as Recanati's multi-layered classification of literal understanding, is to limit the discussion on the historical and technical use of terminology related to the literal sense in the Arabic interpretative tradition.²⁸ Although Gleave uses Recanati's typology in the context of early Islamic textual interpretation in the field of law, this typology can theoretically be useful in other fields.

A simplified version of Recanati's typology can also be used to gain insight in the Karaite sense of literalness and how it is distinguished from non-literal and metaphorical or allegorical meaning. Recanati's typology of literal meaning can be summarized as follows: (1) The conventional meaning or t(type) literal meaning, which is the meaning a sentence of word according to linguistic conventions of a specific language;²⁹ (2) The utterance, or 'what is said', which may involve contextual elements. This utterance is still literal with a minimal departure from the t-literal: thus m(inimal)-literal;³⁰ (3) The literal meaning including the speaker's intention and contextual factors, but is still rooted in the text, thus: p(rietary)-literal.³¹ For example, in case of the biblical phrase: 'So Moses wrote this law and delivered it to the priests [...]'³², there is a t-literal meaning, in this instance governed by the rules of the English language in which it is translated. However, the phrase is also m-literal, as it stays close to the conventional literal meaning, but the word 'delivered' is implicative. How is the law delivered, on a tablet or in a book? The p-literal meaning, according to Recanati's course of thought, is the fact that there is a temporal order between Moses writing the law and delivering it. A logical order in these events may be implied by the order of the words, but is not part of 'what is said', according to the theory. Finally, non-literalness, according to

²⁸ Robert Gleave, "Conceptions of the Literal sense (zāhir, haqīqa) in Muslim interpretive thought," in *Interpreting Scriptures in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Overlapping Inquiries*, eds. Mordechai Z. Cohen and Adele Berlin, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 185.

²⁹ François Recanati, "Literal/Nonliteral", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 25, no. 1 (2001): 264, <https://doi:10.1111/1475-4975.00048>.

³⁰ Recanati, "Literal/Nonliteral," 268.

³¹ Gleave, "Conceptions of the Literal sense", 190.

³² Deuteronomy 31:9, *New King James Version*, accessed November 6, 2017, <https://www.biblestudytools.com>.

Recanati, is the interpretation of an utterance, by matching the linguistic meaning of a sentence to a situation or circumstance. The non-literal meaning contains elements that are not linguistically encoded in the utterance.³³ In the example of Moses, it is not linguistically encoded that he is a Prophet and that this is a divine law. These features are inferred from situational factors and context. In this case, the context is the Biblical narrative and the account of Moses writing the divine law, that he received from God on Mount Sinai. The non-literal meaning is related to metaphor and figurative speech, to which Recanati remarks: 'The more noticeable the conflict [with a literal understanding], the more transparent the departure from t-literal meaning will be to the language users.'³⁴

However, the definition of what is considered a 'conflict' with literal understanding in an utterance, is dependent on several factors, for example, the native language and the theological or philosophical worldview of the 'receiver' is of importance. I would contend that this particularly comes to the fore in the Karaite understanding of the literal sense, especially in the work of al-Qirqisani. On certain occasions in the 'Principles of Biblical Exegesis', Al-Qirqisani shows a preference for a non-literal meaning, and in a few cases clearly expresses the reasons why he departs from the literal sense. These reasons are related to the Islamic viewpoints in theology and rational philosophy as well as the linguistic, grammatical and exegetical frameworks that developed in the Islamic realm. Additionally, I would argue that the situation in which the 'receiver' of the utterances resides is important in defining why a specific literal or non-literal meaning is preferred. This is a religious, political or social situation, that influences how a body of Scripture is to be interpreted and why this interpretation is authoritative. The context and situation of Karaism in the tenth century is one of polemics with Rabbinic Judaism, principally with the Rabbinic scholar Sa'adyah Gaon. It is also set against the background of its Islamic surroundings with its own stances of thought and history of heterogeneous movements. Finally, the Karaite origins are elusive and equally marked by diversity. Therefore, the next sections will describe this context and history before turning to the literal understanding of al-Qirqisani in his 'Principles of Biblical Exegesis'.

³³ Recanati, "Literal/Nonliteral," 270.

³⁴ Ibidem, 272.

Karaism

The earliest, eighth century, history of Karaism is shrouded in obscurity. The fragmentary sources related to the exact origins of Karaism often date from later centuries, ranging from the late ninth century to the middle of the twelfth century.³⁵ In addition to the paucity of sources related to the exact origins of Karaism, the portrayals of early Karaite history are colored by the opinions of their writers. Rabbinic sources, for example, render a rather simplified and hostile image. In these accounts, Karaism was founded by the Babylonian Anan ben David, in the latter half of the eighth century. In the major and often quoted version of the story, Anan was to become the exilarch, *gaon*, of all Babylonian Jewry. However, he is refused by the Rabbanite scholars because of his 'great lawlessness' and 'lack of piety'.³⁶ Instead, his brother Hananiah who is described as modest and pious, is appointed. Out of jealousy, Anan thus withdraws himself from Rabbinic Judaism. He gathers other Jewish 'dissidents', around him, which is the foundation for the Karaite movement.³⁷ The dissidents are described as 'remnants of sectarian groups such as the Sadducees and Boethusians'.³⁸ In this version of the account, Anan is consequently imprisoned by the Muslim authorities. In prison, he meets a Muslim scholar³⁹, later to be identified as Abu Hanifa, who rejected hadith as the sole source of law in Islam.⁴⁰ Abu Hanifa advises him to convince the authorities that his religion is different from Judaism. According to this account, he subsequently wins the favor of the caliph by claiming that his calendar is based on the actual observation of the new moon; similar to the custom in Islam.⁴¹ The image of Karaism that is conveyed with this account can be summarized as follows: (1) Karaism is a 'dissident' movement, (2) it bears the remnants of sectarian groups such as the Sadducees, (3) it is born out of the 'wicked zeal' ⁴² of Anan who declared: 'Seek diligently in the Torah and do not rely

³⁵ Astren, *Karaite Judaism and Historical Understanding*, 84.

³⁶ Nemoy, *Karaite Anthology*, 4.

³⁷ Ibidem.

³⁸ Astren, *Karaite Judaism and Historical Understanding*, 85.

³⁹ Yoram Erder, "The Karaites' Sadducee Dilemma." *Israel Oriental Studies* 14 (1994): 196.

⁴⁰ Yoram Erder, "The Karaites and mu'tazilism," in *A history of Jewish-Muslim relations. From the origins to the present day*, eds. Abdelwahab Meddeb and Benjamin Stora (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 782.

⁴¹ Astren, *Karaite Judaism and Historical Understanding*, 87.

⁴² Nemoy, *Karaite Anthology*, 4.

on my opinion' and thus rejected Rabbanite authority,⁴³ and (4) the movement is somehow affiliated with Islam. Remarkably, the account is used as authentic by some medieval Karaite scholars⁴⁴, although it clearly bears the marks of Rabbanite anti-Karaite polemics.

Modern scholarship on the origins and development of Karaism

Scholarship in the 19th century questioned the factual veracity of the account of Anan, but continued to consider the Karaite movement as a 'schism' and as an isolated phenomenon.⁴⁵ Recent scholars, starting with Leon Nemoy⁴⁶, and after him Michael Cook, equally designate Karaism as a sect, but regard Karaism in a broader perspective.⁴⁷ The contemporary scholarly consensus is that Karaism emerged from a constellation of heterodox movements.⁴⁸ Yoram Erder, for example, suggests that the followers of Anan were one out of several groups that separated themselves from Rabbinic Judaism in the eighth century. Together these groups constituted the Karaite movement.⁴⁹ Daniel Frank regards Anan ben David as the founder of a legal school rather than a sect. His followers, the 'Ananites' were one of the many Jewish heterodox groups that existed in the Abbasid caliphate. He suggests that: 'The Karaites emerged in the same period, either as an offshoot of the Ananites or as an independent scripturalist group.'⁵⁰ Similarly, Martin Cohen argues that multiple movements, 'frequently in vigorous opposition to one another', form the origins of Karaism.⁵¹

Although it is difficult to pinpoint the exact origins of Karaism, the Karaite 'movement' became a more discernable entity in the second half of the ninth century.

⁴³ Astren, *Karaite Judaism and Historical Understanding*, 78.

⁴⁴ In particular, Elijah ben Abraham (12th Century), see: Nemoy, *Karaite Anthology*, 4; and Astren, *Karaite Judaism and Historical Understanding*, 85.

⁴⁵ Revel, "The Karaite Halakah," 1.

⁴⁶ Leon Nemoy, "Early Karaism. The Need for a New Approach." *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 2/40, no. 3 (January 1950): 308.

⁴⁷ Michael Cook, *Studies in the origins early Islamic Culture and Tradition* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 161-182.

⁴⁸ Meira Polliack, "Medieval Karaism," in *The Oxford handbook of Jewish studies*, ed. Martin Goodman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 295.

⁴⁹ Erder, 'The Karaites' Sadducee Dilemma', *Israel Oriental Studies*, 195.

⁵⁰ Daniel Frank, *Search Scripture well : Karaite Exegetes and the Origins of the Jewish Bible Commentary in the Islamic East*, (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 3.

⁵¹ Martin A. Cohen, "Anan Ben David and Karaite Origins," *The Jewish Quarterly Review, New Series* 68, no. 3 (1978): 130.

However, it has been suggested that due to the diversities within Karaism, it is more accurate to describe the movement as 'notions of Karaism'.⁵² Karaism continued to exist until the present day, in different geographical areas. The movement experienced various cycles of transformations during the course of history. Marzena Zawadowska offers a concise model as for the different stages of development in Karaism in medieval times. First, there is a formative stage in the ninth century that produced the first exegetical works. These works were distinctive in their approach and utilized techniques different from the Rabbinic methods of interpretation. This period is marked by the rational, linguistic and literal methods of the Karaite movement. The second stage is the 'early classical period' in the tenth century. The linguistic and literary exegetical tools used in this period are more sophisticated. Most works are written in Judeo-Arabic and incorporated elements from philosophy, lexicography and other disciplines. The third stage, the 'late classical period' in the eleventh century, is marked by the increased specialization of Karaite scholars in different areas of learning.⁵³ The tenth and eleventh centuries are also marked as the 'Golden Age' of Karaism.⁵⁴

Characteristics of Karaism

As for its characteristics, Karaism is defined as a scripturalist movement of a messianic nature.⁵⁵ In addition, Karaism is associated with an anti-traditional viewpoint, in the sense that the movement opposed the Rabbinical Talmudic literature.⁵⁶ As noted, the early classical period in Karaism during al-Qirqisani's lifetime, saw a set of increasingly sophisticated exegetical tools and the borrowing of philosophical elements. This marks Karaism, particularly in its classical stages, as a forerunner in the area of grammar, linguistics and Bible translations into Arabic. Furthermore, several scholars have suggested several Islamic influences on the movement, such as the influence of Islamic thought in the form of *kalam*.

⁵² Polliack, "Medieval Karaism," 295.

⁵³ Zawadowska, *The Arabic translation and commentary of Yefet ben Eli the Karaite on the Abraham Narratives*, 5.

⁵⁴ Ibidem, 3.

⁵⁵ Polliack, "Medieval Karaism," 295; also Astren, *Karaite Judaism and Historical Understanding*; Frank, *Search Scripture well*.

⁵⁶ Astren, *Karaite Judaism and Historical Understanding*, 72.

In the tenth century, messianic ideas within Karaism flourished, in particular in the form of the 'Mourners for Zion' (*avelei zion*) movement. This Karaite movement used Qumranic texts, such as a copy of the Damascus Document that circulated in the ninth century, from which they recited to hasten the arrival of the Messiah. Apart from distinctive features, such as mourning, millenarianism and the call for the return to Jerusalem, the movement used a rational approach in the interpretation of their Scripture.⁵⁷ The rational approach is also a feature of the Mu'tazilites, which can be distinguished in the work of al-Qirqisani, as will be discussed in a later section. The messianic element in general, according to Fred Astren, served as an instrument in the rejection of Rabbinic Judaism. Whereas Rabbinic Judaism was concerned with the social order within the here and now, Karaites distanced themselves from it, and embraced an activist form of messianism.⁵⁸

Additionally, Karaism is mostly depicted as the 'Jewish variation on the theme of sola scriptura, analogously to movements such as Christian Protestantism and Islamic Shi'ism which aspire to reinstate a revealed text (in Judaism, miqra [the Bible]; in Islam, the Qur'an) as the sole or major basis for religious law.'⁵⁹ Until the present day, this notion is widely spread and used as the main characterization of Karaite Judaism in its entirety. Furthermore, the trademark 'scripturalist' is associated with an absolute rejection of the Rabbinic oral tradition.⁶⁰ Modern Karaite studies have nuanced this picture to a certain degree, by demonstrating the different stances of Karaite thought and attitudes towards Jewish law over time. In addition, numerous studies attest comparable attitudes towards tradition or Scripture, that is the Qur'an, within the Islamic environment in which the Karaites resided.⁶¹ Moreover, closer investigation has revealed that tenth century Rabbinic attitudes towards

⁵⁷ Erder, "The Karaites and mu'tazilism," 783.

