Maimonides and Maimonideans on Karaites and aggadot

David Lemler

Perspectives sur l'histoire du karaïsme

Perspectives on the History of Karaism

Guillaume Dye (dir. / Ed.)

Le karaïsme est un mouvement religieux juif qui apparaît au IXe siècle, en Iraq et en Palestine, en opposition au judaïsme rabbinique et à la notion de Torah orale. Ce courant important du judaïsme médiéval, présent aussi dans le monde byzantin et plus tard, à l'époque moderne, dans le monde ottoman, en Crimée et en Europe orientale, est un exemple remarquable de la complexité et de la variété du judaïsme.

Depuis trois décennies, le karaïsme est l'objet d'études novatrices qui ont considérablement renouvelé la compréhension de son histoire, mais qui restent mal connues hors du cercle des spécialistes. L'objectif de cet ouvrage est de fournir une dynamique nouvelle aux études karaïtes dans le monde francophone, en faisant dialoguer spécialistes du karaïsme et spécialistes d'autres branches des études juives : un tel dialogue se révèle particulièrement fructueux, non seulement pour analyser les débats, polémiques et développements à l'intérieur même du judaïsme, mais aussi pour comprendre l'inscription des diverses formes de judaïsmes dans leurs contextes sociaux, culturels et religieux.

Guillaume Dye est professeur d'islamologie à l'Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB). Il est cofondateur et codirecteur du Early Islamic Studies Seminar. *Parmi ses publications récentes :* Le Coran des historiens, *édité avec Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi (3 volumes, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 2019), et* The Study of Islamic Origins, *édité avec Mette Bjerregaard Mortensen, Isaac W. Oliver et Tommaso Tesei (Berlin, de Gruyter, 2021).*

Karaism is a Jewish religious movement that emerged in the 9th century in Iraq and Palestine, opposing rabbinic Judaism and the notion of an oral Torah. This important trend of medieval Judaism, which was also found in the Byzantine world, and later, in modern times, in the Ottoman world, in Crimea, and in Eastern Europe, constitutes a remarkable example of the complexity and variety of Judaism.

For the past three decades, Karaism has been the subject of innovative studies that have considerably renewed our understanding of its history. It remains, however, little-known outside a small circle of specialists. The aim of this book is to provide a new dynamic to Karaite studies in the French-speaking world, by bringing together specialists in Karaism and specialists in other fields of Jewish studies: such a dialogue proves particularly fruitful, not only for analysing debates, polemics, and developments within Judaism itself, but also for understanding the inscription of various forms of Judaisms in their social, cultural, and religious contexts.

Guillaume Dye is professor of Islamic studies at the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB). He is co-founder and co-director of The Early Islamic Studies Seminar. *Among his publications:* Le Coran des historiens, *edited with Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi (3 volumes, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 2019); and* The Study of Islamic Origins, *edited with Mette Bjerregaard Mortensen, Isaac W. Oliver, and Tommaso Tesei (Berlin, de Gruyter, 2021).*

