THE INTERPRETIVE METHOD OF
THE KARAITE AARON BEN JOSEPH:
UNIQUENESS VERSUS CONFORMITY

Résumé

Cet article s’intéresse au commentaire biblique d’Aaron ben Joseph (c. 1260-1320), éminent représentant de l’école byzantine karaïte médiévale, et plus particulièrement à deux aspects qui caractérisent sa méthode interprétative: (a) l’interprétation de la Bible découle du texte lui-même, comme le veut la tradition exégétique karaïte qui considère que le corpus biblique est une source cohérente et homogène; (b) l’attitude personnelle d’Aaron ben Joseph vis-à-vis de la tradition rabbinique et de sa littérature. Parce que cet érudit dut confronter la tradition karaïte ancienne à une société hétérogène et multiple, l’étude de son œuvre contribue à faire mieux comprendre l’école de pensée du karaïsme byzantin et sa position entre judaïsme karaïte et rabbanite.

Abstract

An analysis of the interpretive method of Aaron ben Joseph (c. 1260-1320), an eminent representative of the Byzantine school of Karaism, is the focus of this paper. We shall concentrate on two aspects of his work: (a) Aaron’s perspective of the Biblical corpus as a unified and harmonious source, interpreting the Bible from the Bible itself, in the light of the early Karaite interpretive tradition; (b) Aaron’s attitude to the tradition of rabbinic Judaism and its literature. These two aspects may add to the understanding of the Byzantine Karaite school of thought and its position between Karaism and rabbinic Judaism, illuminating the unique path of this scholar as a Byzantine Karaite who faced his early Karaite heritage within a heterogenic, ever-changing, society.¹

¹. This study is a complementary research of a previous paper of mine, which dealt with Aaron’s attitude to “literal” and “non literal” interpretations from halakhic perspectives; see L. R. Charlap, “Peshat and Derash in Karaite Biblical Exegesis in Byzantium — A Study of Aaron ben Joseph” (Hebrew), Pe’amim: Studies in Oriental Jewry 101-102 (2004-2005), p. 199-220.
Introduction: Features of Byzantine Karaism

According to inner-Karaite historiography, the founder of the Karaite movement, Anan ben David (who lived in the eighth century C.E.) diverged from Rabbinic Judaism as a result of an ideological dispute over the halakhic significance of the Oral Torah. However, the genuine historical circumstances of the emergence of the Karaite sect seem to be much more complex and are still quite obscure, as are the status of the Karaites within the Jewish world, their substantial contribution to Jewish culture and their interaction with the communities of Rabbinic Jews.

The medieval Karaite community has customarily been divided into two groups: the early Karaites (from the third quarter of the eighth century until the first half of the eleventh century), lived mainly in Babylonia, Syria, Palestine, Iran and Egypt, and the later Karaites, who, starting from the second half of the eleventh century, spread out to Byzantium and the Crimea. The former group communicated primarily in Arabic, both orally and in writing, whereas the latter group spoke and wrote mainly in Hebrew.

Researchers think that the initial settlement of the Karaites in Byzantium probably occurred in the second half of the tenth century. In the twelfth century, with the collapse of the Palestinian center — as a result of the Crusades — the Byzantine community became the Karaites’ most prominent center. The history of the Karaite community in Byzantium, as Zvi Ankori observed, is the story of a group that changed from Karaism influenced by the culture and language of Islam, to Karaism influenced by the Christian world, without losing its distinctive identity. The Byzantine Karaites maintained

2. Note, for example, the description given by the eighteenth century Karaite scholar Simcha ben Moses in his essay, Orah Ṣaddiqim, published in Mordechai ben Nissan, Dod Mordechai, Wien 1930, especially f. 17b-21b.

3. The following will be noted from among the early Karaite exegetes: Benjamin al-Nahawendi (9th century), Daniel al-Qumisi (second half of the 9th century) who both wrote their commentaries in Hebrew; other exegetes wrote in Arabic, as Abu Yusuf Ya’qub al-Qirqisani (first half of the 10th century), Solomon ben Yeruham (middle of the 10th century), David ben Boaz (10th century), Abu Ya’qub Yusuf ibn Nuh (second half of the 10th century) and Yefet ben ‘Eli (who wrote a comprehensive exegesis of the entire Bible — a summary of the Karaite exegesis until his time, which also served as a basis of that which came afterwards (at the end of the 10th century).


5. Id., “Qara’im”, p. 39. On the problematic issue of fixing a date for the beginning of the Karaite settlement in Byzantium and the various theories regarding this issue, see Z. Ankori, Karaites in Byzantium, New York, 1959, p. 26-86.
their identity and tried to continue their predecessors’ tradition while adjusting to a new environment and a different socio-cultural reality, including the adoption of the Greek language (as a vernacular language). This was not a group of missionary messengers in a rebellion against the Rabbanites, but rather migrants struggling to retain their identity.6

The Karaite literature in Byzantium is considered to start with the writings of Tobia ben Moses (eleventh century), who was called ha-ma’atiq, namely “the transmitter”, mainly because of his translations from Arabic into Hebrew of a number of important Karaite texts. By so doing, he brought the body of knowledge of the early Karaite heritage to the new center in Byzantium.7 In the eleventh (or twelfth) century, a distinguished Karaite sage by the name of Jacob ben Reuben wrote an important exegesis, named Sefer ha-’osher, which is perhaps the most revealing of all contemporaneous Byzantine literary creations, being the sum total of eleventh-century exegetical knowledge in Karaism.8 Another scholar, Yehuda Hadassi (twelfth century) wrote a book called Eshkol ha-kofer9 (1148), which was devoted to explanations of halakha and ideas in accordance with the Decalogue commands.

