

Karaite Mourning of Zion as an Ascetic Movement

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Abstract

Karaite Judaism developed in an Islamic environment in which there were Muslim movements which preached asceticism (*zuhd*) as a religious value, perhaps in reaction to the temporal successes of early Islam. Their practice of asceticism included abstention in the areas of dress, food, drink, property, and sexual relations, in the hope of preparing the soul for the world to come in which the body would disintegrate and only the soul would remain. Among Rabbanite Jews, there were those who advocated an internal variety of *zuhd*, a sort of radical alienation from society, as a process of spiritual discipline. In the Land of Israel during the Golden Age of Karaism (end of the ninth–eleventh centuries), Karaites adopted ascetic practices (other than sexual abstinence), not in order to prepare the soul but as a way of bringing the Messiah. Those who adopted this ascetic way of life were referred to as the “Mourners of Zion.” There may have been Rabbanite Mourners (rabbinic literature mentions mourning customs in light of the destruction of the Temple), but the vast majority of the Mourners of Zion movement in the Land of Israel were Karaites. Since Karaite asceticism was mainly political, namely in the service of hastening redemption, one can assume that the Karaites would have been happy to leave behind their mourning customs if the messiah had come and rebuilt the Temple.

In addition to asceticism for political purposes, there were Karaites who believed that one should adopt such practices without a direct connection to the mourning of Zion. The outstanding representative of this position was Salmon ben Yeruhim, who argued in his *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* that King Solomon taught asceticism for spiritual purposes and not just for political ones. In addition, Salmon claimed that in certain Psalms, King David described his own ascetic lifestyle. Since David and Solomon were not mourning for the Temple, their asceticism had no relation to its destruction and one should adopt their practices without regard for any political considerations. After the destruction of the Karaite community in the Land of Israel during the First Crusade, the Karaite center moved to Byzantium, where mourning was not perceived as an attractive lifestyle. The last known Karaite identified with the Mourners of Zion was the Byzantine Judah Hadassi the Mourner in the middle of the twelfth century. Until this very day, Karaites refrain from eating meat in Jerusalem as a way of remembering the Mourners of Zion movement.

A

Karaism emerged in the ninth century in the Islamicate world, a world in which a number of Muslim believers were propagating the importance of asceticism as a religious value. Their denial of bodily pleasures, *zuhd* in Arabic, most likely a reaction to the material success of early Islam, was part of a material and spiritual asceticism intended to facilitate a closer association with the divine. It consisted of renunciation of, or indifference to, the physical world and was characterized by physical privation in the realms of clothing, foodstuffs, sleep, property, and sexual relations. Denial of bodily desires in this world was intended to prepare the way to life in the next world, where the soul would exist without the body. A number of Jewish thinkers were influenced by the notion of asceticism, but generally they did not adopt practices characterized by extreme external renunciation of the body. The most notable medieval Jewish supporter of asceticism was Bahya ibn Paquda (eleventh century), who advocated an inner asceticism, one in which the worshipper outwardly remained part of society but inwardly was radically alienated from it. This type of asceticism was the penultimate stage in the spiritual regimen of the believer before achieving pure love of God.¹

In contrast to the inward asceticism advocated by a number of Rabbanite Jews, the austere lifestyle adopted by many Karaite Jews closely resembled the renunciation of physical pleasures of the Islamic *zuhd* movement. The late tenth-century Karaite missionary Sahl ben Mazliah described Karaite routines as follows:

1 Anan ben David, in the eighth century, is usually credited incorrectly with the founding of Karaism, and he adopted certain ascetic practices as well. Karaism, itself, emerged in the ninth century; see Moshe Gil, "The Origins of the Karaites," in Meira Polliack, ed., *Karaite Judaism: A Guide to its History and Literary Sources* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003), 73-118. On Islamic *zuhd*, see Geneviève Gobillot, "Zuhd," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman, et al., consulted online on March 23, 2021 http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.bgu.ac.il/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_8201. On Bahya, see Georges Vajda, *La Théologie ascétique de Bahya ibn Paqūda* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1947); Allan Lazaroff, "Bahya's Asceticism against its Rabbinic and Islamic Background," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 21 (1970): 11-38; Nahem Ilan, "Al-I'tidāl al-Sharī'i: Another Examination of the Perception of Asceticism in *The Duties of the Heart* of Bahya," *Revue des Etudes Juives* 164 (2005): 449-461.