⁵⁸ Astren, *Karaite Judaism and Historical Understanding*, 72.

⁵⁹ Meira Polliack, "Concepts of Scripture among the Jews of the Medieval Islamic World," 82.

⁶⁰ Meira Polliack, "Deconstructing the dual Torah. A Jewish response to the Muslim model of scripture," in *Interpreting scriptures in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Overlapping inquiries*, eds. Mordechai Z. Cohen and Adele Berlin (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2016), 113-129, 118; also, Polliack, "Medieval Karaism," 295; Leon Nemoi *Karaite anthology. Excerpts from early literature*; Astren, *Karaite Judaism and Historical Understanding*, 78; Cook, *Studies in the origins early Islamic Culture and Tradition*, 161.

⁶¹ Cook, *Studies in the origins early Islamic Culture and Tradition*, 161-182, and: Michael Cook, "The Opponents of the Writing of Tradition in Early Islam." *Arabica* 44, no. 4, *Voix et Calame en Islam Médiéval* (1997): 437-530; Hüseyin Hansu, "Debates on the Authority of Hadith in Early Islamic Intellectual History: Identifying al-Shāfi'ī's Opponents in Jimā' al-'Ilm," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 136, no. 3 (2016).

the Hebrew Bible show similarities to those of the Karaite scholars. These include, for example, the approaches in translation and interpretation, but also shared theological motives.⁶² Nevertheless, the label 'scripturalist' seems to be firmly attached to the Karaite movement and is still an often-quoted characteristic in the introductions of Karaite topics of research. Inherently, it leaves the movement with a stigma of staunch adherence 'to the letter', or even as a form of awkward fundamentalism.

Thus, the alleged scripturalist character of Karaism as well as the rejection of oral Law have been studied in the context of similar phenomena in Judaism and Islam. Some scholars have linked Karaism to Islamic supposed cases of scripturalism within movements such as Kharijism.⁶³ At the end of the 19th century, Graetz suggested that Anan's 'hostility to tradition' was prompted by Shiites, who rejected traditions next to the Qur'an, the *Sunna*.⁶⁴ This view has been contested by later scholars, as Shiism did not oppose to tradition as such, but rather rejected the legitimacy of those who held that tradition, the caliph and Companions.⁶⁵ Regarding the relation to Jewish scripturalist movements, some scholars, for example Abraham Geiger, Solomon Schechter and William Oesterley in the early 1900s, associated the Karaite movement with second century Jewish scripturalist trends such as the Sadducees and Qumranic sects.⁶⁶ In the second Temple period, the Sadducees rejected the oral tradition of the Pharisees. Hence, some studies regard Karaism merely as a repetition of the Sadducee movement.⁶⁷ Naphtali Wieder suggested a close connection between Qumranic movements and the Karaites, based on terminology and general approach.⁶⁸ Without a doubt, the apparent use of Qumranic texts by the *avelei zion* stimulated these opinions. Nevertheless, these views are questioned by later scholars. Martin Cohen, for

⁶² Haggai ben-Shammai, "The Tension between Literal Interpretation and Exegetical Freedom: Comparative Observations on Saadia's Method," in *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. Eds. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry D. Walfish, and Joseph W. Goering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 42.

⁶³ Cook, *Studies in the origins early Islamic Culture and Tradition*, 180.

⁶⁴ Ibidem, 162.

⁶⁵ Polliack, "Medieval Karaism," 302.

⁶⁶ Ibidem, 300.

⁶⁷ William O.E. Oesterley, *A Short Survey of the Literature of Rabbinical and Mediaeval Judaism*, (1920), 27.

⁶⁸ Wieder presents his ideas in *The Judean Scrolls and Karaism*, (London: East and West Library, 1962).

example, rejects the opinion that Karaites directly descend from the Sadducees, and states that there is no evidence for such a conclusion, although the similarities are remarkable. Furthermore, he suggests that Karaites sought to legitimize their movement by referring to the earlier Sadducee movement.⁶⁹ Similarly, Daniel Frank notes that Karaites may have been inspired by Sadducee works, but emphasizes that such a link cannot be demonstrated conclusively.⁷⁰ Finally, Polliack compares the Qumranic exegesis with Karaite interpretation, and concludes that there are significant differences. For one, Karaites rejected the notion of a final and authoritative interpretation, but instead envisaged this as 'open-ended' as well as open to anyone who wished to interpret.⁷¹

Elements of kalam and Mu'tazilism

From the ninth century onwards, both Rabbanites and Karaites utilized various components with origins in the Islamic Mu'tazilite school of thought. In particular, al-Qirqisani adopted Mu'tazilite theological themes and exegetical techniques.⁷² The use of *kalam*, the foundation of Mu'tazilism in the form of rational philosophy, is attested a few centuries later by Maimonides: 'In addition you will find that in the few works composed by the Geonim and the Karaites on the unity of God and on such matter as is connected with this doctrine, they followed the lead of the Mohammedan Mutakallemim, and what they wrote is insignificant in comparison with the kindred works of the Mohammedans. It also happened, that at the time when the Mohammedans adopted this method of the Kalām, there arose among them a certain sect, called Mu'tazilah, i.e., Separatists. In certain things our scholars followed the theory and the method of these Mu'tazilah. (...) they chanced first to become acquainted with the theory of the Mu'tazilah, which they adopted and treated as demonstrated truth.'⁷³

⁶⁹ Cohen, "Anan Ben David and Karaite Origins," 140.

⁷⁰ Daniel Frank, "Karaite Exegesis," in *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament. I: From the Beginnings to the Middle Ages (Until 1300)*, ed. Magne Sæbø (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 110.

⁷¹ Meira Polliack, "Wherein lies the pesher? Re-questioning the connection Between medieval karaite and qumranic modes of biblical interpretation," *Jewish Studies Internet Journal* 4 (2005), 151-200, 195.

⁷² Erder, "The Karaites and mu'tazilism," 778.

⁷³ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, transl. M. Friedlander, (1956), 108.

Kalam became discernable around the middle of the eighth century a dialectical method of discussing religious matters. The term is a translation of the Greek word *logos*, and is used as such in Arabic translations of philosophical works. Literally this term designates speech, word, or discussion. Additionally, it represents the common term to describe an Islamic rationalist and religious philosophy⁷⁴, in which religious principles and political-religious matters were discussed. Questions on these matters were resolved using reason rather than tradition. Those who practiced *kalam* were called *mu'takallimun*. The *mu'takallimun* must be distinguished from their opponents, the *falsafa*, who practiced a Neoplatonic interpretation of Aristotelianism.⁷⁵ The rise and development of *kalam* can be positioned in a political or sectarian as well as a cultural framework. As for the political aspect, Joseph Van Ess argues that one of the most prominent schools of *kalam*, Mu'tazilism, is 'a product of the third Muslim civil war which resulted in the Abbasid revolution'.⁷⁶ ⁷⁷ He mentions that, the Mu'tazilites in their formative phase, were dissatisfied with the Umayyad authority and associated themselves with other opponents of the regime. According to Van Ess, they used the example of the first civil war as their argument; this event had destroyed the 'adala' (divine justice); 'the moral integrity and trustworthiness of those who were responsible for the bloodshed; therefore all of them, 'Uthman, 'Ali, Mu'awiya and the others, can no longer be accepted as witnesses.'⁷⁸ Mu'tazilism was not the only movement to use the example of the first civil war. This event, and in particular the battle of Siffin (657 C.E.) also served as a motive for the alleged violent rebellion of the Kharijites. Other opponents, such as the Murji'a, represented a more moderate opposition.⁷⁹ Hence, the Mu'tazilite protests are to be regarded within the dynamics of contemporary and previous sectarian opponents to the Umayyad regime, acting from both a political and

⁷⁴ Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The philosophy of the Kalam*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 1.

⁷⁵ Haggai Ben-Shammai, "Kalam in medieval Jewish philosophy," in *History of Jewish philosophy*, eds. Daniel Frank and Oliver Leaman, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 66.

⁷⁶ Josef Van Ess, "Political Ideas in Early Islamic Religious Thought," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 28, no. 2 (2001), 151-164, 154.

⁷⁷ The exact origins, theological views of Mu'tazilism and the origin of the term Mu'tazila, are still a topic of debate in scholarship. Compare: Sabine Schmidtke, "Neuere Forschungen zur Mu'tazila unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der späteren Mu'tazila ab dem 4./10. Jahrhundert," *Arabica* 45, no. 3 (1998), 379.

⁷⁸ Van Ess, "Political Ideas in Early Islamic Religious Thought," 154.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*, 158.

ethical-theological perspective. After the Abbasid revolution, Mu'tazilite scholars seem to have had a role as advisors in the court of the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun (786-833 C.E.), although his advisors were not exclusively Mu'tazilite. Their influence during his reign can be traced in the hostile attitude towards 'literalists', or traditionists such as the scholar Ibn Hanbal (780-855 C.E.) in matters of interpretation and discussions on the createdness of the Qur'an.⁸⁰ The Mu'tazilites lost their political role once caliph al-Mutawakkil ended the persecution of literalists, in 851 C.E.⁸¹

Besides the political and theological aspects of the early kalam, or rather Mu'tazilite, movement, certain cultural factors played a role. These factors concerned Greek philosophical and scientific works, which were translated from Greek and Syriac into Arabic as early as, and even before, 750 C.E. These works introduced the Greek philosophical tradition to Muslims in general.⁸² This 'influence' is attested in the works of two Arabic writers, Ibn Hazm (994-1064), an Andalusian historian, philosopher and theologian,⁸³ and al-Shahrastani (1086-1153), a historian of religious and philosophical doctrines.⁸⁴ These scholars mention the Greek origins of specific notions in kalam, such as for example the 'theory of atoms'.⁸⁵ Apart from these Greek influences, modern scholarship has identified other possible sources of influence on kalam, such as Christian influences, Persian dualism, Manicheanism and Indian influences.⁸⁶ In the context of Karaism however, two main components of Mu'tazilism are of importance. First, the political-theological dynamics from which Mu'tazilism seemed to have emerged, and secondly the principles of the Mu'tazilite theological system. These principles provide an important setting for the discussion of Yaqub al-Qirqisani's work 'Principles of Biblical exegesis'.

⁸⁰ Michael Cooperson, *Al-Ma'mun*, (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2005), 29-30, 115, 125.

⁸¹ Camilla Adang, *Muslim writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible. From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm*, (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 51.

⁸² ben-Shammai, "Kalam in medieval Jewish philosophy," 66.

⁸³ "Ibn Hazm", Reference Works Brill online, accessed on May 20, 2017
http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/ibn-hazm-COM_0325?s.num=0&s.f.s2_parent=s.f.book.encyclopaedia-of-islam-2&s.q=ibn-hazm.

⁸⁴ "Al-Shahrastani", Reference Works Brill online, accessed on May 22 2017,
http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/al-shahrastani-SIM_6769?s.num=0&s.q=shahrastani.

⁸⁵ Wolfson, *The philosophy of the Kalam*, 64-65

⁸⁶ Ibidem, 66-67.

The Mu'tazilite principles can be summarized in five main theological doctrines. The first two principles became a trademark of the school, whose followers became known as '*ahl al-'adl' wa-'l-tawd'*', 'the people of justice and unity'.⁸⁷ These are the principles of (1) unity (*tawhid*) and (2) divine justice (*'adl*). Related to these main standpoints, there are the principles of (3) 'reward and punishment' (*al-wa'd wa-'lwa'd*), (4) classification of human behavior according to ethical and religious norms (*al-asm' wa-'l-akm*), and finally (5) preventing the evil and commanding the good.⁸⁸ The first principle, unity, designates the absolute oneness of God. God cannot be equaled or compared to humankind, and is incorporeal. Humans cannot perceive God with their senses, but they can understand his essence, his being, by his actions. Although God is presented in Scripture through a multiplicity of actions, he is and remains one.⁸⁹ These actions, for example God's ability to see, hear or speak, are represented in Scripture in such a manner, due to the limitations of human language in which God transmits his message.⁹⁰ The strict adherence to an anti-anthropomorphist view created difficulties in the interpretation of Qur'anic texts. As the Mu'tazilites acknowledged, the Qur'an contains passages in which God is literally described with bodily organs, emotions and gestures. The Mu'tazilites therefore utilized exegetical techniques, such as the use of metaphors, to justify the anthropomorphic descriptions in the Qur'an.⁹¹ According to Ben-Shammai, this form of interpretation was a continuing source of conflict with literalists and traditionalists.⁹² The Mu'tazilite exegetical techniques however, were based on rational premises. Reason was rather meant to complement Scripture, and vice versa.⁹³ The second Mu'tazilite principle, that of divine justice, addresses the freedom of choice and relates directly to the third and fifth principle. It includes the idea that every human being is fully accountable for his deeds, and is rewarded or punished accordingly in the afterlife. The general notion is that God had given human beings reason to define wrong and right. In addition, the idea that human beings have the ability to define what is wrong

⁸⁷ ben-Shammai, "Kalam in medieval Jewish philosophy," 67.