Prix : 29 €

ISBN 978-2-8004-1792-9

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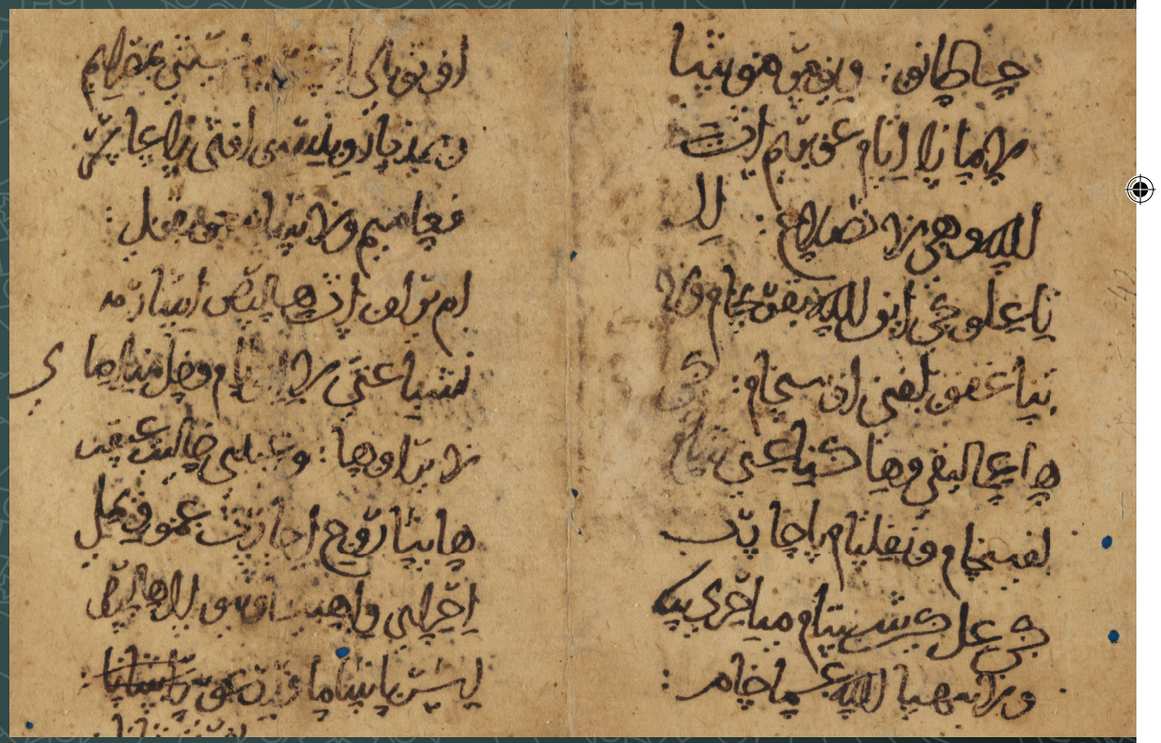

Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles 2021

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Perspectives sur l'histoire du karaïsme

Perspectives on the History of Karaism

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A Karaite version of the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew is written in Arabic script but with Tiberian vowels. Numbers 14:22-43, 15:19-25, 16:28-34, 20:3-8, 31:54-32:22.
© Cambridge University Library

ISBN 978-2-8004-1792-9
eISBN 978-2-8004-1793-6
ISSN 0778-6735
D/2022/0171/7

Avenue Paul Héger 26 - 1000 Bruxelles (Belgique)

editions@ulb.be

www.editions-ulb.be

Imprimé en Belgique

Problèmes d'histoire des religions 28

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Maimonides and Maimonideans on Karaites and *aggadot*

□ David LEMLER

Karaite thinkers, such as Jacob al-Qirqisānī (*ca* 890–*ca* 960), viewed many *aggadot* as irrational imaginings that shatter the authority of the oral tradition as a whole.[1] Proposing a response to these charges was one of the concerns of the Rabbanites, at the peak of the Karaite crisis, between the 10th and the 12th centuries. In this period, two major attitudes can be observed among the rabbis. The first is the one found among several important *Geonim* who dissociated *aggadah* and *halakhah* and denied or belittled the authority of *aggadot*.[2] The second attitude consists in going over the plain meaning of "irrational" *aggadot* and claiming that it is an allegory for a profound and secret meaning. This attitude was that of Maimonides in his youth, by the time of the writing of the *Commentary on the Mishnah*, in which he projects writing an exhaustive commentary of difficult *aggadot* "in a manner which agrees with the truth",[3] that is as allegories of the Aristotelian sciences.