In the thirteenth century, Byzantium, especially Constantinople (Qushta’), became an important Jewish Karaite centre. Karaite sages wrote books of halakha, language, philosophy, commentary, poetry, as well as liturgy and polemics against the Rabbanites. In the second half of the thirteenth century, the Karaite sage Aaron ben Joseph ha-Rofe’, the “first”, (1250-1320) was a prominent writer. He wrote, among other things, an interpretation of the Prophets and the Writings, Mibhar yesharim,10 Sefer ha-Mibhar we-Tub ha-Mishar, which is an interpretation of the Pentateuch,11 and a grammar book Kelil yofi.12 His interpretations are regarded by the Karaites as classical

10. Gozlow, 1834.
11. Aharon ben Yosef, Sefer ha-Mibhar we-Tub ha-Mishar, completed in 1293, Gozlow, 1835.
12. Gozlow, 1847. This composition was edited in three stages over six hundred years. The manuscript was illuminated and completed (from p. 9b to the end) by the editor Yitzhak Tishbi (in 1581). The publisher of the present edition, Yitzhak Trishkan from Gozlow, also intervened in the style and added material from the annotations of the sage Yitzhak ha-Troki, who lived during the same period (e.g. 2a, and see the quote by Yitzhak ha-Troki, 10b). Thus, the views and terminology of Aaron should be differentiated from these later views and phraseology.
Karai exegesis, and it is his exegesis that will be the subject of this paper (henceforth, he will be referred to as Aaron). Approximately fifty years later, during the fourteenth century, Aaron ben Elijah from Nicomedia (called the “latter” or “the younger”, to differentiate him from the above-mentioned “first” Aaron), wrote an additional interpretation of the Pentateuch called Sefer keter Torah. He was primarily interested in religious philosophy, and he is considered by the Karaites to have summarized the Karaite exegesis and the Karaite religious philosophy. In this article we will relate to some of his ideas, in order to compare and enhance our perspective.

It has already been indicated that the Byzantine Karaites exegesis is a late branch, differentiated from the early Karaites exegesis by time (thirteen – fourteenth centuries), place (Byzantium) and the language in which it was written (Hebrew). This includes the pronounced influence of the different cultural background of Byzantium on the community and its literary creations. Contrary to the early Karaites exegesis, the Byzantine exegesis was written after the dissemination of the French-Andalusian Rabbanite exegesis (including that of Provence), providing another way for study. Generally speaking, Aaron was clearly influenced by the exegetes, especially by Abraham Ibn Ezra, to whom he related without citing his sources. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that Aaron is not totally committed to the heritage of the Karaites sages, since this is what he wrote:

רואים כל אדם משכיל לחקור بشכלה בהמה שאמור פзад במקפת המאמר
שאתרא לחון נזאל במקפת המאמר ואמור בין שלחן כל אימת ורצח המשכר אמת ורשקר פֶּה הומני. יא אים ומשכר […]


14. On Aaron ben Eliyahu’s position among the Karaites, see Heller, Nemoy, “Karaites”; for extensive study see Frank, “Karait Exegetical and Halakhic Literature”, p. 541-549. On his philosophical views, see Lasker, From Judah Haddassio to Elijah Bashyatchi, p. 69-95.


16. This is distinctive also in Aaron ben Elijah’s writings. An examination of his interpretation of the Pentateuch will reveal how often he mentions and uses Andalusian exegetes’ ideas.
And it is appropriate for each learned person to reflect upon why, in some of my writings, I will distance myself [in my interpretations] from the Karaite scholars’ sayings, and [I wish that] he [that person] will not annoy me [saying] that I do not follow their truth, since truth and falsehood are not so because of the one who says them, but because of their intrinsic essence (*Sefer ha-Mibhar*, 9, b).

It is apparent, therefore, that Aaron shows a great deal of autonomy, a factor that may be significant in studying of Aaron’s method.

**The Biblical text as a harmonious and unified text: Recurring Halakhic Issues**

It has already been noted that the early Karaites developed new tools in Bible exegesis, as part of the Ananite ideology of relying on the Scripture itself.17 We would like to illuminate one feature which may be linked to this Karaite concept regarding the Byzantine Karaites: their comprehensive and harmonious viewpoint of the Biblical text. This is more apparent in cases in which a story or a halakhic dictum appears more than once in the Scripture, so that the commentator is in a position to determine the boundaries of the context, namely to decide whether he sees all the repetitions as one exegetical unit or as separate units. It appears that Aaron’s interpretations of issues that reappear in the Pentateuch, take into consideration all the references regarding the same issue within the different contexts of the Pentateuch.