⁸⁸ Ibidem.

⁸⁹ Erder mentions that this is also a contradiction of the Christian notion of Trinity: Erder, "The Karaites and mu'tazilism," 784.

⁹⁰ ben-Shammai, "Kalam in medieval Jewish philosophy," 67.

⁹¹ Ibidem.

⁹² Ibidem.

⁹³ Ibidem.

and right, implies that everyone has a duty to oppose injustice and 'prevent the evil'.⁹⁴ This would include, or would even lead directly to the resistance of an evil ruler. Finally, the fourth principle concerns the intermediate position held by the Mu'tazilites in the discussion on believers and unbelievers. This debate revolved around the position of unbelievers, or sinners in the Muslim community. Khariji for example, believed that a true Muslim can be defined by his deeds. Sinners, then, can be declared apostates because of their sinful deeds. The Mu'tazilites held a more moderate position, which deferred this decision to God. If a sinner believes in God in his heart, he is considered neither a believer or an unbeliever.⁹⁵ Another principle comprises a rather complex theory of atomism, that possibly originated in Greek and Indian philosophies. It represents the idea that everything consists of atoms. The existence or extinction of every atom is a creation of God. This theory also forms the Mu'tazilite belief that the world is created by God *ex nihilo*.⁹⁶ These elements of *kalam* and Mu'tazilism represent merely one aspect of the Islamic environment in which Karaism resided. In addition to a specific stance of thought, this environment spurred tensions between Rabbinic Judaism and Karaism.

Political environment and questions of authority

Karaism, or notions of Karaism, emerged and developed under Islamic rule. This Islamic environment, created challenges, both within the Jewish communities and with their Islamic surroundings. Under Muslim rule, once isolated Jewish communities now encountered Rabbinic leadership, the exilarchate and the Rabbinic academies. At the same time, these communities were confronted with the heritage of the internal schisms of the nascent Islamic community.⁹⁷ The far-flung Jewish communities preserved traditions that were reintroduced into the Rabbinic religious system. In response, rabbis sought to strengthen their own religious and social system.⁹⁸ According to Astren, the Rabbinic

⁹⁴ Ibidem, 68.

⁹⁵ Daniel W. Brown, *A new introduction to Islam* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 180-181.

⁹⁶ ben-Shammai, "Kalam in medieval Jewish philosophy," 67, 68.

⁹⁷ Astren argues that similar tensions existed among Muslims, as Muslim scholarly and pietistic groups 'sought alternatives to the imperial, absolutist Islam that was established [...] in the first two centuries A.H', see: Astren, *Karaite Judaism and Historical Understanding*, 29.

⁹⁸ Astren, *Karaite Judaism and Historical Understanding*, 27.

movement sought 'to create political hegemony, monetary supply, theological orthodoxy and legal conformity.'⁹⁹ The activities of the Rabbanites were tolerated and passively encouraged by the Islamic caliphate: Not only did the caliphate recognize the exilarch as 'a prince of the Jews', it also allowed Rabbinic Judaism autonomy in religious and communal matters in the form of *dhimmah*. Under these conditions, Rabbinic Judaism could propagate the Talmud as a 'constitution of local communities', with the rabbis as the 'only authorized interpreters' of its text.¹⁰⁰ The redaction of the Babylonian Talmud finished shortly before the arrival of Islamic rule in the seventh century. The Talmud encompassed the '*torah she-be'alpeh*', which is the oral Jewish tradition that has been written down in the Rabbinic midrashic and mishnaic literature.¹⁰¹ Astren notes that the canonization of the Talmud, resulted in a Rabbinic emphasis on liturgy, midrash and halakha, instead of a direct concern with the biblical text itself.¹⁰² These activities of the Rabbanites caused opposition among local and regional Jewish communities, leading to the emergence of heterodox, proto-Karaite movements. The resistance was not only directed toward the political, social and legal aspects of Rabbinic activity, but also referred to Rabbinic theological and interpretative methods.¹⁰³ Hence, Karaite movements questioned the validity of the Talmudic text and consequently considered the text of the Bible (*Tenach*) as the only legitimate source for law and practice. There are two aspects that need consideration on this point: First, there is the question of authority of texts, supported by a so called 'chain of tradition'. For example, Meira Polliack argues that Karaites 'did not reject the content of oral tradition altogether'.¹⁰⁴ Instead, they rejected the oral law as a legitimate basis for laws and especially the traceability of this body of literature to Moses.¹⁰⁵ Secondly there is the distinction between oral and written transmission of texts. This distinction is attested in tenth century Karaite writings, and leads to the question whether the rejection of the oral law relates to the mode of transmission, or the fact that it has been written down.

⁹⁹ Ibidem, 29.

¹⁰⁰ Ibidem, 28.

¹⁰¹ Polliack, "Concepts of Scripture among the Jews of the Medieval Islamic World," 80.

¹⁰² Astren, *Karaite Judaism and Historical Understanding*, 29.

¹⁰³ Ibidem, 29.

¹⁰⁴ Polliack, "Concepts of Scripture among the Jews of the Medieval Islamic World," 81.

¹⁰⁵ Ibidem, 89.

The chain of tradition

Rabbinic Judaism constructed a chain of tradition to position itself as the inheritor of the divine law given to Moses as early as the first centuries C.E., although earlier vague notions existed before this period. The development of the chain of tradition and its different works to attest its different stages, forms a study in its own right. In the context of tenth century Karaism, it is important to note that this quasi-historical genealogy became especially important during the Islamic period, as Islam created similar constructs in the form of *hadith*.¹⁰⁶ However, it should be noted that the hadith represented the Muslim oral tradition, but it did not have the same status as the Jewish oral law. Nevertheless, in this Islamic environment Rabbinic Judaism wished to enforce the Rabbinic authority of the oral law, by seeking equivalents to the hadith literature. Rabbis therefore evoked the authority of ‘the elders’ by emphasizing the idea that Moses received an additional revelation to the Torah at Mount Sinai. This revelation however, was not to be written down, but was learned by heart and transmitted orally by masters to disciples.¹⁰⁷ The form of this succession and transmission can be described as: ‘Rabbi X said, “I have received a tradition from Rabbi Y, who heard it from his teacher, and his teacher from his teacher, as a law given to Moses at Sinai.”’¹⁰⁸ Astren notes that from the late eighth century onwards, this information was supplemented with ‘notes’, such as information on historical events, but also with information on the transmitters. For example, certain wonders are described that are associated with the transmitter’s death. Such an event would give the transmitter a divine aura of authority.¹⁰⁹ One of the major opponents of Karaism in the tenth century, Sa’adyah Gaon, represents an example of the increased use of the chain of tradition in a separate work, *Sefer ha-Galui*. In this work, he attempts to prove the transmission of tradition by describing a chronological account of history.¹¹⁰

Hence, Astren argues that an already existing notion of the chain of tradition within Judaism was enforced and further developed by the presence of Islamic parallels. The Karaite rejection of the chain of tradition encompassed the rejection of the authority of the

¹⁰⁶ Astren, *Karaite Judaism and Historical Understanding*, 40.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibidem*, 46.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibidem*, 55.

¹¹⁰ *Ibidem*, 56.

Rabbinic ‘masters’ in this chain and their ‘rulings and opinions’.¹¹¹ In addition, Polliack argues in her research that Karaites, in particular al-Qirqisani and Salmon ben Jeroham (b. c.915 C.E.), recognized that the Rabbinic concept of ‘dual Torah’, affected the authenticity of the Hebrew Bible compared to a ‘Muslim model of a singular Scripture’.¹¹² The oral law in particular, provoked Muslim criticism of corruption of the Hebrew Bible. The Karaite scholars, according to Polliack, attempted to re-establish the Hebrew Bible as the sole source of law and revelation to counter Muslim accusations of *tahrif*, or ‘scriptural falsification’.¹¹³ The analysis of al-Qirqisani’s ‘Principles of Biblical Exegesis’, shows indeed a refutation to allegations of falsification, as will be demonstrated in the analysis of his work. However, is the Karaite rejection merely a question of authority, a response to its Islamic environment, or are there other principles at stake?

Surely, models of opposition to tradition would not have been a foreign idea. In the Muslim community, opposition to the hadith is attested in Islamic sources, such as those of Muhammad b. Idris al-Shafi’i (d.820 C.E.). Al-Shafi’i described several opponents of hadith. These opponents rejected the hadith for the following reasons: First, the argument that the Qur’an provides all information for the derivation of laws and therefore explanations on the same topic in the Hadith are unnecessary; secondly, that hadith contains contradictory rulings in comparison to the Qur’an. The opponents remain unnamed in al-Shafi’i and sometimes have been associated with Mu’tazilites, although they have convincingly been identified as Khariji by Hüseyin Hansu.¹¹⁴ This is particularly interesting, as the seventh century Khariji have been associated with exceptional piety that is connected to the oral transmission of Scripture.¹¹⁵ In particular, the origins of the Khariji are associated with the

¹¹¹ Astren, *Karaite Judaism and Historical Understanding*, 78.

¹¹² Polliack, “Deconstructing the dual Torah,” 115.

¹¹³ Gabriel Said Reynolds, “On the Qur’anic Accusation of Scriptural Falsification (*taḥrīf*) and Christian Anti-Jewish Polemic,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 130, no. 2 (2010): 190.

¹¹⁴ Hansu, “Debates on the Authority of Hadith in Early Islamic Intellectual History: Identifying al-Shāfi’ī’s Opponents in *Jimā’ al-’Ilm*,” 521.

¹¹⁵ The excessive piety of Khariji described in classical Arabic sources such as Al-Balādhurī (d. c. 892) and Al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) may have served a political purpose, and thus may be questioned, as argued by Hannah Hagemann: “Challenging Authority: Al-Balādhurī and al-Ṭabarī on Khārijism during the Reign of Mu’āwiya b. Abī Sufyān,” *Al-Masāq* 28, no. 1 (2016): 36-56.

qurra, who allegedly recited the Qur'an during the early Islamic battles on the battlefield.¹¹⁶ Is comparable piety in combination with the preference of oral transmission a part of tenth century Karaite 'scripturalism'?

Oral transmission

To the Khariji, Scripture is the divine revelation that should not be tampered with. Scriptural interpretation forms a boundary that impedes the reception of God's message by human beings. In addition, this message is allegedly to be transmitted in oral form, to remove 'the veil between human and divine'. Oral recitation represents a sacred space in which God's judgement prevails.¹¹⁷ According to Paul Heck, it is particularly the fact that a '*written agreement*' [emphasis added] became authoritative, which created distance to the revelation and paved the way for interpretation.¹¹⁸ An in-depth comparison of the Khariji and Karaite movements goes beyond the scope of this paper, and may even be impossible due to the heterogeneous character of these movements and the fragmentary sources. Obviously, the Kharijite case represents objections towards a written version of the Qur'an, whereas the Karaites display an objection towards the distortion of Jewish oral law, but not the Hebrew Bible in its written form. Nevertheless, there are attestations in tenth century Karaism that clearly mark a discontentment with the fact that the oral tradition had been written down:

'The Holy One has given you an oral Law,
So that you would recite it orally,

¹¹⁶ The origins of Kharijism remains the subject of scholarly contention, where Calder, Juynboll and Shaban describe the *qurra* as 'villagers', and Kenny, Heck and Madigan interpret the *qurra* as Qur'an readers. See: Norman Calder, "The Qurra and the Arabic lexicographical tradition," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 36, no.2 (1991): 297, and Jeffrey T. Kenney, *Muslim rebels. Kharijites and the Politics of Extremism in Egypt*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 24; Paul Heck, "Eschatological Scripturalism and the End of Community. The Case of Early Kharijism," *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 7 (2005): 141; Daniel A. Madigan, *The Qur'an's self-image. Writing and authority in Islam's scripture*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 25; see also n43 where Madigan acknowledges Calders view.