1 Marc Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis: A Thirteenth-Century Commentary on the Aggadah*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 1980, pp. 1–2.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 10, quoting the words of Sherira Gaon: "We do not rely on *aggadic* utterances", and of his son Hai Gaon: "*Aggadic* sayings are not like authentic tradition. Rather, each sage expounded as it occurred to him." Echoes of this apologetic response against the critique of *aggadot* can still be found in the words of Nahmanides during the disputation of Barcelona in 1263 : "We have a third text [in addition to the Bible and the Talmud] which is called *midrash,* that is to say sermons, such as when the bishop stands and delivers a sermon and one of the listeners enjoys it and writes it down. He who believes in this text, well and good; he who does not believe in it does no harm." (Naḥmanides, *Kitvei Ramban*, ed. Hayim Dov Chavel, Jerusalem, Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1963, p. 308, trans. in Robert Chazan, *Daggers of Faith: Thirteenth-Century Christian Missionizing and Jewish Response*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1989, p. 97).

3 Moses Maimonides, *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Introduction to *Sanhedrin*, chpt. 10 (from now on "Introduction to *Pereq Ḥeleq*"), ed. of the Arabic text and Hebrew translation Yosef Kapah, Jerusalem, Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1965, p. 209. I quote the English translation found at https://www.sefaria.org/Rambam_on_Mishnah_Sanhedrin.10.1?lang=en, with changes when necessary.

Identifying and explaining contradictions in Maimonides' writings has been one of the major tasks of his interpreters, in both traditional and scholarly literature. When faced with contradictory statements between his main "Talmudic" writings, his *Commentary on the Mishnah* and *Mishneh Torah*, and his "philosophical" one, the *Guide of the Perplexed*, a classical response has been that Maimonides adapted his discourse to the intended audience of each text.[4] The necessity to hide some truths to the vulgar was indeed a recurrent idea in Maimonides' writing, in particular in the *Guide*.[5] However, the differences found between the two sets of texts might also reflect the fact that his views simply changed on a number of subjects between his youth and his maturity. As a reminder, a first draft of the *Commentary on the Mishnah* was completed in 1167–8, while Maimonides was around thirty years old (even though he kept annotating his own manuscript over the years), the *Mishneh Torah* was completed in 1177–8, while he was around forty, and the *Guide* in 1191, while he was in his fifties.[6] In recent scholarship, many studies endeavored to show that such changes of attitude between a young and mature Maimonides occurred regarding important issues, such as the problem of creation *vs* eternity of the world, miracles or the possibility of a change in divine will.[7]

Some scholars also count the *halakhic* status of the Karaites on the one hand, and Maimonides' attitude towards *aggadot* on the other hand, among those subjects in which a change of position can be discerned. As time went on, Maimonides seems to have soften his attitude towards Karaites.[8] Simultaneously, in his latest major work, the *Guide of the Perplexed*, he announced having abandoned his project of writing a treatise of allegorical interpretations of *aggadot* and at times expresses an open critique on rabbinic *derashot* – that is, the type of interpretations of Biblical verses found in classical rabbinic text (Talmud and Midrash).[9]

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4 See the introductive remarks in Y. Tzvi Langermann, "Maimonides and Miracles. The Growth of a (Dis)-Belief", Jewish History, t. 18, 2004, pp. 147-72, p. 147.

5 Moses Maimonides, *Dalālat al-Ḥā'irīn*, ed. Salomon Munk and Issachar Joel, Jerusalem, Azrieli, 1931, Introduction, 1:31–4 *et passim*. English translations are taken from: *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1963.

6 For those dates, Herbert A. Davidson, *Moses Maimonides: the Man and his Works*, Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 9, p. 205, p. 322.

7 See egg. Leo Strauss, "Notes on Maimonides' Book of Knowledge", in Efraim E. Urbach, Raphael J. Z. Werblowsky and Chaim Wirszubski, eds, *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to Gershom G. Scholem on his Seventieth Birthday by Pupils Colleagues and Friends*, Jerusalem, Magnes Press, 1967, pp. 269-83; Y. Tzvi Langermann, "Maimonides and Miracles. The Growth of a (Dis)-Belief", *op. cit.*; Charles H. Manekin, "Divine Will in Maimonides' Later Writings", in Arthur Hyman et Alfred L. Ivry, eds, *Maimonidean Studies*: *Vol. 5*, New York, Yeshivah University Press, 2008, pp. 189-221.