The first of Aaron’s interpretations to be examined is "לֹא יִגְנֹב, ‘Thou shall not steal”, in the Decalogue (Exod. 20:12; Deut. 5:15). The Rabbinic sages consider this prohibition to refer only to the theft of people, because of its immediate connection with other serious prohibitions such as “Thou shall not kill”, offenses which are punishable by death, in accordance with the dictum “something which is learned from its context” (*TB Sanhedrin* 86a). However, according to Aaron, “Thou shall not steal” is a general commandment that forbids all kinds of thefts (not just theft of people, as the rabbinic thought). He interprets the commandment which refers to the plural

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“You shall not steal” (Lev. 19:11) in a similar manner, as opposed to the rabbinic Sages, who considered this as a special prohibition against stealing property (see TBSanhedrin 86a). The details of the punishment are provided in other places in the Pentateuch: ‘הגדנאשאומכמךומתומת,” “Whoever steals a man [...] shall be put to death” (Exod. 21:15); The punishment for stealing property is double reimbursement (Exod. 22:6), and if one steals a bull or lamb and sells or slaughters it, he will pay five times its worth for a bull and four times for a lamb (Exod. 21:37). Thus, all the verses in the Pentateuch that relate to the prohibition of theft harmonize with each other and advance our knowledge of this subject.

An additional example to this approach may be seen in Aaron’s interpretation issue regarding the Hebrew slave. This issue appears three times in the Pentateuch: in Exodus 21, 2-6, in Leviticus 25, 39-43, and in Deuteronomy 15, 12-18. In Exodus, the laws of release in the seventh year deal with the family (wife, children) of the slave and the responsibilities of the master towards the slave’s family, as well as the piercing of the slave’s ear (to show ownership) if he does not wish to be liberated at the end of the seven years of servitude. The circumstances of the enslavement are not mentioned. In Leviticus, the Pentateuch advances an explanation of the circumstances in this way: ‘וכיוןמכרעמךאחיךימוך,” “And if your brother becomes poor beside you and sells himself to you”; in other words, the slave becomes enslaved because of the constraints of poverty. The text continues saying that a Hebrew slave is enslaved until the jubilee year. In Deuteronomy, as in Exodus, the circumstances of the enslavement are not mentioned; however, “a Hebrew woman” is added to the “Hebrew man”: “If your brother, a Hebrew man, or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you” — a reference is made to a slave of the female gender, as well as to the law of release in the seventh year, the law of ear piercing, and an additional law, allocating a grant upon emancipation. We know that in addition to the slave mentioned in Leviticus who was sold because of poverty, there were slaves sold by the court to compensate for stealing, as it is said, ‘וכגנבהאמישלםאוסלםאישיגנובכיברגנבותומכר,” “If a man steals [...] he shall pay [...] if he has nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft” (Exod. 21:37-22:2).

Sages from the rabbinic stream of halakha differentiated between the interpretations in Exodus and Deuteronomy, which dealt with the slave sold by the court for theft, and the issue in Leviticus, in which the slave sells himself because of poverty.18 The first type of slave, sold for theft, is

18. See Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishma’el, Tractate Neziqin, Mishpatim, 1-2; TB Qiddushin 14b; Maimonides, Mishne Tora, The Book of Qinyan, Laws of ‘Abadim, 3, 12.
released six years after being sold, and if he does not want to be emancipated, he has his ear pierced and becomes a slave for life (although, according to the Sages, he is released during the jubilee year). Upon his release, he receives a grant (according to Deut. 5:15). By contrast, the slave who sold himself because of poverty is not released after six years, nor does he have his ear pierced and does not receive a grant upon release. However, he is freed during the jubilee year. According to Rabbi Eleazar’s opinion (and others too), this differentiation is not made,19 therefore the slave who sold himself because of poverty, must also be freed after six years. However, this is a minority opinion among the rabbinic Judaists. And behold, the Karaite exegetes hold this minority position! According to Aaron, all the references are to be studied as one legal unit: a Hebrew slave is both someone sold for theft by the court (as inferred from the source in Exodus) and someone who sells himself because of the constraints of his poverty (as written in Leviticus).

Thus it develops that each source contributes an element to the law: the rule of emancipation after six years is learned from Exodus and Deuteronomy, the ear-piercing — also from Exodus and Deuteronomy, the grant — from Deuteronomy, and the interpretation of לא עולם ואבדו, “and he shall serve him forever”, meaning until the jubilee — from Leviticus. Aharon writes thus:

ואיש כי אם לו הכר יהו לפני אותו ולשימורו על כל מעשה אחר בא עבדו, עבדו בו לaturdays כל שנות עבדו, ואיש כי אם לו הכר יהו לפני אותו ולשימורו על כל מעשה אחר בא עבדו, עבדו בו לaturdays כל שנות עבדו.