Karaite Mourning of Zion as an Ascetic Movement

This is the practice of the Israelites who have sought God's pleasure and secluded themselves from the desires of this world. They have given up eating meat and drinking wine and have clung to the Lord's Torah; they have stood in assiduous watch before the doors of His Temple. Because of the greatness of their grief and the depth of their sighing, they have lost their strength to stand up against all stumbling blocks, and the skin of their bodies has become wrinkled with premature aging... They have abandoned their merchandise and forgotten their families; they have forsaken their native land and left palaces in order to live in reed huts. They have left the cities to go to the mountains and have suffered bitter calumny. They have removed handsome garments to wear sackcloth, sighing and wailing and crying over Zion's disaster and rolling in the dust of ashes.²

These Karaites, then, did not eat meat or drink wine; did not look after their health; lived lives of isolation in inadequate housing; did not engage in business; and wore sackcloth.³

Although outwardly Karaite asceticism may have looked similar to its Islamic model, its rationale was actually very different. Karaites refrained from bodily pleasures because they were members of the "Mourners of Zion" movement. This trend in Judaism was particularly active in the Land of Israel during the ninth to eleventh centuries, a period known as the Golden Age of Karaism, during which Karaite beliefs and observances were standardized. Just as the circumstances of the emergence of Karaism are unclear, so, too, we do not know who established the penitential movement of Mourners and when exactly it began. We also do not know whether it was restricted to Karaites or included Rabbanite Jews as well. Based on a few positive Rabbinic

2 The Hebrew text is in Simhah Pinsker, *Likkute Kadmoniot* (Vienna, Adalbert della Torre, 1860), vol. 2, 31; a slightly different English translation is in Leon Nemoy, *Karaite Anthology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 113-114.

3 There is no evidence that Karaites advocated or engaged in celibacy, or even sexual moderation beyond that which the Torah requires. Since, as will be explained, the ascetic life was related to the hope of a speedy advent of the Messiah, there was no reason to try to prevent or limit reproduction. It might be noticed as well that all of the recommended deprivations were carried out in the public sphere (restrictions on food, housing, clothing and livelihood); see James T. Robinson, *Asceticism, Eschatology, Opposition to Philosophy: The Arabic Translation and Commentary of Salmon ben Yeroham on Qohelet (Ecclesiastes)*; (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), 124-125.

references to the Mourners, it would appear that it was not solely a Karaite movement. Furthermore, there were also Karaites during this period who were not Mourners, especially those living outside the Land of Israel. Nevertheless, Golden Age Karaism in the Land of Israel and Mourning of Zion were closely identified.⁴

B

In contrast to the spiritual aspects of Muslim *zuhd*, as adopted by some Rabbanite Jews as well, the motivation behind Karaite asceticism as part of Mourning of Zion was first and foremost political. It was one aspect of a strategy to hasten the coming of the Messiah who would rebuild Jerusalem. Those Karaites who participated in this lifestyle, which included the regular recital of special lamenting liturgies, were convinced that this was the way to end the exile. In the Golden Age, many Karaites personally took the first step in negating the exile by leaving their own diasporas, mostly Iraq and Iran, and moving to the Land of Israel. It was there that they observed the ascetic practices described by Sahl ben Mazliah, as well as composing the aforementioned dirges.