8 Notably, Moses Maimonides, *Commentary to Mishnah*, *Ḥullin* 1:2, ed. Yosef Kapah, Jerusalem, Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1967, p. 176, n. 33; Daniel J. Lasker, "The Influence of Karaism on Maimonides" (Hebrew), *Sefunot. Studies and Sources on the History of the Jewish Communities in the East (New Series)*, t. 5, 1991, pp. 145-61; Id., "Maimonides and the Karaites: From Critic to Cultural Hero", in Carlos del Valle (ed.), *Maimonides y Su Época*, Madrid, Sociedad Estatal de Commemoraciones Culturales, 2007, pp. 311–25; Gerald J. Blidstein, "Maimonides' Approach to the Karaites" (Hebrew), *Teḥumin*, t. 8, 1987, pp. 501–10; Id., "The 'Other' in Maimonidean Law", *Jewish History*, t. 18, 2004, fasc. 2/3, pp. 173–95; Yaacov Shapira, "The Jewish Law Perspective on Karaites – Policy and Tradition in Jewish Law" (Hebrew), *Bar-Ilan Law Studies*, t. 19, 2002, fasc. 1, pp. 285-361, pp. 293-9.

9 Yair Lorberbaum, "Changes in Maimonides' Approach to *aggadah*" (Hebrew), *Tarbiz*, t. 79, 2008, fasc. 1, pp. 81-122, Id., "'Incline Thy Ear, and Hear the Words of the Wise, and Apply Thy Heart unto My Knowledge':

In this paper, we draw on the well-grounded hypothesis that Maimonides changed his view on both these issues. While these two subjects have been previously studied separately, we propose to understand them as correlated. We argue that, by the time he was writing the *Guide*, Maimonides thought that the difference between Karaites and Rabbanites was not a significant one regarding the "science of the Law according to the truth"[10] and that therefore, the allegorization of *aggadot* was no longer needed.

We will first show that both issues happen to be textually correlated through an analysis of the two occurrences of the term "Rabbanite" in the *Guide*. Basing on the idea of an evolution of Maimonides' views on both subjects, we will propose to read a number of crucial passages of the *Guide*, in which Maimonides defines his purported reader, as potentially including Rabbanites as well as Karaites. We will then turn to Maimonides' posterity and observe how the interpretation of *aggadot* was indeed linked to the Karaite challenge, among his disciples. We will first study a passage from a text by Maimonides' own son, Abraham, in which the link is explicitly made between the two issues, something which might be telling of latent ideas in the father's teaching. In a concluding paragraph, we will survey intriguing quotations, found in Karaite writings, of the Provençal scholar Levi ben Abraham of Villefranche (*ca* 1245–*ca* 1315), which provides evidence for a Karaite concern about the philosophical interpretations of *aggadot* in the Maimonidean filiation.

Maimonides

The terms "Karaites" and "Rabbanites" in Maimonides' *Guide*

It has been underlined that the term "Karaite" appears only once in the *Guide*.[11] In chapter 1:71, Maimonides assimilates the Karaite theological thought (as well as that of the *Geonim*) with the Mutazilite *kalām* he criticizes in the last chapters of the first part of the *Guide*.

> *As for that scanty bit of argument regarding the notion of the unity of God and regarding what depends on this notion, which you will find in the writings of some* Gaonim *and in those of the Qaraites, it should be noted that the subject matter of this argument was taken over by them from the* Mutakallimiin *of Islam and that this bit is very scanty indeed if compared to what Islam has compiled on this subject.*[12]

Criticism of *aggadah* in *The Guide of the Perplexed*" (Hebrew), *Tarbiz*, t. 79, 2009, fasc. 2, pp. 203-30.

[10] Moses Maimonides, *Dalālat al-Ḥā'irīn*, ed. Salomon Munk and Issachar Joel, Jerusalem, Azrieli, 1931, p. 2. English trans.: *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1963, p. 5.

[11] Lasker, "The Influence of Karaism on Maimonides", *op. cit.*, p. 147.

[12] Maimonides, *Dalālat al-Ḥā'irīn*, 1:71, trans. Pines, p. 176.