And the slave that was mentioned is the one who was sold by the court. Another, who deprives himself by selling all he owns and yet cannot support himself and his household, may sell himself. He shall work for six years, no longer. And this is the measure for those who sell themselves who are married, as it is specified. However, if an unmarried slave is given a wife by his master, he will pierce his ear and remain sold for more than six years. The rabbinic sages interpreted this differently, saying, what is [the difference] between someone who sells himself and one who is sold by the court — that the one sold by the

19. See Mekhilta de-R. Shim‘on bar Yoḥay 21, lines 25-29, and in TB Qiddushin 14b, the opinion of Rabbi Eleazar (or according to another version, Eliezer).
court has his ear pierced and his master gives him a wife as a maidservant and he is not sold for more than six [...] and when he is released he receives a grant. The one who sells himself does not receive a grant and does not have his ear pierced; he is sold for more than six years [...], nor does he take a wife for a maidservant. And it is not so, as it is written, “If your brother sells himself to you [...]” (Deut. 15:12), and if only the court were the seller, what is the reason “or the Hebrew woman”? And they [the rabbinic Sages] said that a woman would not be sold for theft [!]. (And) in their opinion this portion refers to a slave who was sold by the court (Sefer ha-Mibhar, Exod. 40a).

It might also be understood that the Karaite exegete does not regard the slave who is the subject of Exodus and Deuteronomy as one who was sold for theft, since this is not explicitly written there; it is simply written, “If you buy a Hebrew slave [...]” (Exod. 21:2), without specifying whether he had been enslaved for theft or from poverty. If no conditions or distinctions are made, then a slave of any sort is the subject of the sale, under any circumstances.20

Finally, let us examine Aaron’s exegesis of the contradictory verses that relate to eating unleavened bread (maṣṣa) on Passover: In Exodus 13:6-7 (and in other places in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy) it is said: שבעת ימים תאכל מצות, “Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread”, whereas in Deuteronomy 16:8, it says: ששת ימים תאכל מצות וביوم השביעי תאכל מצות całegoל, “for six days you shall eat unleavened bread and on the seventh day there shall be a solemn assembly to the Lord your God”. According to Aaron (Sefer ha-Mibhar, Exod. 17b), it is required to eat unleavened bread for seven days, as indicated in most of the Pentateuch sources. When it is written in Deuteronomy that unleavened bread should be eaten for only six days, this is to explain another issue, which is the difference between the days of ḫol ha-mo‘ēd and the seventh day of Passover, which is an assembly (‘aṣeret) (Sefer ha-Mibhar, Deut. 13a). Thus, Aaron attempts to explain discrepancy between the two verses and obscure the issue, although his exegesis is somewhat problematic. By contrast, according to the Sages of the Babylonian Talmud (Pesaḥim 120a), eating unleavened bread is obligatory on the first night of Passover only, whereas on the other six days it is not. The conclusion they reached shows that they discussed the contradiction between the sources, and came up with a non-literal interpretation to innovate a halakha, although it was not written explicitly.

20. Compare the approach of Sa‘adyya Ga’on. According to him, “if you buy [...]” etc. includes both selling himself because of poverty and sale by the court, and in both circumstances the person shall not be sold for more than six years. See Y. Ratzabi (ed.), Rav Saadya’s Commentary on Exodus, Jerusalem, 1988; Arabic, p. 318; Hebrew, p. 108.
Relation to Talmudic Ideas and Interpretations of the Sages

It has been shown that the early Karaites were well versed in rabbinic Judaism which they already often quoted. Researchers have attempted to rationalize this, believing that coping with rabbinic Judaism was the reason for their proficiency in the literature of the Sages. However, the Karaite exegesis was not committed to the contents or the ideas of the Oral Tradition and the Sages’ interpretations. Our examination of the Byzantine-Karaite stream shows that, like their predecessors, the Byzantines were well versed in the literature of the rabbinic Sages, quoting from it as well as arguing with it, as will be discussed below.

Aaron’s attitude towards the Mishna and the Oral Tradition in general is sustainable, as he wrote:

ואין כל אמריהם בל ההלכה [...] אלא הלהי מכל עὺד מה שאמיה ההכובאל

החלוקה טפומ ישועומ כל הנבונים.

And not all their sayings are useless [...] and we have not eliminated all of it, only that which writing does not tolerate and that is the point of dissension [about which there is controversy] which is in contradiction to what is written (Sefer ha-Mibhar, 9a).

In other words, Aaron accords merit to the interpretations of the Sages, with three reservations: (1) if the verse does not “tolerate” them — his intention apparently being to the Sages’ interpretation from an intellectual and logical viewpoint; (2) if there is disagreement about them, meaning that the Sages’ interpretation contradicts another fact or law from the Torah; (3) if the Sages’ interpretations contradict the literal meaning of the written word. On condition that the Sages’ interpretations do not fall into any of the


22. Note that Ben-Shammai thinks that the polemic system which was established by the Karaite al-Qumisi, was the motivating factor in the assimilation of the substantive material of rabbinic Judaism, “Karaite Exegetes”, p. 53. However, compare Tiros-Becker who shows that there were Karaites who brought rabbinic materials not intended for polemic purposes, Rabbinic Hebrew Handed Down in Karaite Literature, vol. I, p. 7-9.