Mourning for the Temple was not, of course, a Karaite invention. The Talmud, Baba Batra 60b, records a number of mourning practices for the Temple.⁵

Our Rabbis taught: When the Temple was destroyed for the second time, large numbers in Israel became ascetics (*perushim*, also the Hebrew for Pharisees), binding themselves neither to eat meat nor to drink wine. R. Joshua (a Tanna in the first half century after the destruction) got into conversation with them and said to them: "My sons, why do you not eat meat nor drink wine?" They replied: "Shall we eat meat which used to be brought as an offering on the altar, but now is no longer? Shall we drink wine which used to be poured as a libation on the altar,

4 See Yoram Erder, *The Karaite Mourners of Zion and the Qumran Scrolls. On the History of an Alternative to Rabbinic Judaism* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017); Moshe Zucker, "Reactions to the Karaite Mourners of Zion Movement in Rabbinic Literature," in *Sefer ha-yovel le-Rabbi Chanoch Albeck* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1963), 378-401 (Hebrew).

5 The identification of the authorities mentioned here does not imply a commitment to the historicity of the account.

but now is no longer?" He said to them: "If that is so, we should not eat bread either, because the meal offerings have ceased." They said: "[That is so, and] we can manage with fruit." But he said: "We should not eat fruit either, because there is no longer an offering of first-fruits." They said: "Then we can manage with other fruits." But, he said: "We should not drink water, because there is no longer any ceremony of the pouring of water." They were quiet, namely they had no answer for him. He said to them: "My sons, come and listen to me. Not to mourn at all is impossible, because the decree has already been decreed. To mourn overmuch is also impossible, because we do not impose on the community a hardship which the majority cannot endure." The sages therefore have ordained thus. A man may stucco his house, but he should leave a little bare. A man can prepare a full-course banquet, but he should leave out an item or two. A woman can put on all her ornaments, but leave off one or two. For so it says, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I remember you not, if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy" (Ps. 137:5-6). What is meant by my chief joy? R. Isaac (the name of a number of sages) said: "This is symbolized by the burnt ashes which we place on the head of a bridegroom." R. Papa asked Abaye (in the fourth century): "Where should they be placed?" [He replied]: "Just where the phylactery is worn, as it says (Isaiah 61:3), 'To provide for the Mourners of Zion (*aveilei zion*), to give them a garland [*pe'eir*, understood by the rabbis as the phylacteries] for ashes [*eifeir*].'" It has been taught: R. Ishmael ben Elisha (also soon after the destruction) said: "Since the day of the destruction of the Temple we should by rights bind ourselves not to eat meat nor drink wine, only we do not lay a hardship on the community unless the majority can endure it."

We see that abstaining from meat and wine was a natural reaction to the destruction of the Temple; Rabbanites outgrew that natural reaction, but many Karaites advocated it. Unlike the Rabbanites, the Karaites believed that the majority of their community could endure the hardships to be laid upon them.⁶ Basing themselves on the verse

6 One of the theories of Karaite origins is that the movement arose in order to protest the harsh stringencies of rabbinic law. Karaite adoption of ascetic

in Isaiah, cited in the Talmud, which predicted the eventual vindication of those who grieve the destruction of Jerusalem, the Jewish lamenters called themselves Mourners of Zion.

The first known ideologue of the Karaite return to Zion and their mourning for it was Daniel al-Qumisi, from Damghan, a city in the district of Qumis, province of Tabaristan, in northeastern Iran. Al-Qumisi moved to Jerusalem around 875 and bemoaned the situation in the Holy City thus:

He has burned His sanctuary; He has left His Holy Place and His Temple, the dwelling of His Holy of Holies, to be trampled under the feet of the unclean ones, the uncircumcised... He has abolished His priests and their sacrifices... Our festivals have turned into days of mourning, all our songs have become dirges, and our holidays are full of sorrow and sighs... Our sun has set in daylight, as if it were nighttime, and our midday is as if it were darkness.

Al-Qumisi's solution to this unhappy situation was to advocate immigration to the Land of Israel and the adoption of an ascetic lifestyle. He did this despite diasporic opposition to such a move:

Know, then, that the scoundrels who are among Israel say one to another: "It is not our duty to go to Jerusalem until He shall gather us together, just as He dispersed us." These are the words of those who would draw the wrath of the Lord and who are bereft of sense. Even if the Lord had not decreed the commandment for us to come to Jerusalem, from the lands of dispersion, in mournful and bitter tears, would we not know with our own understanding that the objects of wrath should come to the gate of the one who is angry, to make supplication? ... This is even more so since the Lord has commanded the people of the Exile to come to Jerusalem, to stand within it at all times before

practices, in addition to its advocacy of strictness in many ritual areas (e.g., no illumination or heating in homes on the Sabbath), would seem to militate against the assumption that Karaism came to lighten the burden of rabbinic Jewish law; see Raphael Mahler, *Ha-Qara'im* (Merhavia: Sifriyyat Hapoalim, 1949); Martin A. Cohen, "Anan Ben David and Karaite Origins," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 68 (1978): 129-145; 224-234.

