Karaite Judaism and Historical Understanding

Fred Astren

Notions of history and the past contained in literature of the Karaite Jewish sect offer insight into the relationship of Karaitism to mainstream rabbinic Judaism and to Islam and Christianity. *Karaite Judaism and Historical Understanding* describes how a minority sectarian religious community constructs and uses historical ideology. It investigates the proportioning of historical ideology to law and doctrine and the influence of historical setting on religious writings about the past.

Fred Astren discusses modes of representing the past, especially in Jewish culture, and then poses questions about the past in sectarian, particularly Judaic sectarian, contexts. He contrasts early Karaita scripturalism with the literature of rabbinic Judaism, which, embodying historical views that carry a moralistic burden, draws upon the chain of tradition to suppose a generation-to-generation transmission of divine knowledge and authority. Karaites in the medieval Islamic world eschewed historical thinking, in concert with their rejection of the rabbinic concept of tradition. One important medieval Karaita, al-Qirjisani, however, constructed a sophisticated historical argument as part of his philosophical exposition of Karaitism, demonstrating theological and philosophical strategies common in Islam and Christianity.

Reconstructing Karaite historical expression from both published works and previously unexamined manuscripts, Astren shows that Karaites relied on rabbinic literature to extract and compile historical data for their own readings of Jewish history, which they recorded in an encyclopedic literature similar to contemporary Byzantine Christian Orthodox writing. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Karaita scholars in Poland and Lithuania collated and harmonized historical materials inherited from their Middle Eastern predecessors. Astren portrays the way that Karaites, with some influence from Jewish Renaissance historiography and impelled by features of Protestant-Catholic discourse, prepared complete literary historical works that maintained their Jewishness while offering a Karaite reading of Jewish history.

Studies in Comparative Religion • Frederick M. Denny, series editor

FRED ASTREN is professor and director of the Jewish Studies Program at San Francisco State University. The author of *The Jewish Printed Book in India: Imprints of the Blumenthal Rare Book and Manuscript Library* and coeditor of *Judaism and Islam: Boundaries, Communication, and Interaction*, Astren has also published articles on Karaitism and the Dead Sea Scrolls, death rituals in Judaism and Islam, the influence of Islam on Karaite Judaism, and biblical constructions of British sacred history. Astren lives in El Cerrito, California.

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