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INTERACTIONS BETWEEN
KARAITE AND RABBANITE THOUGHT
IN SPAIN AND BYZANTIUM

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Daniel Lasker. *From Juddah Hadassi to Elijah Bashyatchi: Studies in Late Medieval Karaite Philosophy.* Leiden and Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2008.

This new volume, the fourth in Brill's "Supplements to the Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy," is a welcome addition to the growing corpus of Karaite scholarship. It focuses on the understudied Hebrew-writing Karaites of Byzantium. As the subtitle suggests, it consists of sixteen "Studies," including thirteen chapters previously published over a twenty-year period (1984-2004). It is, however, far more than a collection of occasional essays relating to a single theme, a contribution that would be important in its own right. The articles are re-presented here in narrative form, arranged topically and chronologically, framed by a new introduction and new conclusion, and together they develop a very clear and coherent argument: that Karaite philosophy, theology, and law, grounded initially in Mu'tazilite Kalām, became largely Aristotelian under the influence of Maimonides in the later Middle Ages. Late medieval Karaite thought, in other words, was "decisively" Maimonidean.

The present review, far too brief to do justice to the very broad range of subjects discussed, will introduce the parts and chapters of the book and its main themes.

Part I: Background

The first three chapters of Lasker's book provide general background and set up a contrast with later developments. The author provides a brief history of Karaite philosophy and theology in general—from the so-

called “golden age” in Jerusalem (tenth–eleventh centuries) to the fifteenth century, singling out and introducing the major figures and outlining some of the major themes (especially during the early centuries). To achieve this introductory goal, chapters 1 and 3—two of the new chapters written for this volume—are encyclopedic in character. Chapter 2 is more analytical, arguing that Karaism, despite the many individual Karaites who voiced opposition to the study of “foreign sciences,” was generally open to and positively inclined towards philosophy, theology, philosophical theology, science, and rationalism, five terms that Lasker uses interchangeably throughout the volume.

Part II: Major Thinkers

In Part II Lasker gives detailed introductions to the philosophical and theological ideas of the four main thinkers in his survey: Judah Hadassi (fl. 1149), Aaron b. Joseph “The Elder” (fl. 1290s), Aaron b. Elijah “The Younger” (d. 1369), and Elijah Bashyatchi (d. 1490). The four are presented chronologically, which helps to support the “central motif” (p. 69) of the book: the shift from a strongly Kalamitic orientation in Karaism, preoccupied with “unity and justice,” to an Aristotelian one influenced primarily by Maimonides. Beginning with Aaron b. Joseph, the Karaite thinkers discuss a full range of theological problems—creation vs. eternity, the existence of God and divine attributes, prophecy and providence, evil and theodicy, dogmatic principles and reasons for the commandments, immortality, resurrection, and messianic redemption—from a decidedly philosophical perspective, generally abandoning the “classical” positions of early Karaism for the Aristotelianized ones developed by Maimonides and other Rabbanite figures from Spain and southern France.

Part III: Contacts with Rabbanite Thinkers

Part III moves backward to twelfth-century Andalusia. In three very interesting, well-researched and illuminating chapters, Lasker shows the importance of Karaism in the development of Rabbanite thought in Islamic Spain. This is true, he argues, for the work of a host of thinkers: Moses ibn Ezra, Abraham ibn Ezra, Joseph ibn Saddiq, Judah b. Barzilai al-Bargeloni, and especially Judah Halevi and Maimonides, who are discussed at length in separate chapters. The author shows how both Halevi and Maimonides were very aware of, knowledgeable about, even attracted to

aspects of Karaism even as they rejected them and developed their own ideas in opposition to them. He then highlights the reciprocal effect they had on later developments in Byzantium. The fourth and final chapter in this section reconsiders an old question: possible Karaite influence on the Jewish-Christian debate in Christian Europe, especially through the work of Petrus Alfonsi in the twelfth century and the polemics of Nicolas Domin during the 1240 Disputation of Paris.

Part IV: Topics

In the discussion of specific topics, the subject of Part IV, Lasker is at his best. Each of the four chapters in this section presents a clear, simple, straightforward history of a theological problem: compensation for animal suffering; the prophecy of Abraham; the status of Jerusalem; and final reward. The first two, in particular, illustrate perfectly the development Lasker argues throughout the book: from early Karaite principles of belief based on Mu'tazilite Kalām, to Aristotelianized Rabbanite ideas developed by Maimonides and others (sometimes directly in contrast to Karaism), to the later Byzantine modification of early Kalamitic positions in light of Maimonides (and others). The dialectical relationship between the Karaite and Rabbanite thinkers is brought out most clearly in this section.

Part V: Into the Modern Period

The final section consists of a single chapter, written originally for this book, which recounts the afterlife of the ideas and developments detailed in previous sections, from the fifteenth century to the eighteenth, from Byzantium to Eastern Europe. Four thinkers are singled out for brief discussion: Isaac b. Abraham of Troki (d. 1594), Zerah b. Nathan of Troki (d. 1655), Mordecai b. Nisan of Kukizov (d. early eighteenth century), and Simhah Isaac Lutzki (d. 1760). The work of these figures, Lasker argues, marks the end of the creative period in the history of Karaism.

To sum up

From Judah Hadassi to Elijah Bashyatchi is a model work in the history of Jewish philosophy and the history of ideas. This clear and thorough introduction to late medieval Byzantine Karaite thought in relation to both the “golden age” of Karaism in Jerusalem and the flowering of Rabbanite Judaism in Spain (especially with Maimonides) should provide a solid

foundation for all future investigations. It will hopefully do more as well: stimulate research into areas the author only alludes to, including lesser-known figures in Byzantium (to help fill out the picture); contemporary Karaites thinkers in Egypt, Syria, and the Land of Israel; and contemporary Rabbanite literature in Byzantium. Only in light of these contexts can Judah Hadassi, Aaron b. Joseph, Aaron b. Elijah, and Elijah Bashyatchi fully take their proper place in the history of Jewish philosophy.