Karaite Mourning of Zion as an Ascetic Movement

Him, mourning, fasting, weeping, wailing, and wearing sackcloth and bitterness both day and night.

Al-Qumisi scolds his fellow Jews for using the danger of travel to the Land of Israel as an excuse for not coming (after all, he himself had made the long journey from Iran), since even members of other religions were constantly making pilgrimages to Jerusalem. Al-Qumisi, however, has a plan to overcome Diaspora Jewry's hesitance to return to Jerusalem in order to pray for its redemption.

If you will not come because you are running quickly after your own merchandise, then send from each city five men, along with support for them, so that we may form one sizable community to supplicate our God at all times upon the hills of Jerusalem.⁷

Since Karaites understood that their form of Judaism is based on Scripture, they looked for biblical precedents for their ascetic practices. Much energy was expended on legal discussions concerning the permissibility of eating meat in the absence of the Temple, since many pre-Karaite sectarians, such as Anan ben David and Mishawayh al-Ukbari, as well as early Karaites, such as Benjamin al-Nahavendi and Daniel al-Qumisi, understood that the eating of non-sacrificial meat (*besar ta'avah*) was permitted only when there is an altar on which sacrifices are offered. Until Noah built an altar after the flood, humanity was not allowed to eat animals, and the altars of the Patriarchs were also understood as a method of permitting the eating of meat. Thus, in the absence of the Temple and its sacrificial altar, eschewing meat was not only a function of mourning but also a result of legal impediments to animal slaughter. Similar arguments were made concerning the drinking of wine, which was also said to be permitted only when the Temple stood.⁸

7 These three citations are taken from Nemoy, *Karaite Anthology*, 35-36, 38. The entire epistle which includes Qumisi's call for immigration to Israel and repentance is found with translation in Leon Nemoy, "The Pseudo-Qūmisian Sermon to the Karaites," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 43 (1976): 49-105 (most scholars do not share Nemoy's skepticism about his authorship of the letter). Details of Qumisi's life have been reconstructed by Haggai Ben-Shammai, "Fragments of Daniel al-Qumisi's Commentary on the Book of Daniel as a Historical Source," *Henoch* 13 (1991): 259-282.

8 See Erder, *Mourners of Zion*, 211-283; Moshe Firrouz, "Studies in Eshkol Hakofer of Judah Hadassi" (PhD diss., Ben-Gurion University, 2018), 116-145 (Hebrew).

In addition to the legal issues involved in the ingestion of wine and meat, many Karaites understood these prohibitions as part and parcel of their mourning rites. In order to give scriptural justification for ascetic practices as a sign of mourning, Karaite Mourners looked for biblical precedents. Hence, some Karaites took their ascetic inspiration from the mourning practices of Daniel, who, according to the book that bears his name, lived before the rebuilding of the Temple: fasting, sackcloth and ashes (9:3); and refraining from rich food, meat, and wine as well as the use of lotions (10:2-3).⁹ Other proof texts are provided by the prophet Amos, although he lived before the destructions of both the northern and southern kingdoms. He upbraids his listeners for their wanton habits, including eating meat and drinking wine, saying that these practices will lead to exile (chapter 6). If this was the case before the destructions and exile, then, certainly afterwards, one should refrain from meat and wine.¹⁰ The connection between the mourning customs and the destruction of the Temple would seem to indicate that if the Temple were rebuilt, Jews would again be allowed to eat meat and drink wine.¹¹ This is a far cry

Much of our information about the early schismatics is derived from the work of Yaqub al-Qirqisani, who lived in the first half of the tenth century in Baghdad, in the same place and at the same time as the Karaites' great nemesis, Rav Saadia Gaon (882-942). Although Qirqisani explains the origins of the reasons for forbidding meat in the absence of the Temple, he seems to refute these reasons, leading to the probable conclusion that he, himself, did not forbid the eating of meat. Curiously, in his encyclopedic *Book of Lights and Watchtowers*, Qirqisani does not mention his contemporaries in the Land of Israel, the Mourners of Zion, even though he gives copious accounts of Karaite practices with which he disagreed.