The two occurrences of the term "Rabbanite" were less scrutinized by the readers of the *Guide* even in the context of the study of Maimonides' attitude regarding Karaism. They appear in two passages which are instrumental in the scholarly discussion about a possible change of attitude of Maimonides towards the *aggadot* and more generally the authority of the oral tradition. We will start with the second occurrence and continue with the first which requires a longer analysis.

In chapter 3:43, while discussing the meaning of the four species of the Sukkot bunch, Maimonides calls the rabbinic *derashot* on the subject mere "poetical conceits" (*al-nawādir al-shi'riyya*) and suggests this applies also to many more *derashot*. He concludes the passage with the following note:

> *I have deviated from the subject [of the chapter] (*ḥarajtu ʿan al-gharaḍ*), but this is a useful observation that may be needed by everyone endowed with intellect among those who profess the Law and are* Rabbanites *(*al-mutasharriʿīn wal-rabbānīn*).* [13]

In the general introduction to the *Guide*, Maimonides warns his reader that such deviations are paradoxically the mark that an important issue is at stake.

> *[W]hen reading a given chapter, your intention must be not only to understand the totality of the subject of that chapter, but also to grasp each word that occurs in it in the course of the speech,* even if that word does not belong to the intention (gharaḍ) of the chapter. [14]

This remark inspired Abraham Nuriel his method of esoteric reading of the *Guide*: when an unexpected term appears in a passage, this might be the indication of a secret doctrine. Tracking the different occurrences of this term in the *Guide* might help conjecture the hidden message.[15] This is the method we propose to implement here with regards to the word "Rabbanite".

The second occurrence of the term appears in this same introduction. Maimonides explains why he abandoned his project, announced in his youthwork the *Introduction to Pereq Ḥeleq* (which belongs to his *Commentary on the Mishnah*), to write two books: the "*Book of Prophecy*" and the "*Book of Correspondence*", dedicated to the allegorical interpretation of, respectively, prophetic parables and rabbinic "*derashot*"

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[13] Maimonides, *Dalālat al-Ḥā'irīn*, 3:43, ed. Munk-Joel, p. 420, trans. Pines, p. 573, n. 15 *ad loc*, Pines notes "This term [Rabbanites] is probably used in contradistinction to the term Qaraites."

[14] Maimonides, *Dalālat al-Ḥā'irīn*, Introduction, trans. Pines, p. 15, emphasis ours.

[15] See, among other studies, Abraham Nuriel, "The Question of a Created or Primordial World in the Philosophy of Maimonides", in *Concealed and Revealed in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Hebrew), Jerusalem, Magnes Press, 2000, pp. 25-40.

(Maimonides uses here this word to refer to difficult *aggadot*).[16] In the introduction to the *Guide*, Maimonides gives two reasons for abandoning this project. The first is that it would have been contradictory to explain to the vulgar what the prophets and the Sages had found fit to conceal to him through parables. It is in the formulation of the second reason – which concerns only the interpretation of rabbinic *aggadot* and not that of prophetic parables – that the word "Rabbanite" is found.

> *We also saw that [1] if an ignoramus among the multitude of* Rabbanites *(*jāhil min jumhūr al-rabbānīn*) should engage in speculation on these* Midrashim*, he would find nothing difficult in them, inasmuch as a rash fool (*jāhil*), devoid of any knowledge of the nature of being, does not find impossibilities hard to accept. If, however, a perfect man of virtue (*kāmil fāḍil*) should engage in speculation on them, he cannot escape one of two courses: [2] either he can take the speeches in question in their external sense and, in so doing, think ill of their author and regard him as an ignoramus – in this there is nothing that would upset the foundations of belief (*laysa fī dhalika hadd fī qawāʿid al-iʿtiqād*); or [3] he can attribute to them an inner meaning, thereby extricating himself from his predicament and being able to think well of the author whether or not the inner meaning of the saying is clear to him.*[17]