¹¹⁷ Heck, "Eschatological Scripturalism and the End of Community," 138.

¹¹⁸ Ibidem, 140 n11, 143.

For, say you, He had deemed it, in His wisdom, a laudable command.
Why, then, did you write it down in ornate script?
Had the Merciful One wished to write it down,
He would have had it written down by Moses.
Now did He not give it to you to be studied orally,
And had He not ordained it not to be inscribed in a book?
Yet they altered God's alleged words and wrote it down,
And instead of studying it orally they transferred it into writing.'¹¹⁹

This passage from the 'Book of the wars of the Lord' was written by the Karaite Salmon ben Jeroham demonstrates a disproof of the fact that oral tradition had been written down. In subsequent passages, he promotes the sole validity of the written Scripture, the Tanach. Furthermore, Jeroham criticizes contradictions within the Mishnah and questions the chain of scholars by which this law was transmitted. He indicates that the Rabbanites 'have drawn God's wrath upon themselves'¹²⁰, and reprimands them for placing themselves in the position of Moses while they do not have the 'holy spirit' in them.¹²¹ In fact, Jeroham accuses the Rabbinic Jews of altering 'God's alleged words' and treating God's commandments with contempt. In the ninth century, a similar accusation towards Rabbinic Judaism can be read in the commentary on the Qur'an by al-Tabari (829–923 C.E.). He discusses the Qur'anic verses that consider the corruption of Scripture¹²² and states: 'God made their hearts impure, which led to their misrepresenting and altering the words that their Lord had revealed to Moses.'¹²³ Camilla Adang argues that al-Tabari specifically notes the distortion of God's spoken words and not the written Torah. She concludes that al-Tabari specifically implies that the rabbis distorted the truth with 'their tongues' and wrote their own book to be used next to the Torah.¹²⁴

¹¹⁹ ben Jeroham, "The Book of the Wars of the Lord", 74-75.

¹²⁰ Ibidem, 75.

¹²¹ Ibidem, 78.

¹²² The Qur'an does not mention *tahrif* as a specific term, but mentions Jews or Christians corrupting their Scripture through either textual modifications or misinterpretation. Qur'anic verses: 2:75; 4:46; 5:13 and 5:41. "Tahrif", Oxford Islamic Studies Online, accessed October 24, 2017, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2306>.

¹²³ Adang, *Muslim writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible*, 228.

¹²⁴ Ibidem.

Yet, there are no explicit examples that Jeroham relates the oral recitation to a 'sacred space' in which the direct experience of revelation is expressed. As such, there is no direct reference to piety other than Jeroham's disproof of the fact that the rabbis positioned themselves in the footsteps of a Prophet, Moses, by writing down an 'oral' revelation. Because of the rabbi's 'lack of holiness', the written revelation therefore lost its divine character. Rabbanites however, did not per definition perceive the written oral law as a sacred space either. The oral Torah was not a holy object, and contrary to the production of Torah scrolls, there were no limitations as to the writing itself, the scribes or materials.¹²⁵ In his research, Martin Jaffee contends that these written texts of oral Law were meant merely as a mnemonic tool. He states: 'These mnemonic traces of revelation could be restored to life as Torah only in the mouths of Sages and disciples.'¹²⁶ The oral Law, then, is placed in a Rabbinic structure of masters and disciples, where the contents are transmitted solely in the context of controlled Rabbinic teaching.¹²⁷ Rather than rejecting the writing of oral law or its contents per se¹²⁸, the Karaites, in this case Jeroham, contested the Rabbinic structure in which the transmission took place.

Literal meaning

Literal meaning in Islamic context: Terminology and concepts

In Islam, several notions of literal meaning were developed from the eighth until the early ninth century. These notions found their way into a more sophisticated framework in the tenth century and onwards. However, the awareness of a literal versus a non-literal understanding may be embedded in the Qur'an itself. Indications of what would become terminology for literal and non-literal meaning, and subsequent modes of reading and

¹²⁵ Martin S. Jaffee, "A Rabbinic Ontology of the Written and Spoken Word: On Discipleship, Transformative Knowledge, and the Living Texts of Oral Torah," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65, no. 3 (1997): 541.

Jaffee, "A Rabbinic Ontology of the Written and Spoken Word," 542.

¹²⁷ Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 42.

¹²⁸ Others suggest that there was opposition to oral culture as illiterate, an opinion held by elites in a new system in which books were regarded with esteem, compare Polliack, "Deconstructing the dual Torah," 116.

interpretation can be found in several verses. Robert Gleave presents these indications in an extensive research on literalism and literal meaning in the context of early Islamic legislation. First, the idea of a primary literal meaning may relate to the statement that the Qur'an presents itself as written in clear Arabic, *lisān 'arabi mubīn*, as stated in for example in verse 43:3 of the Qur'an: 'Indeed, We have made it an Arabic Qur'an that you might understand.'¹²⁹ In this view, every Qur'anic verse must be regarded as presented in accurate, literal language, termed *haqīqa*.¹³⁰ *Haqīqa* does not represent a meaning as such, but is rather a category that describes how language is used. In this sense, the speaker intends to express the same meaning as the word's own meaning. If the speaker intends to convey another meaning than the 'owned' meaning, this is designated as *majaz*, the non-literal usage of language.¹³¹

On the other hand, the Qur'an also reflects upon itself and mentions a degree of ambiguity in verse 3:7 (sūrat āl 'im'rān): 'It is He who has sent down to you, [O Muhammad], the Book; in it are verses [that are] precise - they are the foundation of the Book - and others unspecific.'¹³² Secondly, according to Gleave, there are additional clues in the Qur'an that indicate that literal and non-literal are distinguished, albeit in an evasive manner. One clue is the use of the terms *zahir* and *batin*, which are used as a contrasting pair throughout the Qur'an. The root for *zahir*, z-h-r, is typically used in the sense of 'to appear', 'to become manifest', or 'to prevail over'. *Zahir* then means *apparent*, *external* or *manifest*. As an opposition, *batin* means as much as *inward* or *hidden*.¹³³ Thirdly, the terms *tafsir* and *ta'wil* can be found in the Qur'an. *Ta'wil* is used in several instances in the Qur'an, for example in the earlier mentioned verse sūrat āl 'im'rān. *Tafsir* however, appears only once in Q25:33. These terms are widely translated as 'interpretation', and were meant to uncover the true meaning of a text. *Tafsir* and *ta'wil* became known as exegetical methods in Islam in

¹²⁹ "Chapter (43) sūrat l-zukh'ruf (The Gold Adornment)", accessed on July 29, 2017, <http://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=43&verse=3>.

¹³⁰ Gleave, "Conceptions of the Literal sense", 184.

¹³¹ Gleave, *Islam and literalism*, 36.

¹³² <http://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=3&verse=7> "Chapter (3) sūrat āl 'im'rān (The Family of Imrān)", accessed on July 29, 2017, <http://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=3&verse=7>.

¹³³ "Zahir", Oxford Islamic Studies Online, accessed on July 29, 2017, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2551>.

subsequent centuries. Whereas tafsir is used in interpreting the outward or *zahir* meaning of the text, *ta'wil* is a method of allegorical interpretation.¹³⁴

Literal meaning in tenth century Rabbinic Judaism: Sa'adyah Gaon

Peshat, or literal interpretation of the Biblical text in Rabbinic Judaism, continued to develop further in the medieval period, particularly through the exegetical activities of Rashi (Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac; Troyes, 1040–1105 C.E.) and Abraham Ibn Ezra (Spain, Italy, France, England, 1089–1164 C.E.).¹³⁵ In the Talmud, Rabbi Kahana states: 'a verse does not depart from its literal meaning' (*ein mikra yotze middei peshuto*).¹³⁶ This rather marginal Talmudic statement became the basis for the distinction in *peshat* and *derash* as two complementary terms in the medieval period. The literal interpretation or the 'plain sense exegesis' of the Bible became connected to the term *peshat*. Although initially, the term did not simply represent a literal meaning, but rather an opinion 'sanctified' by a long tradition.¹³⁷ The contrasting term is *derash*, which represents an allegorical or moral explanation.¹³⁸ The latter form can be found in the Talmud. From the ninth century onwards, some Rabbinic exegetes abandoned this allegorical, or midrashic form of interpretation which proclaims that the true meaning of Scripture is not apparent at first sight. Instead, Rabbinic Judaism developed different strategies of Bible interpretation that incorporated new methods, which were borrowed from surrounding Muslim and Christian cultures.¹³⁹ However, the Rabbinic exegetes employing these new techniques, tried to remain faithful to the Rabbinic tradition. For example, some scholars were keen to use the Talmudic *peshat* maxim as a defense against Karaite scholars, who, as a generalized statement, did not consider the authority of

¹³⁴ "Tawil", Oxford Islamic Studies Online, accessed on 18 January 18, 2016, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2358?hi=0&pos=7936>.

¹³⁵ Mordechai Z. Cohen, "Emergence of the Rule of Peshat in Jewish Bible exegesis," in *Interpreting Scriptures in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Overlapping Inquiries*, eds. Mordechai Z. Cohen and Adele Berlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 205.

¹³⁶ "Babylonian Talmud, tractate Shabbat 63a", The William Davidson Talmud, accessed on November 1, 2017, <https://www.sefaria.org/Shabbat.63a?lang=bi>.

¹³⁷ Strack and Stemberger, transl. Markus Bockmuehl, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 235.

¹³⁸ Lindsay Jones, *Encyclopedia of Religion* (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2005), 865-870.

¹³⁹ Cohen, "Emergence of the Rule of Peshat in Jewish Bible exegesis," 205.

the Talmud. The *peshat* maxim thus became a hermeneutical principle within Rabbinic Judaism from the ninth to the eleventh centuries.¹⁴⁰ In this timeframe, which became known as the ‘Geonic’ period, an important Rabbinic exegete is Sa’adyah Gaon (882–942 C.E.). He served as the head of the Sura Academy in Baghdad and used a rational, grammatical method of interpretation of the Bible. His work comprises interpretations and translations into Arabic, among which commentaries on Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy, as well as various other portions of the Bible.¹⁴¹ Sa’adyah endeavored to offer complete translations, known as the *Tafsir*¹⁴², of the Torah to a Jewish Arabic-speaking audience. However, as various modern scholars have noted, his translations show deviations from the original Hebrew. David Freidenreich for example, notes in his analysis of Sa’adiyah’s *Tafsir*, that he occasionally departs from the Biblical text and introduces interpretations from the Qur’an or other Islamic sources. One instance relates to the color of the purification heifer that is mentioned in the Book of Numbers. Here, Sa’adyah prefers the ‘Qur’anic color of the special cow to be more reasonable and therefore more accurate than the color stipulated in the Torah and unhesitatingly accepted in Talmudic sources’.¹⁴³ On a linguistic level, Sa’adyah used lexical substitutes for Hebrew nouns, particularly in the case of anthropomorphisms in the text.¹⁴⁴

Although the eleventh century scholar Ibn Ezra refers to Sa’adyah as the founder of *peshat* interpretation, Sa’adyah essentially employs a range of Qur’anic interpretative methods and terminology.¹⁴⁵ For example, he states that the language of the Bible is clear, and should be interpreted by its apparent (*zahir*) meaning. Sa’adyah offers an additional term, which he associates to *zahir*: the term *masmū*. Ben-Shammai suggests in his analysis that this means as much as ‘heard, audible’. *Zahir* and *masmū* are both perceived by the senses, where *zahir* is perceived by sight and *masmū* by hearing. The latter may be

¹⁴⁰ Ibidem.

¹⁴¹ ben-Shammai, “The Tension between Literal Interpretation and Exegetical Freedom,” 34-35.

¹⁴² ‘*Tafsir*’ in this occasion refers to Sa’adyah’s translation of the Torah, not to the interpretative method as such.

¹⁴³ David M. Freidenreich, “The Use of Islamic Sources in Saadiah Gaon's "Tafsīr" of the Torah,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 93, no. 3/4 (2003): 354,394.

¹⁴⁴ Marzena Zawadowska, “The Bible read through the prism of theology. The medieval Karaite tradition of translating explicit anthropomorphisms into Arabic,” *Journal of Jewish Thought & Philosophy* 24 (2016): 175.