- 9 See D.S. Margoliouth, *A Commentary on the Book of Daniel by Jepheth ibn Ali and Karaite* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1889), 90-91, 104-105 (Arabic); 44, 52-53 (English); Daniel Frank, *Search Scripture Well. Karaite Exegetes and the Origins of the Jewish Bible Commentary in the Islamic East* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004), 201.
- 10 Judah Hadassi, *Eshkol ha-kofer*, alphabet 237. Hadassi's text until alphabet 100 is available in Daniel J. Lasker, Johannes Niehoff-Panagiotidis, and David Sklare, *Theological Encounters at a Crossroads: A Preliminary Edition of Judah Hadassi's Eshkol ha-kofer, First Commandment, and Studies of the Book's Judaeo-Arabic and Byzantine Contexts* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019); subsequent citations are taken from the forthcoming full edition of the book, which can be consulted meanwhile in the Gözleve, 1847, edition and in a number of reprints of that edition.
- 11 See Yoram Erder, "Remnants of Qumranic Lore in Two Laws of the Karaite Benjamin al-Nihāwandī concerning Desired Meat," *Zion* 63 (1998): 12-13; 35-36 (Hebrew); idem, "The Negation of the Exile in the Messianic Doctrine of the Karaite Mourners of Zion," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 68 (1997): 138; Hadassi, *Eshkol ha-kofer*, alphabets 233-234.

from Islamic *zuhd* in which asceticism is intended to prepare one for life after death and is not dependent on political events in this world.

Karaite asceticism, then, should generally be distinguished from that of the Islamic *zuhd* movement, with its external renunciation of physical pleasures, and that of Jewish Rabbanism, with its internal alienation from the physical world, since both forms of asceticism were for the benefit of the individual worshipper in the context of personal spiritual life. Karaite asceticism was to achieve political goals, the bringing of the Messiah and the rebuilding of the Temple, after which it could be abandoned. Nevertheless, one should be careful not to draw too sharp a distinction between spiritual and political asceticism in Karaism.

C

The most important Karaite expositor of personal asceticism was Salmon ben Yeruham (mid-tenth century). In his commentary on Lamentations, Salmon advocates an ascetic lifestyle as a sign of mourning for the Temple, a typical move by a Karaite Mourner of Zion. He criticizes those Jews in the exile who do not eschew meat and wine in light of the destruction of the Temple, namely the non-Mourners, especially among the Rabbanites. Salmon also produces a series of dirges to be recited as part of the rituals of mourning intended to bring about an end to the exile.¹²

Yet, Salmon's advocacy of asceticism goes beyond the political agenda of the Mourners of Zion. This is most clear in his commentary on Ecclesiastes, where Salmon writes that the purpose of King Solomon in this book is to inculcate five principles. These include the

12 See Jessica Andruss, "Exegesis, Homily, and Historical Reflection in the Arabic Commentary on Lamentations by Salmon ben Yeruham, Tenth-Century Karaite of Jerusalem" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2015); the Judaeo-Arabic text of this commentary was published by Mohammed Abdul-Latif Abdul-Karim, "Commentary of Salmon ben Yeruham on Lamentations" (PhD diss., University of St. Andrews, 1976); and an edition of chapter one was published by Salomon Feuerstein, *Der Commentar des Karaers Salmon ben Jerucham zu den Klagliedern* (Cracow: Verlag des Verfassers, 1898). The commentary is the focus of Haggai Ben-Shammai, "Poetic Works and Lamentations of Qaraite 'Mourners of Zion'—Structure and Contents," in *Knesset Ezra: Literature and Life in the Synagogue; Studies Presented to Ezra Fleischer*, ed. S. Elizur et al. (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 1994), 191-234; and Lawrence Marwick, "Studies in Salmon ben Yeruham," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 34 (1944): 313-20; 475-80.