This text parallels a passage from the *Introduction to Pereq Ḥeleq*, in which Maimonides listed three classes of men, according to their attitude towards the words of the Sages in *derashot*. The numbers 1–3 we have added to sequence our quotation from the *Guide* indicates the number of the corresponding "class" in the *Introduction to Pereq Ḥeleq*. Two of them take these words literally. The first class, whom we might designate as the "submissive literalists", considers that the literal interpretation of the Sages' teachings is always true. Since this class of men lacks any knowledge of the science of nature, they do not perceive any difficulty in so doing. The second class – the "derogative literalists" – considers that since their teachings taken literally at times contradict the philosophical knowledge of nature, this ruins their credibility (at least on speculative matters). Only the third class – that of the "respectful allegorists" – considers these strange *aggadot* as parables that should be interpreted allegorically, and therefore preserves both the philosophical knowledge and the authority of the Sages. The same three attitudes are found in our passage of the *Introduction of the Guide* but, as analyzed in detail by Yair Lorberbaum, the terms Maimonides uses to refer to each of them are very different.[18]

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[16] See Maimonides, *Dalālat al-Ḥā'irīn*, trans. Pines, p. 9, n. 23 and in Munk's French translation: *Le Guide des égarés*, trans. Salomon Munk, Paris, Maisonneuve & Larose, 2003, p. 15, n. 1.

[17] Maimonides, *Dalālat al-Ḥā'irīn*, Introduction, ed. Munk-Joel, pp. 5-6, trans. Pines, pp. 9-10 (we added the numbers).

[18] Lorberbaum, "Changes in Maimonides' Approach to *aggadah*", *op. cit.*

In the *Introduction to Pereq Ḥeleq*, Maimonides notes that the "submissive literalism" is mostly seen among "the preachers (*al-darshanīn*) who inform the masses of the people about what they [=the preachers] do not know". He also criticizes them at length and in very harsh terms, accusing them of "destroy[ing] the beauty of the Torah and darken[ing] its splendor". In the introduction of the *Guide*, Maimonides refers to these men as "ignoramus[es] among the multitude of *Rabbanites*". He considers now that their mistake is not something which deserves to be corrected through the allegorization of the *aggadot*, even though they were described in the *Introduction to Pereq Ḥeleq* as "lowering [the Sages] to the lowest depths".[19]

The men of the second class, the "derogative literalists", were described in Maimonides' youth, as "even more foolish (*ajhal*) than the first class". At that time, Maimonides wrote on their account:

> *most of those who stumble in this error are those with pretense to the medical sciences and those who carry on about the laws of the constellations; since they are – according to their thinking – understanding and wise in their [own] eyes and sharp and philosophers. And how far are they from humanity, according to those who are truly wise and philosophers.*[20]

It is well-known that Maimonides considered astrology as a mystification and a false science akin to idolatry. In the introduction of the *Guide* however, the position of the "derogative literalist" is presented as one of the two possible attitudes towards the Sages adopted by "a perfect man of virtue". And Maimonides adds that this position implies "nothing that would upset the foundations of belief." In Maimonides' youth, the men of the second class were to be classified as foolish, together with those of the first class: taking the words of the Sages literally was a sign of foolishness. In his maturity, those men may be "perfect men of virtue" just like those of the third class, the "respectful allegorist". It thus appears that paying respect to the Sages is no longer considered to be a condition of perfection, neither something that is in any way correlated to the foundations of belief.

The following table compares the main characterizations of the three classes of men in the *Introduction to Pereq Ḥeleq* and in the introduction of the *Guide*.

[19] Maimonides, *Introduction to Pereq Ḥeleq*, ed. Kapah, p. 201.

[20] Maimonides, *Introduction to Pereq Ḥeleq*, ed. Kapah, p. 202.