23. This understanding is based on the comparison of texts in the forewords of the theory of Sa’adya Ga’on and Abraham Ibn-Ezra, which will be presented below.
three above categories, they bear merit and can be quoted. These reservations, particularly the third, in our case, warrant further inquiry and elaboration.

It is important to note that in the research of medieval interpretation, it is usual to differentiate between peshat and derash. The distinction between these two concepts and the relationship between them has frequently been discussed from different angles in the research, and various explanations, often contradictory, have been given.24 One of the most accepted definitions of the term peshat in the research is that of Sarah Kamin, who established a number of criteria for the peshat: appropriateness of language (apparently referring to the grammar of the word and its forms as well as to the etymology of single words), the syntactical structure, the contextual content, the literary genre and the literary structure, “with the reciprocal relations between these components”.25 With this definition, Kamin emphasizes the connection between the peshat and the text, regardless of other parameters such as the commentator’s outlook etc. Nonetheless, even according to this definition, there is still plenty of room for different emphases.26

Different definitions were given also to the term derash. Uriel Simon, for example, proposed that derash — contrary to peshat — derives from a broader, more general viewpoint, devoid of grammatical rules.27 From another perspective, some are of the opinion that derash gives the literal meaning of the words, regardless of their context, as in the case of derasha of the letters.28 Lifshiz decided that derash that appears in the halakhic section of the Torah is “the legal explanation”, whereas the peshat is the


26. For a discussion about this matter and examples of the contradictions between “lexical peshat” and “contextual peshat”, see L. R. CHARLAP, “Biblical Interpretation”, p. 138-144.


“interpretative explanation”. In any case, following Simon, Kamin and others, one can determine that on the continuum of *peshat-derash*, *peshat* is always the more grammatical, literal, interpretation in comparison to *derash* which is less grammatical and less scriptural, unfettered by grammatical and textual norms.

Now let us return to Aaron’s words that were quoted above. From what he says, we can infer that he is aware of the less scriptural nature of the Sages’ writings (what we refer to as *derash*). However, he thinks it necessary to integrate them into his interpretations defining their parameters. One of the parameters that he emphasizes is the demand for a balance and a proportional relation towards the “grammatical” and literal interpretation of the text. If we compare Aaron’s attitude to Sa’adya Ga’on’s observation on this issue, we notice that Sa’adya supports the literal meaning but allows for three exceptions: instances in which tangible knowledge or wisdom dissents; instances in which the interpretation contradicts another verse; instances which contradict the prophets’ sayings. The same instances are noted by Ibn Ezra in the introduction to his commentary, *Shita aheret*, in which it is written:

וְהָנֵה אָמוֹרモデル תָּהוּד \[
\text{And behold, there is a rule in the Pentateuch} \]
[... that if we found a reference in one that denies one of three possibilities, one is straightforward reasoning [logically the reasonable interpretation], or by rational inference the written word denies another [another written word], or denies the Qabbala [the Oral Tradition], which has been studied [... it is said that that is the wisdom which is lost to us because our wisdom is limited.]

In other words, Ibn Ezra regards the Oral Tradition as the ultimate means of interpretation, and no interpretation of any kind can reject or ignore it. Hence, it would seem that the three sages identify similar problems, but reach different conclusions: Sa’adya Ga’on and Ibn Ezra relinquish the literal interpretation in favor of tradition, whereas Aaron relinquishes tradition and opts for the literal meaning. Continuing this approach, Aaron informs...

his readers that although the literal meaning is the principal one, he will not refrain from a non-literal interpretation. As he puts it:

And I will also apologize for the fact that I make mention of minor non-literal exegesis within the literal meaning, which the observer should not disparage. I have seen that there are people who share my love of this, and despite the fact that I have often objected to deviating from the literal meaning because it is the most basic and all of Israel is united in saying that Scripture must be interpreted literally, and since not all opinions are equal, some people will explain literally, whereas others will interpret non-literally (Sefer ha-Mibhar, 10a).

Indeed, as we have demonstrated elsewhere, when Aaron dealt with the halakhic section of the Torah, he brought the Sages’ halakhic interpretation, which is sometimes characterized as non-literal interpretation, albeit with certain limitations, in the spirit of his introductory comments. For example, while examining Aaron’s interpretations of the portion regarding the Hebrew slave (as above), we noticed his rejection of the halakha according to which the slave may have his ear pierced only if both he and his master have wives and children (TB Qiddushin 22a) since he could not find any basis for it in the text. Furthermore, he rejected the rabbinic interpretation that the woman given to the slave may be Canaanite, as in his opinion, that would contradict the law וגו לְעֹלָם וּעֲבַדְוֹ, “You shall save alive nothing that breathes” (Deut. 20:15), which is said of the Canaanites (In his opinion, the woman would have come from the locality, but would not have been Canaanite). However, he accepts the fact that rabbinic ideas have a firm basis in other biblical writings even if they are not in the same place, just as he accepts rabbinic ideas that seem logical to him. For example, he does not interpret literally נְתֵנֶךָ לְעֹלָם, “And he shall serve him for his life”, but agrees with the rabbinic Sages that the slave who has had his ear pierced will be released in the jubilee year (הֵיֹבל עד). Apparently, he reaches this interpretation by inference from the quote in Leviticus 25:40, where it is explicitly written: וְעַד בֶּן כְּלָלֶה הוּא לֹא יִגְרוֹנָה, “He shall serve you until the year of the Jubilee”.