fact that humans are not created by God for this world, that one should renounce the lower material world and its pleasures, and that true reward and punishment are otherworldly.¹³

In the course of the commentary, Salmon explains numerous verses in Ecclesiastes as expressions of these principles. Thus, Eccl. 1:2, “vanity of vanities” (translated by Salmon as “dust of dust”) is explained as follows:

The sage, peace be with him, intended in this dictum to teach the people of the world that all things of this world and what people occupy themselves with in terms of toil and work and building and planting and amassing of numerous supplies and property – all of it is dust and of no value; not a thing in it persists for man. And since it is dust, one ought to renounce it and turn oneself to something other than it, to that which should be sought after... The things of this world are at the utmost of what is dust, of no value, lacking persistence; there should be no desire for it, for it will become as if it never was.¹⁴

Likewise, Eccl. 1:3 (“What profit has a person in all his work”) is interpreted to mean that the prophets were content with eating little, dressing in rags, and living off alms.¹⁵ In subsequent passages, Salmon understands Ecclesiastes as teaching that individuals should reduce their engagement with the world to the minimal needs for survival while engaging in good works, acts of purification and cleanliness, and sexual chastity.¹⁶ In his descriptions of asceticism, Salmon employs *zuhd* terminology, such as trust in God (*ittikāl*), but he backs away from advocacy of extreme asceticism, preferring instead a middle way in terms of behavior while maintaining one’s contempt for the world.¹⁷

13 Robinson, *Asceticism*, 110-111. Salmon was not the only Judaeo-Arabic writer to make a connection between Ecclesiastes and *zuhd*. See Saadia, *Sefer ha-nivhar ba-‘emunot uva-de’ot*, ed. Yosef Kafih (Jerusalem: Sura, 1970), 10:3-4, pp. 290-295; Isaac ibn Giyyāth (1038-1089), *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* in Yosef Kafih, ed., *Hamesh Megillot* (Jerusalem: Ha-Aguda Le-Hatzalat Gnzei Teiman, 5722), 161-296 (entitled *Kitāb al-zuhd*/Book of Asceticism, attributed incorrectly to Saadia).

14 Robinson, *Asceticism*, 112-113; 184-185.

15 Ibid., 114; 186-191.

16 Ibid., 123-124; 302-305; sexual chastity refers to refraining from forbidden sexual practices, e.g., adultery, and not to celibacy.

17 Ibid., 113; 119-125; 127-130.

Karaite Mourning of Zion as an Ascetic Movement

According to Salmon, King David was also a promoter of asceticism in the Book of Psalms, and he served as a model for the present-day Mourners. For instance, in his commentary on Ps 69:12 (“I made sackcloth my garment; I became a byword among them”), Salmon understands that David was an object of scorn in terms that resonate with the Karaites’ own experiences:

When I wore sackcloth in order to humble myself and break away from yearnings of the world through the hardship of haircloth and abandoning the pleasure of the softness of clothing, I became a byword for them. Even so today, when they (the Rabbanites) assemble for their banquets, their drinking parties, or their other nefarious gatherings, they dress up one of their number in sackcloth, in the manner of a scarecrow and jeer at him, saying: “Behold the image of Jabez! Behold the image of al-Qumisi!”¹⁸

The Rabbanite mockery of the Mourners of Zion is also foretold by David, whose enemies made him into an object of ridicule, as he became a “favorite topic for those who sit in the city gates” and in “the song of the drunkards” (Ps. 69:13). Since Kings David and Solomon adopted ascetic practice without any connection to mourning for the Temple, their renunciation of the world could not have been a tactic to restore Jerusalem. It would seem, then, that Salmon adopted Islamic *zuhd* ideology and regarded asceticism as a goal in and of itself. If other Karaites would have been happy to eat meat and drink wine when the Temple was rebuilt, this apparently was not the case at least with Salmon. We have no way of knowing how widespread among Karaites was this non-political, spiritual approach to asceticism, but it is likely that Salmon was not the only Karaite adherent of *zuhd*.¹⁹

18 Lawrence Marwick, *The Arabic Commentary of Salmon ben Yeruham on the Book of Psalms, Chapters 42-72* (Philadelphia: Dropsie College, 1956), 100. Leon Nemoy, in his review of Marwick’s edition, *Jewish Quarterly Review* 48 (1957): 59, suggests that Jabez (I Chron. 4:9) is a code word for Anan.