	Intro. Pereq Ḥeleq	**Intro. *Guide***
"submissive literalist"	"… the preachers (*al-darshanīn*) who inform the masses of the people about that which they [=the preachers] do not know" "To them all the impossibilities are necessary occurrences"	"an ignoramus among the multitude of Rabbanites" (*jāhil min jumhūr al-rabbānīn*) "does not find impossibilities hard to accept"
"derogative literalist"	"Even more foolish (*ajhal*) than the first class" "They consider themselves to be intellectuals and wise philosophers but how far removed they are from humanity when they are compared to true philosophers"	"A perfect man of virtue" (*kāmil fāḍil*) "Thinking ill" about the Sages implies "nothing that would upset the foundations of belief" (*laysa fī dhalika hadd fī qawā'id al-i'tiqād*)
"respectful allegorist"	"Few and scattered individuals" Their writings indicate "their perfection (*kamāluhum*) and that they attained the truth"	A perfect man of virtue (*kāmil fāḍil*) "able to think well of the author (of a *aggadah*)"

According to Yair Lorberbaum, these differences imply that Maimonides' view of the Sages as a whole changed radically.[21] While by the time of the writing of the *Introduction to Pereq Ḥeleq*, he still thought the Rabbis were all accomplished philosophers who concealed the philosophical truths in parables; by the time of the writing of the *Guide*, he did not think so anymore. In several passages of the *Guide*, besides the previously quoted passage from 3:43, he even expressed open critics of the Sages' opinions on speculative matters.[22]

It is quite intriguing that the term "Rabbanite" should appear in the general introduction of the *Guide*, while it is absent from the *Introduction to Pereq Ḥeleq*, precisely in a passage so crucial about the *aggadot*. This might suggest that the question of a possible change of attitude of Maimonides regarding the *aggadot* should be investigated in association with another issue: that of his possible similar change of attitude regarding Karaism and the Karaites.

[21] Lorberbaum, "Changes in Maimonides' Approach to *aggadah*", *op. cit.* For an alternative reading, see J. Stern, *The Matter and Form of Maimonides'* Guide, Cambridge, London, Harvard University Press, 2013, p. 49, n. 38: "Maimonides' change of plan may also have been due to his growing skepticism about human knowledge of metaphysics, hence, the impossibility of giving definite interpretations of many *midrashim*. […] It is clear that Maimonides changed his view. The question is of what: *aggadah* or knowledge of metaphysics?" One may object to Stern that Maimonides did not have qualm providing alternative interpretations of one and a same prophetic parable in the *Guide*, so that it seems that the impossibility to provide a definite interpretation of a text did not prevent him, by then, from writing down one or even several interpretations.

[22] Lorberbaum, "'Incline Thy Ear, and Hear the Words of the Wise, and Apply Thy Heart unto My Knowledge': Criticism of *aggadah* in *The Guide of the Perplexed*", *op. cit*. See Stern, *The Matter and Form of Maimonides'* Guide, *op. cit.*, pp. 352-6 for another reading of the phrase "poetic conceit" in *Guide* 3:43. More generally, for a thorough analysis of Maimonides' view on the value of *midrashic* exegetical method, see Morderchai Z. Cohen, *Opening the Gates of Interpretation: Maimonides' Biblical Hermeneutics in Light of His Geonic-Andalusian Heritage and Muslim Milieu*, Leiden, Brill, 2011.

Maimonides' evolving attitude regarding the Karaites

Regarding the *halakhic* status of the Karaites and the way to behave with them, contrasted statements are found in Maimonides' writings that may be explained as an evolution toward a more lenient attitude from his youth to his maturity. A strong argument in favor of such a change is found in a passage of his *Commentary on Mishnah Ḥullin* 1:2. In the first draft of this commentary, Maimonides rules, as he does in other passages of the *Commentary on the Mishnah* and in the *Epistle to Yemen*, written in the same period at the beginning of the 1170s, that the Karaites are the contemporary equivalent of the sectarian groups of the Second Temple and that therefore they may be put to death by anyone without trial.[23] Later on probably at the end of his life, as was underlined by Yosef Kapah basing on graphological considerations in his edition of the *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Maimonides added a marginal note to his own copy, in which he specified that the death sentence is only applicable to the founders of such sects, while contemporary Karaites fall into the category of "*anusim*" (acting under duress) and "*tinoq she-nishbah*" (a child taken captive by non-Jews): they only follow the error they inherited from their ancestors, for which they are not liable.[24] This position coheres with the one found in the *Mishneh Torah*, where he adds that contemporary Karaites should be treated with moderation and that one should try to reintegrate them into Rabbanite Judaism.[25] In an undated *responsum*, he went as far as ruling that one is allowed to visit them in their home and to circumcise them even on Shabbat.[26]