32. See CHARLAP, “Peshat and Derash in Karaite Biblical Exegesis”.
In his interpretation to "then his master shall bring him to God" (Exod. 21:6), he (as well as Aaron ben Elijah) interprets *elohim* as meaning “judges”, as did the rabbinic Sages. Here, in our opinion, the reason does not stem from other writings but is rather a simple logical deduction, as to how it is possible to approach the Holy One Himself! To quote him:


34. For more examples of the halakhic material and a more general discussion, see CHARLAP, “Peshat and Derash in Karaite Biblical Exegesis”.

And the truth is clear that the writing relates to he that has or does not have a wife [...] *If his master gives him a wife* — to the person who comes alone [...] and it is not correct to interpret that she would be a Canaanite slave [...] *And if he shall say* [...] this writing uses the infinitive form33. And the rabbinic sages said that he must say repeatedly [...] *I loved my master* [...] and these rabbis said that [if] he loves his master but his master does not love him, he does not have a pierced ear [...] these are interpretations. *Elohim*, refers to the judges [...] *to the door* [...] or to the mezuzah and to the mezuzah [...] and *he will work for him forever* [shall be interpreted] to the jubilee (*Sefer ha-Mibhar, Exod. 40a-b*).

All of the above shows that Aaron brings and accepts some of the most meaningful opinions of the rabbinic Sages in this portion but rejects those that have no basis in the text or contradict another text.34 In the narrative parts of the Pentateuch, this phenomenon is especially prominent. Apparently — in the spirit of his introduction — Aaron’s goal is to add another aspect to the literal meaning. However, we also find rabbinic interpretations, some of which seem non-literal, that Aaron brings in order to accept or reject a particular idea. The way in which he does so merits close study.

We shall bring a few examples of rabbinic interpretations that Aaron uses in his commentary on Genesis (chapters 1-3), in which he expresses his agreement or disagreement with those interpretations. Aaron agrees with the
following: "and the ba’alei ha-qabbala (referring to those who received the Oral Tradition that was handed down from generation to generation, namely the rabbinic Sages) who said that, in the beginning the sky was created damp and on the second day it congealed" (Sefer ha-Mibhar, Gen. 1:6). This interpretation appears in the Palestinian Talmud (Berakhot 1, 5) and is also brought by Rashi and Ibn Ezra (Gen. 1:6). It expresses the view that the substance of all things appeared on the first day, while the form was given to them subsequently, each on its appointed day. This view of his is aligned to the Kabbalistic Medieval thought, found in Nahmanides’ writings, which stresses that God created the main elements on the first day, and from that point on, He only strengthened these elements. That is why Aharon interpreted רקיע יי , "let the sky be" (Gen. 1:6) as רקיע יתחזק , "let the sky strengthen", following the Sages, whom he quotes, and following Rashi, Nahmanides and others. The same happened with the lights: the basic element was created on the first day, but on the fourth day, God just hung them in the sky (Gen. 1:14). From an exegetical point of view, this interpretation also solves the problematic repetition of the sky’s creation on the second day (Gen. 1:6-8), subsequent to its creation on the first day (Gen. 1:1). According to this interpretation, the former appearance of the sky’s creation relates to the substance, while the latter relates to its final form.

Another rabbinic interpretation that Aaron brings is ואמר . המר , "And [the fruit tree] was created with its fruit at once. And the rabbinic Sages said that all that was created in the beginning was created completely formed" (Sefer ha-Mibhar, Gen.18a). This opinion appeared previously in the Babylonian Talmud (Rosh ha-Shana 11b; Hullin 60a) in order to explain the term: פרי עץ , "fruit trees" (Gen. 1:11), which might imply that when the tree first emerged, it was already fruit-bearing. By using this interpretation Aaron actually resolves the appearance of the term “fruit trees” at this stage of Creation, which also reflects the Sages’ opinion that all the creations were created ripe, ready to be integrated into the world of action.

Another rabbinic saying — דוד כי האדום וההוא נבראו פרצוק אחד , “And it is known that Adam and Eve were created with one face” (Sefer ha-Mibhar, op cit, 25a) — has already been quoted in the Babylonian Talmud (‘Erubin 18a; Ketubbot 8a), to resolve the contradiction between the text in

35. See Nahmanides’ commentary to Gen. 1:1.
Genesis 1:27: "So God created man in his own image [...] male and female he created them". In the story that appears later in Genesis 2:21–23, according to the former source, the human male and the female were created as one entity, while according to the latter, the male was created first, and after a while, the female was created. By bringing this rabbinic interpretation, Aaron offers a possible solution: the creation of the human entity was a two-stage process. At first it was one entity, and subsequently, the division into two bodies took place. This view was an accepted view among some Rabbanites in the Medieval Ages, including Maimonides. He brings another rabbinic interpretation to the verse "אֵין אֵדֶן בְּגֶן וַיִּנְהַג אֵת אָדָם אַלּוֹן [...] וַיַּקֵּחַ" (Gen. 2:15): The Lord took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden". 