19 Paul Fenton, “Karaism and Sufism,” in Polliack, *Karaite Judaism*, 199-212, theorizes a connection between the early Mourners and Sufism, which may have also affected the Karaite spiritual outlook. Yefet ben Eli, the greatest Karaite exegete who lived at the end of the tenth century, also devoted parts of his commentary to Ecclesiastes to advocacy of an ascetic lifestyle; see Robinson, *Asceticism*, 23-24. For a discussion of Salmon’s and Yefet’s commentaries on Ecclesiastes, see Georges Vajda, *Deux commentaires Karâïtes sur l’Ecclésiaste* (Leiden: Brill, 1971). For Yefet’s objection to extreme asceticism, see, e.g., 177-178.

D

Despite the Mourners of Zion's best efforts, the Messiah did not come. By the middle of the eleventh century, however, the movement was still strong. We have a marriage contract from 1028 where the couple pledges to follow the calendar according to observation and not to eat beef or lamb in Jerusalem until the altar of God is established.²⁰ Nevertheless, there seem to have been some cracks in the Mourners' steadfastness, as we have evidence in the eleventh century of Karaite butcher shops even in Jerusalem.²¹ In any event, instead of the Messiah, there arrived in the Land of Israel first the Seljuks in 1071 and then the Crusaders in 1099. The Golden Age of Karaism had already started to wane, but these invasions proved to be the final blow to this period.

Karaites, like other Jews, proved to be resilient in the face of adversity. There were still surviving Karaite communities in Cairo, Damascus, Iraq and Iberia. The next significant Karaite center, however, was in Byzantium. Even when the Mourning of Zion movement was going strong in the Islamic world in the tenth and eleventh centuries, Karaite immigrants were beginning to settle in Christendom. They were not quite ready to lead an independent religious life, so some of their students travelled from Byzantium to Jerusalem to study in the famous study house there. The most prominent of these students was the mid-eleventh-century Tobias ben Moses, the major figure in a translation project that transmitted the Judaeo-Arabic Karaite legacy of the Golden Age to a Greek-speaking, Hebrew-reading community of Byzantium. Tellingly, when he was in the Land of Israel, Tobias was known as *ha-avel*, the mourner, but when he was back home in Constantinople, he was *ha-ma'atig*, the translator. If in the mid-eleventh century, when there was still a Jerusalem Karaite community, Tobias seems to have abandoned Mourning when he returned home, it would seem that in twelfth-century Byzantium, Mourners of Zion and their ascetic practices should have been just memories.²²

20 Firrouz, "Studies," 124.

21 Haggai Ben-Shammai, "The Karaites," in J. Prawer and H. Ben-Shammai, eds., *The History of Jerusalem: The Early Muslim Period 638-1099* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 1996), 217.

22 For the early history of Byzantine Karaism, see Zvi Ankori, *Karaites in Byzantium* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957).

The case of Judah Hadassi indicates that the allure of ascetic practices in order to mourn for Zion can remain strong even at a physical distance from the Land of Israel and without the communal aspects of the Mourners of Zion movement. Hadassi was the most prominent Karaite of the twelfth century, and his monumental Hebrew work, *Eshkol ha-kofer* ("Cluster of Henna"), is a repository of the entire corpus of Karaite law, lore, exegesis, polemics, and much more, which predated its mid-twelfth century composition. We do not know much about Hadassi, but he invariably calls himself Judah ben Elijah *ha-Avel* (the mourner), and his legal decisions tend towards the ascetic practices of the Karaite Mourners.²³