¹⁴⁵ Cohen, “Emergence of the Rule of Peshat in Jewish Bible exegesis,” 205.

understood as the ‘commonly accepted sense’ of a word or phrase to people who share a common language.¹⁴⁶ If compared to Recanati’s three-layered theory, this notion of commonly accepted sense seems very similar to the m-literal meaning, or rather ‘what is said’ and forms a minimal departure of the strict literal sense. Only in case of ambiguity in the text, *ta’wil* should be used to interpret its non-literal meaning (*majaz*). Additionally, according to Sa’adyah, ambiguity is inherent to the language of the Torah as it is, in essence, human language.¹⁴⁷ Naturally, human language includes equivocal as well as plain elements. In her research on the interpretation of (anthropomorphist) Biblical texts by the Gaon and contemporary Karaite scholars, Marzena Zawadowska states that Sa’adyah considered the human language as unsuitable for the transmission of the divine message, and therefore required *ta’wil*.¹⁴⁸

An exposition of Sa’adyah’s interpretative methods can be found in *Kitāb al-amānāt wal-i’tiqādāt* (The Book of Beliefs and Convictions). According to Sa’adyah, there are four reasons to apply *ta’wil* in a text: (1) if the literal meaning is not compatible to the sense perception, (2) if the text contradicts reason, (3) if there is a clear text that provides the literal meaning, then this text should be used to interpret the unclear passages, and (4) if the message in Scripture is related to a tradition, the text should be interpreted in conformity with tradition.¹⁴⁹ Apart from the use of Arabic philological and grammatical expressions, two of his statements are reminiscent of Mu’tazilite principles. For example, the view that Scripture should comply with reason, and that the literal meaning of a text should correspond with the perception by the senses. If these principles are not met, *ta’wil* should be used to interpret the text. This interpretative method especially comes to the fore when God is depicted in human form and relates to the Mu’tazilite idea that reason proves that God cannot be compared to man.¹⁵⁰ However, the last of his four principles indicates that Sa’adyah attempts to stay well within the boundaries of the Rabbinic view. Sa’adyah mentions tradition as a valid factor to deviate from the apparent meaning. To Sa’adyah,

¹⁴⁶ ben-Shammai, “The Tension between Literal Interpretation and Exegetical Freedom,” 37.

¹⁴⁷ Compare the Rabbinic dictum: ‘The Law speaks with the tongue of men’; Nemoy, *Anthology*, 63.

¹⁴⁸ Zawadowska, “The Bible read through the prism of theology,” 205.

¹⁴⁹ ben-Shammai, “The Tension between Literal Interpretation and Exegetical Freedom,” 35.

¹⁵⁰ Zawadowska, “The Bible read through the prism of theology,” 175.

tradition is the information that is transferred from the Prophets to the Sages and ‘sanctified by the authority of the latter’¹⁵¹; thus, referring to the Rabbinic chain of tradition.

Sa’adyah Gaon appears to be an early Rabbinic exponent of a more individualized style of interpretation, both in the realm of Halacha and scriptural exegesis.¹⁵² He leaves freedom to the learned individual to interpret Scripture by providing a systematical framework of principles. In this framework, he demonstrates how Arabic lexical replacements and terminology as well as Mu’tazilite constructs of thought can be utilized. Absolute exegetical freedom, however, is not permitted; this would lead to invalidation of the Scripture as a basis of faith and law.¹⁵³ *Ta’wil* can only be applied if it can be justified by the mentioned four reasons. Sa’adyah Gaon therefore firmly positions his principles in both reason and tradition. The concept of *peshat*, as it became known through Rashi and Ibn Ezra and the stricter eleventh century readings of the term, is therefore not entirely applicable to Sa’adyah. He does not refer to the maxim ‘*ein mikra yotze middei peshuto*’, and simply seems to consider the *zahir* meaning of the text as a ‘default position’ from which the exegete should start.

Sa’adyah Gaon became one of, if not the most important, opponent of contemporary tenth century Karaite scholars such as Ya’qub al-Qirqisani and Salmon ben Jeroham. Although they are never mentioned by name in the works of Sa’adyah, Sa’adyah is referred in the work of these Karaite scholars. Jeroham names him ‘the Fayyumite’, the native of Fayyum in a rather fierce refutation.¹⁵⁴ Al-Qirqisani possibly refers to Sa’adyah in his ‘Principles of Biblical Exegesis’ and mentions him with certain esteem: ‘Another scholar of our own time also composed a fine book on this subject [...]’.¹⁵⁵ The book mentioned by al-Qirqisani is possibly Sa’adyah’s *Kitāb al-amānāt wal-i’tiqādāt*.¹⁵⁶ There are parallels and differences in these Rabbinic and Karaite works. Especially the differences might allude to the special characteristics of scriptural methods within Karaism in this timeframe.

¹⁵¹ ben-Shammai, “The Tension between Literal Interpretation and Exegetical Freedom,” 41.

¹⁵² Astren, *Karaite Judaism and Historical Understanding*, 32.

¹⁵³ ben-Shammai, “The Tension between Literal Interpretation and Exegetical Freedom,” 41.

¹⁵⁴ ben Jeroham, “The Book of the Wars of the Lord”, 74.

¹⁵⁵ Al-Qirqisani, *Book of Parks and Gardens*, 54.

¹⁵⁶ Polliack, *The Karaite Tradition of Arabic Bible Translation*, 65.

Literal meaning in tenth century Karaism: Al-Qirqisani

Similar to his opponent, Sa'adyah, al-Qirqisani uses linguistic tools and Islamic terminology to define a literal understanding of Scripture. Principally, he believes that the commandments in the Torah were to be taken in a literal sense, rather than in a secondary or esoteric sense. The Karaites borrowed the Arabic terms in this context: *zahir* for the apparent, literal meaning and *batin* for the 'inward' or hidden meaning of the Scripture. Subsequently, he utilizes the Islamic interpretative methods of *ta'wil* and *tafsir*.

As for the 'mechanism' to achieve a literal understanding, al-Qirqisani states in his introduction of 'Principles of Biblical Exegesis': 'The Sages have the power to educate others 'by joining or separating or arranging them [the meaning of things] in proper sequence [...]'.¹⁵⁷ With this statement al-Qirqisani alludes to linguistic methods in the interpretation of the Bible. In the 20th principle of his essay, he explains that additions or omissions of clauses, words or letters are sometimes required to render a text complete and well-ordered.¹⁵⁸ For example, the phrase 'For whom do I labour [...]' (Eccl. 4:8) according to al-Qirqisani, requires the addition 'he shall not think and say for whom do I labour [...]'.¹⁵⁹ This also includes passages or words that may be understood as an assertion, but are in fact a negation. Additions of negative particles is thus allowed to clarify these passages.¹⁶⁰ Finally, words or phrases may be omitted, as they are likely to be understood from their context. In linguistics, this is referred to as ellipsis or condensation of text.¹⁶¹ Hence, the understanding of literalness as proclaimed by al-Qirqisani, is not simply an adherence to what Recanati names the t-literal. It clearly involves the incorporation of contextual factors, so that it would be appropriate to refer to the other classes of literalness, the m- and p-literal. It demonstrates that al-Qirqisani clearly attempted to grapple with the grey area that is so easily signified as 'literal understanding'. As noted, Sa'adyah equally attempted to clarify this area, signified in the term *masmū*. Both al-Qirqisani and Sa'adyah move from the realm of literalness to non-literal in case of violation of rational principles, and in case of anthropomorphic descriptions

¹⁵⁷ Al-Qirqisani, *Book of Parks and Gardens*, 58.

¹⁵⁸ Polliack, *The Karaite Tradition of Arabic Bible Translation*, 73.

¹⁵⁹ Ibidem, 73.

¹⁶⁰ Ibidem.

¹⁶¹ Zawanowska, *The Arabic translation and commentary of Yefet ben Eli the Karaite on the Abraham Narratives*, 127.

of God. Nevertheless, there are two important differences in the approach of Sa'adyah and al-Qirqisani. One is the use of *qiyas*, analogy, the other is consensus, *ijma*. Both terms represent sources of law within Islam, and both have been adopted by Karaism. Al-Qirqisani mentions *qiyas* or analogical deduction, as a valid tool for logically defining the text's meaning.¹⁶² Borrowed from Islam, this term denotes a tool to derive laws or rulings. Rather than adopting the Rabbanite halakha, Karaites used this form of reasoning to derive laws from less explicit passages of Scripture. Evidently, Sa'adyah criticized the use of *qiyas* as a valid form of interpretation.¹⁶³ The second term, consensus, is likewise associated with an Islamic notion.¹⁶⁴ It comprises the idea that an interpretation or translation of Scripture is only valid, if it is derived from the authority resulting from general agreement of the 'nation as a whole'. Individuals or specific groups are not authorized to do so.¹⁶⁵ Al-Qirqisani used this principle in the context of translations. Polliack mentions that he finds the deliberate modification in the translation of Scripture are not acceptable, as consensus on such a change by a large group would be merely impossible. As for the individuals or 'certain groups', it is very likely that al-Qirqisani's view is directed against Rabbanites such as Sa'adyah Gaon, who derived their authority from their individual status.¹⁶⁶

The elements discussed here, such as the innate struggle for authority, the complex definition of the literal sense, rational and theological concepts borrowed from Mu'tazilism, as well as preconceived opinions on language are discussed by al-Qirqisani, implicitly or explicitly, in the 'Principles of Biblical Exegesis'.

Al-Qirqisani's 'Principles of Biblical Exegesis'

The Introduction

¹⁶² Al-Qirqisani, *Book of Parks and Gardens*, 59.

¹⁶³ Erder, "The Karaites and mu'tazilism," 782.

¹⁶⁴ Geoffrey Khan, "Al-Qirqisānī's Opinions concerning the Text of the Bible and Parallel Muslim Attitudes Towards the Text of the Qur'ān," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 81, no. 1/2 (1990): 59.

¹⁶⁵ Polliack, *The Karaite Tradition of Arabic Bible Translation*, 70.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, 70, 71-72.

In the introduction of the 'Principles of Biblical exegesis, al-Qirqisani addresses two important ideas before discussing the actual principles of interpretation of Scripture: First al-Qirqisani discusses the connection between rational philosophy and Scripture; secondly he examines to whom these methods of rational philosophy are suitable tools. Al-Qirqisani's main objective in his 'Principles of Biblical Exegesis', however, is to examine the problems in dealing with ambiguous passages of the Bible. As for his approach, al-Qirqisani mentions that he intends to cover both the general and the special questions. All too often, according to al-Qirqisani, some scholars who are involved in rational speculation and research tend to discuss only matters of special interest, and neglect topics of a more general character. As a result, he claims, such scientists and theologians cannot even answer the simple questions asked by an 'unlearned' man. Thus, the 'general and easy should form the point of departure in science and theology, from which one might then progress to that what is special and difficult'.¹⁶⁷

As a first major theme in his introduction, al-Qirqisani reflects on the relationship of rational speculation and the interpretation of Scripture. Although he does not explain the term 'rational philosophy' or 'rational speculation' as such in this section of his work, he appears to refer to religious philosophy or theology, in which the use of human reason plays a crucial role.¹⁶⁸ The central notion in rational speculation, is that all information perceived by humans, either by sense or cogitation, can be used as a basis for rational deductions and analogy, such as *qiyas*. Reasoning, then, is one of the foundations of philosophical postulates. The use of rational speculation is, as noted, a feature of Mu'tazilite thought. Another foundation is Scripture itself, as al-Qirqisani argues: '[...] indeed, Scripture is really one of the foundations of philosophy, providing that the investigator divests himself of personal inclination and bias.'¹⁶⁹ This may allude to the use of Islamic methods of *qiyas*, but also *consensus*. An interpretation is only valid, if it is carried by 'the whole of the nation', not by the personal inclination of the interpreter. This may be an implicit attack on Sa'adyah Gaon, who, as noted, practiced an individual manner of interpretation. Al-Qirqisani emphasizes that both disciplines, rational philosophy and the knowledge of Scripture,

¹⁶⁷ Al-Qirqisani, *Book of Parks and Gardens*, 53-54.

¹⁶⁸ Haggai ben-Shammai also proposes the term 'rational theology' in "Kalam in medieval Jewish philosophy," n1. I will continue to use the term 'rational philosophy' in this paper.