This means that Adam was created in the same place that later on, in history, would be used for atonement (where Abraham intended to sacrifice his son), a derash that appeared in Pirque de-Rabbi Eli’ezer 12. Although it does not appear anywhere in the Bible that the place where Adam was created would subsequently be the place where Abraham would sacrifice his son Isaac, the very idea is not illogical and does not contradict what is written. The ideational concept underlying this interpretation is that the place of Creation is the place of atonement, that is to say, that there is a basic connection between the two events that take place at the same spot, and in a certain sense, the trial that Abraham underwent when asked to sacrifice Isaac, complements the act of Creation; in the footsteps of the Sages, this was what Aaron wanted to denote.

Besides bringing rabbinic interpretations that seem to reflect views concerning the theory of Creation or adding other views that fit — or at least do not contradict — the text, Aaron brings several rabbinic interpretations which one may regard as "obvious derash", namely, distinctive non-grammatical interpretations, as in the following: "וַיִּקָּחֵם יְהוָה את אָדָם וַיֵּצֶר עֵפֶר בַּתּוּבֵא הַזָּה לָנֶצֶר וַיִּיָּצֵר יֵודָע חַרֶם בֶּאֲלֵמָה, וַיִּנְהַג אֵת אָדָם אַלּוֹן [...] וַיַּקֵּחַ וַיִּנְהַג אֵת אָדָם אַלּוֹן" (Sefer ha-Mibhar, Gen. 23a). This means that Adam was created from dust who will eventually return to his land. It can also be saying that wa-yiṣer appears with only one yod in the context of the creation of animals. It can be seen that wa-yiṣer means way, ‘alah’ for the creature that was created from dust who will eventually return to his land” (Sefer ha-Mibhar,
Gen. 22a). Here he implies that there are two interpretations, both relating to the spelling of the word מִיצֶר (Gen. 2:7), including double yod, comparing this spelling to that of the same word in the context of the creation of animals — מִיצֶר — with only a single yod (Gen. 2:19). Based on this discrepancy, several ideas, to which Aaron refers in his first interpretation, appear in the midrashic literature, such as: מִיצֶר referring to two creations, one for Adam and one for Eve; creation from the upper regions (referring to spiritual features) and creation from the lower regions (referring to materialistic features); creation of the good inclination (הָרֵד הַדֶּשֶּׁא) and the bad inclination (הָרֵד הַרְעֶה); of this world (הָעָלָה הָוָא) and the world-to-come (הָעָלָה הָהֶזָּ).39 The second interpretation — the saying that וָיִיִּשֶר includes the prefix וָאָלָ, “alas”, for the creature that was created from earth, since he is supposed to return to it — is an idea that appeared in Midrash Ne’elam, Gen. 17.40

These two interpretations are introduced to solve the discrepancy between the two spellings. From a grammatical point of view, both forms express the root ר.צ.י from the radical sub-group כ. ב. Biblical grammar allows both of these possibilities when sometimes the spelling is *plene* and sometimes defective.41 Aaron did not base his explanation on grammatical considerations. The two rabbinic interpretations that Aaron brought are midrashic solutions to the problem; they deviate from the grammar of form and its various appearances in the Bible, arising from a different plane — the perspective that Aaron wishes to bring to light. The first interpretation finds midrashic clues in the double yod, which appears only at the creation of man, and from that, the differences between the creation of men and animals are derived. The second interpretation divides the word into two parts (וָיִיִּשֶר = וָאָלָ + יִּשֶר) in order to express his idea of the nothingness of man. It is obvious that the division is non-grammatical by default, however, there are many more similar examples in the rabbinic literature.42

In all the rabbinic interpretations that we have brought to-date, this case is the most remote in terms of Aaron’s attitude towards the *peshat* of the text. When we recall Simon’s opinion that *derash* is the most remote interpretation from grammar in relation to *peshat*, then, this example is closest to *derash* on the continuum between *peshat* and *derash*. Nonetheless, Aaron

39. See Bere’shit Rabba, Theodor-Albeck (ed.), 14, 2-5.
40. Compare Rashi, in his commentary to Gen. 18:1.
41. E. Kautzsch, A. E. Cowley (eds), Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar, Oxford, 1910, p. 192-194. Note that both forms have no *dagesh* in the *sade*.
42. For other examples, see I. Heinemann, Darkhei ha-Aggada [The Ways of Aggada], Jerusalem, 1974, p. 111-112 and 117.
did not steer away from bringing this derasha, since it provides the reader with certain ideational foundations about the creation of man.