As is typical of his book, Hadassi reviews all the arguments for and against the permission to eat meat when there is no Temple, and he rejects all the arguments that allow eating meat. As a Mourner, Hadassi would have liked to prohibit meat, but as someone who lived in the twelfth century when the Mourning of Zion movement had already run its course, and in Constantinople where the site of the destroyed Temple was at a far distance, he understands that ascetic mourning practices held no mass appeal. He gives detailed instructions as to how to slaughter animals, so obviously Karaites engaged in producing meat for consumption. Hadassi's conclusion seems to be: "Happy is the person who, with full contentment, refrains from any slaughter of animals, until God will gather the dispersed of Israel to Jerusalem. Then all of your slaughters will be acceptable."²⁴ He seems to eschew the ingestion of fowl and wine as well, even though he discusses the use of wine in various settings and which birds are permitted to be eaten. In short, Judah Hadassi *ha-Avel* was a mourner as an individual; as a community leader, however, he could not impose his personal predilections on his co-religionists, reminiscent of the Rabbinic dictum that we do not lay a hardship on the community unless the majority can endure it. Furthermore, he does not advocate asceticism for reasons of personal piety; his call for the eschewal of meat and wine was for communal, political reasons and, as in the case of a number of Karaite predecessors, was motivated by legal issues concerning the altar.

23 For a partial edition of *Eshkol ha-kofer*, see Lasker, et al., *Theological Encounters*; Hadassi's thought is discussed by idem, *From Judah Hadassi to Elijah Bashyatchi: Studies in Late Medieval Karaite Philosophy* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008), 41-59. For Hadassi's views of Mourning, see Firrouz, "Studies," 116-145.

24 Hadassi, *Eshkol ha-kofer*, Alphabet 233, letter tet.

Hadassi was firmly in the tradition of classical Karaism, not only in terms of Mourners of Zion but also in terms of his extremely negative attitude towards the Rabbanites. By the end of the thirteenth century, the Karaite Aaron ben Joseph, the Physician, known as Aaron the Elder, took a giant step toward Karaite-Rabbanite rapprochement by integrating the writings of Abraham ibn Ezra, Maimonides and other Rabbanite savants into his Karaite theology and exegesis. He relied on the words of a somewhat mysterious Karaite, Nissi ben Noah, who wrote after Hadassi and claimed that most of the Talmud was actually the words of “our ancestors,” namely, that it was now acceptable to appropriate Rabbanite teachings. Aaron ben Joseph remained a staunch Karaite, but he was more than willing to consider Rabbanite sources as an important part of his intellectual heritage. Golden Age Mourning of Zion held no attraction for him.²⁵

The same is true for Aaron’s Byzantine Karaite successors, such as Aaron ben Elijah, known as Aaron the Younger, in the fourteenth century and Elijah Bashyatchi, the final Karaite decisor, in the fifteenth. When Karaites flourished in Eastern Europe in the early modern and modern periods, their sages there were fully immersed in Rabbinic sources. Mourning of Zion seems to have disappeared.²⁶ And, yet, mourning practices did not die out entirely among Karaites. We have indications from visitors through the centuries that Jerusalem Karaites did not eat meat. Even today, Karaites do not eat meat in Jerusalem. Nevertheless, today’s Israeli Karaites give no evidence of other signs of an ascetic lifestyle. Contemporary Israeli Karaites are very proud of their Golden Age ancestors, but they do not imitate their Mourning and the deprivations attending it.

25 Although thirteenth-century Byzantine Karaism moved away from Golden Age theology, exegesis and law, Egyptian Karaites, who continued to be conversant with Judaeo-Arabic, maintained many of the classical Karaite stances, but we do not know their attitude towards ascetic practices. Just as not all the writings of authors in the Golden Age in the Land of Israel, whom we know to have been Mourners, have explicit references to ascetic or grieving practices, so, too, some of the Egyptian Karaites may have adopted mourning practices without making direct references to them. I thank David Sklare for discussing this subject with me.

26 On the Karaite attitudes towards Jerusalem as they relocated further and further away from it, see Lasker, *Studies*, 229-247.