¹⁶⁹ Al-Qirqisani, *Book of Parks and Gardens*, 54.

confirm each other. Rational speculation alone is not sufficient, and mere knowledge of the Bible is equally inadvisable. According to al-Qirqisani, those scholars who reject rational speculation are ignorant and poor in knowledge. Hirschfeld suggests in his edition of this preamble that al-Qirqisani alludes to the Rabbanites who were against metaphysical speculations.¹⁷⁰ However, al-Qirqisani seems to address both Rabbinic Judaism and Karaism, as he states in his *Kitāb al-anwār wal-marāqib*, that: ‘laws should be made along the lines of research and speculation only; whatever is proved by research and speculation to be necessary and logical should be accepted as dogma, no matter who adheres to it, be it the Rabbanites, or Anan [the Karaites], or anyone else.’¹⁷¹

To illustrate the importance of rational speculation supplementing Scripture and vice versa, al-Qirqisani quotes Genesis 1:1, ‘In the beginning [...]’ and mentions its ‘hidden meanings and abstruse problems’.¹⁷² Al-Qirqisani argues that a scholar attempting to interpret this text by means of rational speculation only, could find the biblical explanation of creation in contradiction with philosophical or natural principles. Yet, accepting the Scripture as one of the sources for philosophy is necessary to interpret the Biblical texts correctly. Although al-Qirqisani doesn’t provide a sound solution in the case of Genesis, he expounds on this idea in the following paragraphs. His main purpose, so it seems, is to demonstrate that Scripture itself confirms the validity of the use of reason. As an example, he refers to Isaiah 41:20: ‘so that people may see and know, may consider and understand that the hand of the Lord has done this [...]’ and states that this verse confirms the validity of the use of reason. He argues that if one perceives ‘a thing made’, one can deduct the existence of a maker, in this case God as the creator of humankind.¹⁷³

Al-Qirqisani’s emphasis on the interaction of Scripture and rational philosophical argumentation bears a resemblance to the previous mentioned Mu’tazilite standpoint that Scripture and reason cannot contradict each other: Reason should affirm Scripture and vice versa.¹⁷⁴ From the standpoint of the Mu’tazilites, Scripture can only be

¹⁷⁰ Hirschfeld, *Qirqisani Studies*, 11.

¹⁷¹ Leon Nemoj, “Al-Qirqisani's account of the Jewish sects and Christianity,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 7 (1930): 320.

¹⁷² Al-Qirqisani, *Book of Parks and Gardens*, 54.

¹⁷³ *Ibidem*, 56.

¹⁷⁴ ben-Shammai, “Kalam in medieval Jewish philosophy,” 67.

confirmed and appropriately interpreted by reason, or rationalistic speculation.¹⁷⁵ Moreover, an important Mu'tazilite principle is the religious duty of rationalistic speculation, *nazar*, which is to be fulfilled by believers. However, this is only an obligation to those who are capable to do so. According to Mu'tazilism, these persons are the 'learned ones', the *khassa*. For the 'masses' or *amma*, this religious duty is not obligatory.¹⁷⁶ This opinion also resonates in al-Qirqisani's 'Principles of Biblical Exegesis'.

Thus, the second theme in al-Qirqisani's introduction covers the question on *who* is suitable to use rational speculation to interpret Scripture. Al-Qirqisani presents an idea similar to the Mu'tazilite notion of the *khassa*. Al-Qirqisani argues that '[...] God has placed it in the power of Sages to elicit the meanings of things and to bring them near to men's understanding [...]'¹⁷⁷ According to al-Qirqisani, one of the greatest 'learned men' is the Biblical King Solomon. Solomon, but also Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah were wise men, knowledgeable in 'all matters of wisdom and understanding'.¹⁷⁸ Nevertheless, he declares that basic knowledge is established in every human being, including little children. This basic knowledge does not simply embody a naturally embedded instinct of the sort that animals possess, but the wisdom of choice, reasoning and deduction, and especially, the knowledge of God's justice and power. Again, this echoes the Mu'tazilite notion that God has placed rational knowledge in every human mind; knowledge that is self-evident and doesn't have to be learned. It comprises 'rudimentary' knowledge, such as basic ethical and social conventions and laws. This belief represents a central Mu'tazilite doctrine: the immediate knowledge of ethical principles. This knowledge, or God's will, can be known by anyone through applying reason.

In this context, Mu'tazilism distinguishes between reason and revelation. God has placed rational knowledge in the human mind, though reason alone is not sufficient. There is God's revelation, which is needed to inform humankind of all details, especially those persons who are not capable to discover the basic laws independently. Interestingly, Ben-Shammai mentions that in Mu'tazilism there is a notion that '[...] this revealed knowledge (or law) is acquired through hearing or audition, which is the customary way by which revelation

¹⁷⁵ Ibidem, 68.

¹⁷⁶ Ibidem, 69.

¹⁷⁷ Al-Qirqisani, *Book of Parks and Gardens*, 58.

¹⁷⁸ Ibidem, 55-56.

is received by its addressees.¹⁷⁹ Al-Qirqisani does not discuss the mode of transmission of revelation, although in the introduction of his 'Principles of Biblical Exegesis', he states the following: 'Were the eyes of their minds open, they would have learned that these things are tools for the understanding of Scripture and ladders and bridges toward the perception of revealed truth.'¹⁸⁰ Al-Qirqisani possibly refers to Rabbanite scholars, as he mentions 'some of our scholars' that regard speculation forbidden in a preceding passage. The statement could then be regarded as a disproof of their use of oral revelation. Instead of using the appropriate tools, they 'blindly' created their own version of revelation.

Although in the discussion of these two major themes, al-Qirqisani does not mention Mu'tazilism or Kalam by name, their influence in his introduction seems undeniable.¹⁸¹ The Bible citations used, as well as some of the principles that al-Qirqisani mentions, strongly resemble Mu'tazilite thought, and in particular, Kalam. For example, some of the five major principles of its theological system can be distinguished in al-Qirqisani's 'Principles of Biblical Exegesis'. The principle of the oneness of God, *tawhid*, is one of the major principles in Mu'tazilism. In the seventh point of the introduction of his 'Principles of Biblical exegesis', Al-Qirqisani cites Isaiah 45:6 as the rational proof of the oneness of God: 'That they may know from the rising of the sun, and from the west, that there is none beside me. I am the Lord, and there is none else.' The Mu'tazilite principle incorporates the idea that God is incorporeal and does not resemble humankind. Although al-Qirqisani does not elaborate on the principle of *tawhid* in this passage, he does so elsewhere in *kitab al-anwar wal-maraqib*.¹⁸² In addition, al-Qirqisani wrote a theoretical discussion on anthropomorphism, in which he describes and refutes Rabbinic texts in which anthropomorphist ideas are presented, for example that God can weep, mourn or pray.¹⁸³ ¹⁸⁴ Another reference to Mu'tazilite thought in the introduction of 'Principles of Biblical Exegesis' can be found in al-Qirqisani's remark on the following passage of Isaiah 48:6-7: 'You have heard; See all this. And will you not declare it? I have made you hear new things from this time, Even hidden things, and you did

¹⁷⁹ ben-Shammai, "Kalam in medieval Jewish philosophy," 68.

¹⁸⁰ Al-Qirqisani, *Book of Parks and Gardens*, 55.

¹⁸¹ Erder even suggests that Karaites before the eleventh century 'had a tendency to conceal that [Mu'tazilite] inspiration in their writings.'; Erder, "The Karaites and Mu'tazilism", 784.

¹⁸² Haggai ben-Shammai, "Qirqisānī on the Oneness of God," *The Jewish Quarterly Review, New Series, Essays in Honor of Leon Nemoy* 73, no. 2 (1982): 108.

¹⁸³ Astren, *Karaite Judaism and Historical Understanding*, 74.

¹⁸⁴ Zawanowska, "The Bible read through the prism of theology," 177.

not know them. They are created now and not from the beginning; And before this day you have not heard them, Lest you should say, 'Of course I knew them.'¹⁸⁵ Al-Qirqisani mentions that this 'is a proof of the temporal incipency of substance, on the ground that it is inseparable from other temporal incipients, meaning the accidents'.¹⁸⁶ Al-Qirqisani seems to refer to the theory of atomism. In this theory, all substance in this world is composed of identical atoms without spatial dimensions. Characteristics of these atoms, in the form of physical or mental attributes such as composition, color, movement, will and knowledge, are called 'accidents'. The destruction or existence of every individual atom and accident is the creation of God.¹⁸⁷ God, therefore is represented as omnipotent, and his power is unlimited. Laws of nature or seemingly causal sequences are merely unrelated events under full control of God. Causality is therefore denied.¹⁸⁸ The theory of atomism is closely related to the Mu'tazilite theory of the creation of the world ex nihilo, especially visible in the idea of God's omnipotence: Like every single atom, the universe is not governed by chance.¹⁸⁹ Part of the view that the world is created out of nonexistence, is the rejection of the idea of infinity. Al-Qirqisani demonstrates this view by, once again, referring to Isaiah and argues thus: '[...] proves the impossibility of one thing being preceded by a third thing, and so forth, without end'. With reference to Psalms 100:3, 'Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us [...]', he claims: '[...] shows the impossibility of things being self-created'.¹⁹⁰ Sa'adyah Gaon equally supported this Mu'tazilite notion and established it as 'an exclusive of authentic Judaism'.¹⁹¹

Another important Mu'tazilite principle that comes to the fore in the introduction of 'Principles of Biblical Exegesis', is the preposition of divine justice, *'adl*. Al-Qirqisani cites from Psalms 19:8-10, and mentions that the perfection of the Law of God is closely connected to reason that is free from faults. Moreover, the commandments of God, as stated in Psalms, are clear and lucid and free from ambiguities. Al-Qirqisani mentions that the 'human heart feels satisfaction' in knowing the truth of the divine premises, and

¹⁸⁵ Isaiah 48:6-7, *New King James version*, <https://www.biblestudytools.com>

¹⁸⁶ Al-Qirqisani, *Book of Parks and Gardens*, 56.

¹⁸⁷ ben-Shammai, "Kalam in medieval Jewish philosophy," 67.

¹⁸⁸ Ibidem, 68.

¹⁸⁹ Ibidem, 67.

¹⁹⁰ Al-Qirqisani, *Book of Parks and Gardens*, 56.

¹⁹¹ ben-Shammai, "Kalam in medieval Jewish philosophy," 73.

therefore suggests the implicit knowledge of right and wrong in every human being. God's commandments are indisputable, according to al-Qirqisani: 'the judgements of the lord are the truth'.¹⁹² Nevertheless, as mentioned previously, al-Qirqisani acknowledges the need to elucidate the meaning of Biblical passages. He clarifies the question how this should be done in the next section, the actual principles of Biblical exegesis. As a final statement in his introduction he mentions: '[...] let us now [...] mention the necessary preliminary things pertaining to the explanation of the meaning of Scripture and the interpretation of its seeming ambiguities [...] we shall demonstrate the perfection of the whole of Scripture in the way of account, address, statement, and question, relating to fact, metaphor, generalization, advancement, postponement, abridgement, profusion, separation, combination [...]'.¹⁹³ Thus, according to al-Qirqisani, the message of God is inherently perfect, but simultaneously mentions the linguistic tools to interpret the 'perfect' text.

Principles of Biblical Exegesis

Moses' written Torah

The first and fundamental principle in Biblical exegesis according to al-Qirqisani, is that the Pentateuch is written down by Moses, 'our prophet and master'.¹⁹⁴ At first glance, this principle seems slightly out of place in a pragmatic discussion on the methods to use in interpreting Scripture. However, once it is placed within the context of inter-religious polemics and Mu'tazilite thought, the statement becomes clear. According to Erder, the arrival of Islam, presenting itself as the conveyor of true monotheism, caused theological discussions and evaluations among Jewish scholars. One of the topics of debate within Judaism was the question whether the Biblical commandments predated the Revelation by Moses and whether there was a difference between the Torah of Moses and the Torah of the Patriarchs. As Erder points out in his study, a major debate in Islam in the tenth century concerns the question of abrogation, or *naskh*. Erder describes *naskh* as: 'nullification of one

¹⁹² Al-Qirqisani, *Book of Parks and Gardens*, 57-58.

¹⁹³ Ibidem, 59.

¹⁹⁴ Al-Qirqisani, *Book of Parks and Gardens*, 60.

revealed commandment by Divine Will and its replacement by another commandment.¹⁹⁵ According to Erder, *naskh* originally related to the change of the Commandments within Islam itself. However, the principle soon was used in the discussion on the abrogation of the Torah and its replacement by the Qur'an. Erder concludes that Karaites, being in close interaction with their Islamic environment, were pressed to formulate an opinion on whether the commandments predated the Torah, but framed this view in the discussion on *naskh*, using adopted Muslim terminology and principles.¹⁹⁶ In formulating such a view, the opinions on this matter within Karaism varied. A common ground, though, according to Erder, lies in the division of the commandments in two types: rational and revealed. The Karaite notion, similar to Mu'tazilite thought¹⁹⁷, encompasses that rational commandments are inherent in every human being, and have existed since the beginning. Revealed commandments however, can only become known to humankind by prophecy. Erder argues that al-Qirqisani believed that revealed commandments were disclosed to the prophets starting with Adam. According to his standpoint, the revelation of the Torah ends with Moses.¹⁹⁸ In addition, Al-Qirqisani's emphasis on the written transmission by Moses, by citing Deuteronomy 31:9 'And Moses wrote this Law', and Joshua 8:31: 'As it is written in the book of the Law of Moses', suggest that the written form is important and possibly preferred. Overall, this first statement in 'Principles of Biblical Exegesis', does not only resonate a significant debate in the context of al-Qirqisani's lifetime and his Islamic environment, but also conveys an important message: the Pentateuch is written down by Moses, which suggests that all other (non-written) claims to revelation afterwards, cannot be a valid basis for proper exegesis. Again, this seems to allude implicitly to Rabbinic 'tampering' with revelation after Moses.