Examples of non-literal interpretations with which he disagrees or about which he has reservations are those cases when the interpretations in question express allegorical exegesis:

And know that all that is written [about Paradise] is straightforward and not a parable, and many ignorant people arrogantly interpret sayings metaphorically, each as he pleases. And I will mention the best [idea], although I do not believe in this […] and they said that the snake is the evil impulse […] (Sefer ha-Mibhar, Gen. 23b-24a).

The source of this idea, in which the snake is considered a metaphor rather than a concrete object, is apparently The Wisdom of Solomon 2, 24; however, it is a well-known observation in other Jewish sources.43 Aaron brings this derasha because, apparently, it was widely known during his time, even though he, himself, had reservations about it, as he had reservations about all allegorical interpretations.44 For the same reason, he rejects the saying אֲנִי אֵלֶּה כַּהַנָּה וְאָלֹה כַּהֲנָה אָלֹה, “and they said that you should not read ‘leather gown’, just ‘lightening gown’” (Sefer ha-Mibhar, Gen. 24, b). This derash, which appears in Bere’shit Rabba, 20, 12, is based on the similarity in pronunciation of the Hebrew consonants ‘ayin [= ‘] and aleph [= ‘], an accepted means of interpretation in the literature of the Sages,45 which is seemingly aimed to give an allegorical, even mystical, meaning to the story of the Garden of Eden.


44. See Aaron’s attitude to this method in his introduction to the Pentateuch (Sefer ha-Mibhar, Gen. 8a-b) which was influenced by Abraham Ibn Ezra’s introduction. Compare Ibn Ezra’s objection to allegorical interpretation in his introduction to Genesis, ha-derakh ha-shlishit, in VAISER (ed.), Perushei ha-Tora le-Rabbenu Abraham Ibn Ezra, p. 6-7. For comparative analysis of the two introductions, see CHARLAP, “Peshat and Derash in Karaite Biblical Exegesis”, p. 206-207. For a comparison of the use of allegories by the Greeks and by the Jewish Sages see HEINEMANN, Darkhei ha-Aggada, p. 150-161. For the Christian allegorical interpretation method and its origins by Origen, see S. KAMIN, Jews and Christians Interpret the Bible, Jerusalem, 2008, p. 89-112 (First published in EAD., “The Polemic against Allegory in the Commentary of Rabbi Joseph Bekhor Shor” [Hebrew], Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought, 3, 3 (1984), p. 367-392).

45. For information about this kind of derasha and more examples, see HEINEMANN, Darkhei ha-Aggada, p. 113.
The above examples demonstrate that Aaron agrees with rabbinic interpretations as long as they fit his theological-philosophical views or his exegetical opinions, as he does in the interpretations that come to strengthen his theory of Creation. However, he expresses reservations when these interpretations express ideas that are unacceptable to him, such as allegorical ideas which divorce the text from its reality. We can only assume that in those cases in which he chose to quote the opinions of the Sages, he did so in order to reject them. As far as we know, allegorical concepts were widespread and accepted in medieval times, and it is possible that Aaron, like Ibn Ezra and perhaps even under his influence, took this opportunity to express his objection to them.

Conclusion

Aaron regards the entire Biblical text as a harmonious and unified text. This concept has influenced his interpretation of the Pentateuch since he believes that all the verses or issues are intended to complement to one another and to be interpreted accordingly.

As to his relation to Talmudic ideas and the literature of the rabbinic Sages — our findings demonstrate that he, like his predecessors, has profound knowledge of the traditions of the rabbinic Sages, both in the halakhic parts of the Pentateuch and the narrative parts. He not only refers to this literature to increase wisdom, to vary his commentaries and enrich them — as he writes in his introduction to the Pentateuch — but also to support his opinions through objection or debate. Moreover, he does not refrain from citing distinctive non-literal interpretations (according to the above definition), as he does in interpretations to the word *wa-yyišer* (see above). Nonetheless, as we have shown, Aaron agrees with rabbinical interpretations as long as they fit his theological-philosophical views or contribute to his exegetical opinions, as in the case of the interpretations of the Creation which were accepted by other Rabbanite philosophers and commentators in his time. However, he does express reservations when these interpretations express ideas, such as those based on allegories, which are anathema to him.

Did Aaron follow the traditional Karaite way of interpretation? It would be difficult to label him a traditionalist. On the one hand, his understanding of the broad biblical context as a crucial factor in interpretation, as we have shown above, expresses his loyalty to the old Karaite way of interpreting the Bible from the Bible alone. On the other hand, some of the statements he made, in addition to the expressions he quoted from Talmudic literature,
and his reliance on them in his interpretations — in both the narrative section of the Bible and the halakhic section — show that he paved a new way for himself, which, one can assume, was due to the influence of contemporaneous Rabbanite interpretation and thought.

By illuminating Aaron’s interpretive method and inquiring about his attitude towards rabbinic literature and the rabbinic Sages’ opinions, as well as his commitment to the tradition of the Karaite sages — we hope to make a contribution to the understanding of the nature of this aspect of Karaite exegesis and its special role within the Jewish culture of the Medieval Age.

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