¹⁹⁵ Yoram Erder, "Early Karaite Conceptions about Commandments Given before the Revelation of the Torah," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 60 (1994): 104.

¹⁹⁶ Erder, "Early Karaite Conceptions about Commandments Given before the Revelation of the Torah," 105, 127.

¹⁹⁷ Both Erder and Hirschfeld stress the possibility of the influence Mu'tazilite thought in this passage; Erder, "Early Karaite Conceptions," 109, n19.; Hirschfeld, *Qirqisani Studies*, 17.

¹⁹⁸ Erder, "Early Karaite Conceptions about Commandments Given before the Revelation of the Torah," 129.

Secondly, he mentions: ‘Scripture as a whole is to be interpreted literally, except where literal interpretation may involve *something objectionable* [emphasis added] or imply a *contradiction*. [emphasis added] Only in the *latter case* [emphasis added], or in similar cases which demand that a passage be taken out of its plain meaning [...] does it become necessary to take the text out of the literal sense.’¹⁹⁹ Interestingly, al-Qirqisani does not explain further as to what is ‘objectionable’. Instead, he seems to focus on the contradiction that may be present in a biblical passage. Only in such instances an alternative reading of the text is permissible. Non-literal interpretation of Scripture entirely, however, is not allowed as this would ‘lead to the nullification of all accounts therein, including all commandments, prohibitions, and so forth [...]’.²⁰⁰ This shows a strong resemblance to Sa’adyah Gaon, who equally warns for an invalidation of the Scripture as a basis of faith and law in the case of unrestrained use of ta’wil. As an example of a valid case for non-literal interpretation, al-Qirqisani mentions a passage in Exodus 24:10 that suggests the image of God as a human being: ‘[...] and they saw the God of Israel. And there was under His feet as it were a paved work of sapphire stone, and it was like the very heavens in its clarity.’²⁰¹ In this fragment, God is not only portrayed as someone who can be perceived by the human eye, he is depicted with feet. At this point in his ‘Principles of Biblical Exegesis’, al-Qirqisani argues that it would be ‘contrary to reason’ to believe that humans can see God with their eyes. This concern with anthropomorphic and anthropopathic depictions of God in the Biblical texts however, as already noted, is not unique to al-Qirqisani, or even Karaism. Sa’adyah Gaon, likewise argues that by use of reason it can be demonstrated that God cannot be compared to man. Similarly, he argues that corporeal depictions of God in the Scripture should not be understood literally, but need to be interpreted by using non-literal methods.²⁰² In general, the corporeal representation of God already concerned Al-Qirqisani’s and Sa’adyah’s predecessors.²⁰³ Jewish scholars before them were equally baffled by the idea that the Divine was represented in human and material depictions. The reason that these anti-

¹⁹⁹ Al-Qirqisani, *Book of Parks and Gardens*, 60.

²⁰⁰ Ibidem.

²⁰¹ Ibidem.

²⁰² Zawanowska, “The Bible read through the prism of theology,” 175.

²⁰³ Ibidem, 164.

anthropomorphist views within Judaism came to the surface more prominently in the ninth century, probably lies in the emergence of anti-Jewish polemicists (Christian and Muslim), who equated Judaism with anthropomorphism.²⁰⁴ In the same period, the Muslim Mu'tazilite school developed similar notions. As noted, in Mu'tazilism, God's incorporeality is closely connected to the concept of *tawhid*, the oneness of God, which presented a nonfigurative and transcendent understanding of God. As the Qur'an contains descriptions of God's body and emotions, the Mu'tazilites developed various exegetical techniques, such as the use of metaphors, to explain these depictions of God.²⁰⁵ One of these techniques includes *ta'wil*, a technique to be used on verses, or texts, for which there is no first apparent meaning. These texts require exegetical wisdom to uncover their hidden and proper meaning.²⁰⁶ Both al-Qirqisani and Sa'adyah Gaon refer to non-literal interpretative methods and both suggest a range of alternatives for corporeal passages in Scripture. Zawanowska lists some examples of this process: the hand, or arm of God for example, represents his power. God's heart represents divine wisdom, whereas his lips and mouth refer to his speech (*mukallim*).²⁰⁷ Although al-Qirqisani does not elaborate on these alternatives in his 'Principles of Biblical Exegesis', he does so in his *Kitāb al-anwār wal-marāqib*.

Thus, in the case of contradiction, the exegete is allowed to employ non-literal methods of interpretation. However, al-Qirqisani also mentions that there are textual passages for which both an allegorical and a literal interpretation are acceptable. He refers to a Biblical passage, as an example, which describes the happiness of Jacob once he hears that his son Joseph is still alive: '[...] the spirit of their father Jacob revived.'²⁰⁸ According to al-Qirqisani, this may be explained literally, such as the invigoration of Jacob's spirit or rather, the fact that Jacob was gladdened by the news. Al-Qirqisani adds that this 'a figure commonly used in men's speech'.²⁰⁹ The allegorical interpretation alludes to the gift of prophecy. Prophecy, according to al-Qirqisani, is sometimes referred to as 'spirit'. In this fragment then, the revival of the spirit designates the return of the gift of prophecy to

²⁰⁴ Zawanowska, "The Bible read through the prism of theology," 165.

²⁰⁵ ben-Shammai, "Kalam in medieval Jewish philosophy," 93.

²⁰⁶ Erder, "The Karaites and mu'tazilism," 782.

²⁰⁷ Zawanowska, "The Bible read through the prism of theology," 178.

²⁰⁸ Genesis 45:27, *New International Version*, <https://www.biblestudytools.com>

²⁰⁹ Al-Qirqisani, *Book of Parks and Gardens*, 61.

Jacob.²¹⁰ As for the literal understanding of this text, al-Qirqisani associates 'literal meaning' with 'common speech'.

This principle is the only instance in which al-Qirqisani discusses the literal interpretation of a Biblical text in a direct manner. Yet, he seems to struggle with the concept of literal sense. If compared to Recanati's categories, al-Qirqisani's perception of literalness seems, at first sight, to consist of one category: the t-literal, the literal sense that is governed by the rules of linguistics. However, in his example of Jacob, he demonstrates that he acknowledges 'common speech' in human language. This could be categorized as m-literal or in the case of Jacob, even p-literal. The statement then, remains within the realm of literal understanding, as the phrase is still grounded in the linguistic roots of the text. Hence, where al-Qirqisani at first glance seems to contradict himself, he is really defining an intermediate category in literalness that incorporate contextual factors. Later principles, such as the aforementioned 20th proposition, show the utilization of linguistic tools as omission, reordering and addition. These tools attest how linguistics were used in order to stay within this grey area of literal sense. Al-Qirqisani in general uses the term *zahir* to indicate literal meaning²¹¹ and it is unclear whether he utilizes any terms that refer to other classes of literalness, such as for example, the term *masmū*, the commonly accepted sense, as it is employed by Sa'adyah.

Language in Scripture

The next four principles of exegesis reflect on the language in which Scripture is written. First of all, al-Qirqisani firmly states that Hebrew is the primordial language in which God addressed his prophets. Al-Qirqisani refutes those who claim 'Aramaic' and Arabic are the primeval languages. He asserts that Scripture itself mentions that one single language existed, until mankind was divided in multiple languages. Al-Qirqisani refers to Messianic times, when 'all mankind will call the Lord by his Hebrew name *Adonay*.'²¹² As for the claims towards Aramaic²¹³ as the primordial language, al-Qirqisani argues that in the Bible Psalms

²¹⁰ Ibidem.

²¹¹ Nemoy, *Karaite anthology*, 338, n II.12.

²¹² Al-Qirqisani, *Book of Parks and Gardens*, 63.

²¹³ According to Nemoy, 'Aramaic' designates the Syriac language; Al-Qirqisani, *Book of Parks and Gardens*, 338, n II.13.

and other textual passages can be found that have a layout in alphabetical order. The verses of these texts are ordered by their initial letters, as for example Psalm 119:1. Once these are translated into another language, the alphabetical order is broken. Additionally, al-Qirqisani points out that names and words in the Bible are derived out of Hebrew words. As an example, he notes that the name of Adam, the first human in Genesis 2:7, is derived from the earth from which he was created: *adamah* in Hebrew. The word *isha*, ‘woman’ in Hebrew, is another example. As stated in Genesis 2:23, ‘She is to be called Woman [*isha*], because she was taken out of Man [*ish*].’²¹⁴ Al Qirqisani further points out that in Aramaic, the word for ‘man’ is *gabra*; the word for ‘woman’ however, is *itta*. Consequently, the latter word cannot be derived from *gabra*. In his commentary on this proposition, Hirschfeld remarks that al-Qirqisani ‘borrowed’ this idea from the Rabbinic Midrash.²¹⁵ Indeed, the midrash mentions the unlikelihood of Aramaic being the ‘Holy Tongue’ whilst referring to *itta*, amongst other words.²¹⁶ This does not only signify al-Qirqisani’s knowledge of the Rabbinic literature, but also his apparent acceptance of, at least, parts of this literature.

In the same manner, al-Qirqisani asserts that Arabic cannot be the primordial tongue. He furthermore states: ‘We do not say this here because someone claims that Arabic is the primeval tongue but merely in order to remove all possible doubts.’²¹⁷ In the notes to his translation, Nemoj remarks that al-Qirqisani probably mentioned this for those who ‘may be unfamiliar with Aramaic and may not understand the preceding examples.’²¹⁸ However, Nemoj seems to disregard the ‘mainstream’ Islamic notion of supremacy of the Arabic language, as affirmed in the Qur’anic phrase (*bi-)**lisan ‘arabi mubin*.²¹⁹ This represents the idea that the Qur’an is the word of God, which is written in ‘clear Arabic speech’, the perfect and purest language. It renders the Qur’an as inimitable, *ijaz*, and ‘miraculous’.²²⁰ This notion, in connection with the question whether the Qur’an could be translated, was

²¹⁴ Al-Qirqisani, *Book of Parks and Gardens*, 62.

²¹⁵ Hirschfeld, *Qirqisani Studies*, 21.

²¹⁶ Midrash Rabbah, Genesis, XVIII. 4-5, transl. H. Freeman and M. Simon, (London, 1939), 143.

²¹⁷ Al-Qirqisani, *Book of Parks and Gardens*, 62.

²¹⁸ Ibidem, 339 n II.13.

²¹⁹ Q26:195, Q16:101-103

²²⁰ William A. Graham, *Beyond the written word*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 85.

present from the early centuries of Islam onwards.²²¹ Seen in the light of inter-religious discussions, where al-Qirqisani wrote in a predominantly Islamic environment, this may fairly be an attempt to firmly position and clarify the Jewish view to an assimilated, Arabic speaking Jewish public. To substantiate his message, al-Qirqisani placed it in an Islamic theoretical framework.

The second assertion considers the form in which Scripture is delivered to mankind. According to al-Qirqisani Scripture is transmitted in such a way, so that man can understand it easily. He refers directly to a Talmudic dictum: 'The Law speaks with the tongue of Men', which again demonstrates al-Qirqisani's use of Rabbinic sources. He relates this principle directly to the depiction of God's body in Scripture. He explains to his readers that God, in the process of describing himself, intentionally described himself as having eyes and ears. He did so, as mankind is accustomed to sight and hearing. As God's own speech is so magnificent and so different from human speech, God addresses humankind in their own speech. Al-Qirqisani states: 'He fashioned for them a speech akin their own, near to their comprehension, acceptable to their understanding, and bearable to their faculties.'²²² He compares the position of mankind to God with the relation of animals and men. Animals, so he says, need to be addressed according to their 'constitution', as men need to be addressed according to theirs. Like his Rabbinic counterpart, Sa'adyah Gaon, al-Qirqisani regards the anthropomorphic description of God in Scripture as an element that needs figurative interpretation. However, whereas Sa'adyah considers the human language of the Torah as 'unfit' for the divine message, al-Qirqisani thus argues that the Scriptural language is especially fitted to carry the message of God.

Falsehoods and foreign language in Scripture

Besides the notion that Hebrew is the primordial language, al-Qirqisani discusses two additional features of Scripture: First he addresses the apparent 'false' statements in Scripture. Secondly, he elaborately discusses the language that is used when persons of

²²¹ Meir M. Bar-Asher, "We have made it an Arabic Qur'an. The permissibility of translating scripture in Islam in contrast with Judaism and Christianity," in *Interpreting Scriptures in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Overlapping Inquiries*, eds. Mordechai Z. Cohen and Adele Berlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 68.

²²² Al-Qirqisani, *Book of Parks and Gardens*, 63.

other religions are quoted in the Bible. As for the first statement, al-Qirqisani maintains that Scripture does not contain any falsehoods unless clearly signified as such. If untruths are stated, they are uttered by specific and named characters, as for example the Pharaoh in Exodus when he declares ‘Who is the Lord, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord and I will not let Israel go.’²²³ Additionally, he mentions the truthfulness of the account of Sarah laughing on hearing that she would give birth, and later denying that she had laughed.²²⁴ Apparently, here he rejects allegations by unnamed critics that this did not happen in such a way. Al-Qirqisani thus seems to convey that everything in Scripture is intentional, and its language a part of God’s ‘exalted’ plan.²²⁵ After this statement, Al-Qirqisani starts a lengthy discussion on how the speech of gentiles is recorded in Scripture. For example, if they spoke a different language, is it rendered in Hebrew in the Bible by means of translation? He lists the various opinions of different, unnamed persons, before declaring his own opinion in this matter. He mentions that ‘some’ maintain that if the original language is not specified in Scripture, the account was delivered in Hebrew. Others maintain that Scripture occasionally renders accounts in Hebrew without mentioning that they were originally recounted in other languages. It is impossible, so these critics state, to conclude that all protagonists in the Bible spoke Hebrew. ‘Some’ discuss the idea that Kings and courtiers of other nations were in a position to learn Hebrew, as narrated in the story of Ahashveros.²²⁶ Hence, the rendering of their dialogues in Hebrew is correct. However, al-Qirqisani mentions examples in the Bible that reject this notion, for example the account of Joseph and his brothers. In this account, an interpreter translates in the conversation between Joseph, who speaks Egyptian, and his brothers, who speak Hebrew. Yet, the story is entirely narrated in Hebrew. Al-Qirqisani’s conclusion is, that not all accounts in the Bible were originally spoken in Hebrew. They were rendered into the primary language of the Bible.²²⁷

It is interesting to note that al-Qirqisani devotes such a lengthy discussion to alleged faults and the rendering of Hebrew in Scripture in his fifth and sixth principles. It is particularly notable, that his sixth principle somehow elaborates further on his argument

²²³ Exodus 5:2, *New International Version*, <https://www.biblestudytools.com>

²²⁴ Al-Qirqisani, *Book of Parks and Gardens*, 64.

²²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²²⁶ *Ibidem*, 66.

²²⁷ *Ibidem*, 68.

that Hebrew is the primordial language. From the third principle, it should already be clear to his readers that Hebrew was the original language, until mankind was ‘dispersed and divided by tongues’.²²⁸ It is therefore logical to conclude that foreign languages were spoken by the Scripture’s characters. Al-Qirqisani’s major statement in this principle therefore seems to be hidden in his conclusion: ‘[...] some things may have been spoken in other languages but were recounted in the tongue in which Scripture was *composed* [emphasis added].’²²⁹ The idea that Scripture is composed, relates to the Mu’tazilite idea of the ‘createdness’ (*mahluk*)²³⁰ of Scripture. Whereas the Qur’an describes itself as the ‘speech of God’, Mu’tazilites maintained that this cannot be interpreted as ‘God speaking’, in the manner of human beings. Therefore, the words of the Qur’an are objects that God created.²³¹

Al-Qirqisani does not mention those who criticize Scripture in by name. Therefore, it remains unclear whether his argumentation is directed against actual critics in his time. Hirschfeld suggests that these critics are Muslim scholars who accused Rabbinic Judaism of ‘falsifying the Torah’²³², thus referring to the Muslim concept of *tahrif*, which in general means the corruption of a text,²³³ or ‘scriptural falsification’.²³⁴ Criticism on Jewish and Christian Scripture can be distinguished in a few Qur’anic verses²³⁵, and the concept of *tahrif* has been discussed by Muslim scholars such as al-Tabari (829–923 C.E.) and al-Masudi (d.957 C.E.). Nevertheless, they considered the Torah misinterpreted, rather than textually falsified.²³⁶ Al-Tabari, as noted before, specifically mentions the distortion of God’s spoken words and not the written Torah.²³⁷ Other Muslim scholars, such as al-Maqdisi (d.966 C.E.) note

²²⁸ Al-Qirqisani, *Book of Parks and Gardens*, 62.

²²⁹ Ibidem, 68.

²³⁰ Wolfson, *The philosophy of the Kalam*, 303.

²³¹ Cooperson, *Al-Ma’mun*, 30.

²³² Hirschfeld, *Qirqisani Studies*, 25.

²³³ <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2306>, accessed on 22 October 2017

²³⁴ Reynolds, “On the Qur’anic Accusation of Scriptural Falsification (*taḥrīf*) and Christian Anti-Jewish Polemic,” 190.

²³⁵ The Qur’an does not mention *tahrif* as a specific term, but mentions Jews or Christians corrupting their Scripture through either textual modifications or misinterpretation. Qur’anic verses: 2:75; 4:46; 5:13 and 5:41,

<http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2306>, accessed 24 October 2017.

²³⁶ Adang, *Muslim writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible*, 232.

²³⁷ Ibidem, 228.

a textual distortion of the Torah.²³⁸ Other scholars have noted that accusations of *tahrif* of the Qur'an within the Islamic community took place as well, notably amongst the Kharijites and Mu'tazilites.²³⁹ Hirschfeld continues to mention that there are no records of Rabbanite Jews rejecting the Islamic accusations.²⁴⁰ This text by al-Qirqisani, he suggests, proves that at least a Karaite refuted these ideas. He furthermore states: 'No doubt their strict adherence to the word rendered the retort of the latter more cogent.'²⁴¹ The question rises, however, whether it is really the Muslim criticism to which al-Qirqisani responds, and to what degree al-Qirqisani's alleged 'adherence to the word' is a motivation. Certainly, he rebuts the claim that Scripture contains falsehoods, which as such can be perceived as an answer to Muslim criticism. However, in his fifth principle, he refers to the example of Sarah's laughter. That this is not a randomly chosen example is evident when one considers the Rabbinic literature. The midrash rabbah states on this topic: 'Bar Kappara said: Great is peace, for *even Scripture made a mis-statement* [emphasis added] in order to preserve peace between Abraham and Sarah. Thus, it is written, Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying: "Shall I of a surety bear a child?" It does not say, "Since my lord [Abraham] is old" but "Seeing that *I am* old [emphasis added]."'²⁴² The midrash thus overtly states that Scripture contains faults. Subsequently, in his 'Principles of Biblical Exegesis', al-Qirqisani implicitly refutes the Rabbanite stance as well. This demonstrates that al-Qirqisani's main objective in this principle is the establishment of Hebrew Scripture as the primary, uncorrupted and authoritative basis for exegesis. At the same time, however, the principle is entangled in a polemical discussion between and within Islam and Judaism. In the context, the 'adherence to the word' in the sense of strict literal, *zahir*, interpretation is less important than the exposition of the Hebrew Bible as the single valid source of interpretation.

Conclusion

²³⁸ Ibidem, 49,234.

²³⁹ Clare Wilde, "The Quran: Kalam Allah or words of man? A case of Tafsir transcending Muslim-Christian communal borders," *Parole de l'Orient* 32 (2007): 4-5.

²⁴⁰ Hirschfeld, *Qirqisani Studies*, 25

²⁴¹ Ibidem.

²⁴² Midrash Rabbah, Genesis (Vayera), XLVIII. 17-19, transl. H. Freeman and M. Simon, (London, 1939), 416.

Two premises shaped this thesis so far. One is the concept of literalism or scripturalism, in the sense of authority, and more precisely defined as the belief that the literal meaning is favored in interpreting the Hebrew Bible, in comparison to all other types of meaning. The second premise concerns the literal sense, the embedded meaning that is attached to a text by the words and linguistic rules of a specific language. Before turning to the understanding of literal sense in Scripture, some remarks can be made with regards to the Karaite overall attitudes towards authority, and authority of interpretation in particular. Whereas the reliability of the account of Anan ben David is questionable, it reveals some important clues. The Karaite movement resulted from an amalgamate of movements with one common denominator, which is represented in the rejection of Rabbinic authority. Besides the suggestion that this rejection is a direct result of the attitudes of preceding Jewish sects such as the Sadducees or Qumranic groups, there is the notion that there are influences from Islamic circles, for example the Khariji movement that categorically rejected tradition and only held the Qur'an authoritative. Considering the attested Mu'tazilite elements in the work of al-Qirqisani, it is interesting to note that Mu'tazilism allegedly has its roots in heterogeneous movements with political and ethical aspirations.

I would argue that these elements at least disclose that tenth century Karaite movements, however they came into existence, were familiar with similar models of rejection of authority. These were either models from their own Jewish history, or the immediate history of their Islamic rulers. This would not imply direct 'influence', but merely indicate that Karaite movements inherited notions of the battles and conflicts surrounding the claims to power, the 'rightfulness' and piety of the leaders in the early Islamic community. As for the nature of the Karaite rejection of the Rabbanites, I would argue that this is not merely a matter of authority of literal or non-literal interpretations. The Rabbinic leaders attempted to gain political hegemony over Jewish communities in the Islamic realm. In this process, the Rabbinic scholars presented themselves as the only authorized interpreters of Scripture. They attempted to enforce this image of authority by emphasizing the chain of tradition, associated with the oral tradition, which by then had been written down. As demonstrated by Salmon ben Jeroham, the objection to this Rabbinic literature was not directed to the contents of that law *per se*. This would suggest that Jeroham considered the oral law as interpretation in oral form as valid. However, al-Qirqisani firmly emphasizes the 'written Law' by Moses as the only valid basis for interpretation.

As I have demonstrated, the interpretation techniques presented by al-Qirqisani are not exclusively literal. To tenth century Karaites al-Qirqisani and Jeroham, the Rabbanite endeavors possibly signified their unethicalness and their incapability of pious leadership, which triggered their rejection of Rabbinic leadership and their claim to interpretation, whether it be literal or non-literal. Instead of 'blindly' following tradition, al-Qirqisani advocated an individual form of exegesis based on rational speculation and logical derivation. His Rabbinic opponent Sa'adyah Gaon, similarly promoted this individually oriented interpretation, yet remained faithful to the Rabbinic tradition and rejected logical derivation.

As for the definition of the literal sense in al-Qirqisani's preamble 'Principles of Biblical Exegesis', the second principle contains one direct reference to the use of literal interpretation. In the same principle, however, al-Qirqisani shows that he has difficulty in defining 'the literal sense'. The 'literal sense' is rather a grey area, with different levels of literal meaning. Parallel to modern linguistic theory, these different levels of literal meaning can be distinguished by the linguistic rules and contextual aspects, for example 'common speech'. Al-Qirqisani shows in the 'Principles of Biblical Exegesis' a similar interest in linguistic and grammatical tools to order, omit and add clauses, words and letters to support the interpretation of the Biblical text. Both al-Qirqisani and Sa'adyah Gaon grappled with the boundaries of literal sense, although they agreed on non-literal understanding of the Biblical text in case of anthropomorphic depictions of God, or any other descriptions that contradict reason. These instances required a figurative or allegorical interpretation. The rational elements were borrowed from Mu'tazilism. Many of the propositions in al-Qirqisani's are related to Mu'tazilite concepts, framed in such a way that they implicitly address disputes with his Rabbinic or Muslim environment.

I would thus argue that al-Qirqisani's 'Principles of Biblical Exegesis' rather promotes a rational approach in Biblical interpretation than a strict literal interpretation, if such a literal interpretation can be determined at all. Therefore, there is no absolute rejection of allegorical interpretation, moreover, the allegorical interpretation is even preferred in certain cases. The nature of scripturalism depicted in the 'Principles of Biblical Exegesis', is therefore not based on the belief that a pure literal interpretation is favored over a non-literal interpretation. Its nature encompasses the preference for an interpretation that is based on the uncompromised divine revelation, 'the perfect Law of the Lord', the Hebrew

Bible. Interpretation should be performed by an equally uncompromised and independent interpreter, who does not claim to possess the divine truth. The methodological approach is the only way to reach this divine truth. A staunch adherence 'to the letter' is therefore not a just representation of al-Qirqisani's 'Principles of Biblical Exegesis'.

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