Among the scholars who admit an evolution of Maimonides' position on the subject,[27] the divergent interpretations of Gerald Blidstein and Daniel Lasker are noteworthy for our present discussion. Both of them agree that Maimonides changed his view on

[23] Maimonides, Commentary to *Mishnah Avot*, 1:3, ed. Yosef Kapah, p. 410; Id., *Epistle to Yemen*, Eng. trans. in Abraham Halkin, *Crisis and Leadership: Epistles of Maimonides*, Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society of America, 1985, p. 114.

[24] Maimonides, Commentary to *Ḥullin* 1:2, ed. Kapah, p. 176, n. 33.

[25] "Therefore, efforts should be made to bring them back in repentance (*le-haḥaziran bi-teshuvah*), to draw them near by friendly relations (*le-moshkham be-divrey shalom*), so that they may return to the strength-giving source, i.e., the Torah (*'ad she-yaḥzeru le-eytan ha-Torah*), and one should not hurry to kill them (*lo yemaher adam le-horgam*)." Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Mamrim* 3:3 (trans. in Blidstein, "The 'Other' in Maimonidean Law", *op. cit.*, p. 185). According to Shapira, "The Jewish Law Perspective on Karaites", *op. cit.*, p. 296, the last words "one should not hurry to kill them", which were omitted in most printed editions, but found in Yemenite manuscripts, may be interpreted as a correction of a previous ruling. *Cf.* Yuval Sinai, "Maimonides' Contradictory Positions Regarding the Karaites: A Study in Maimonidean Jurisprudence", *Review of Rabbinic Judaism*, t. 11, 2008, fasc. 2, pp. 277–91, pp. 288–9).

[26] Moses Maimonides, *Teshuvot ha-Rambam*, ed. Joshua Blau, Jerusalem, Mekitse Nirdamim, 1960, no. 449, pp. 729-32.

[27] For alternative interpretations of these contradictions, see Isaac Shailat, *Letters and Essays of Moses Maimonides* (Hebrew and Arabic), Jerusalem, Maaleh Adumim, 1995, who contests the attribution of the undated letter (pp. 668–9) and considers Maimonides had a coherent position over the years. He simply did not find fit to specify the distinction between the two categories of Karaites (founders vs followers) in the first draft of the *Commentary on the Mishnah* (p. 142). Sinai, "Maimonides' Contradictory Positions Regarding the Karaites", *op. cit.*, proposes to see in these contrasted statements a consequence of Maimonides' general view of the indeterminacy of law (he phrases "judicial discretion"), which dictates a nuanced normative position in order to leave room to the judges in their application of the law. As Sinai admits: "my proposal does not

Karaites after he settled in Egypt and became a communal leader, realizing that the Karaites constituted an essential component of the Jewish community. Then, the Karaite issue became a major question with concrete implications, while before that it was a rather theoretical question.[28] At some stage, as a result of a more or less long evolution, he revised his previous views on the issue. The debate is on the meaning of this evolution.

According to Gerald Blidstein, Maimonides' change of attitude is mainly strategic. He felt more efficient to socialize with the Karaites and to bet on their progressive assimilation, than to exclude them, even though his view of the Karaite doctrine as such did not change. What changed though was that "the 'later Maimonides' [was] less tolerant of error in matters of metaphysical doctrine than of error with respect to *halakhah*".[29]

According to Daniel Lasker,[30] the change of attitude reflects growing "Karaite tendencies" in Maimonides' own thought as time went on. It is maybe a perception of such "tendencies" that led some Karaite thinkers, from the 15th century onward, starting with Eliyahu Bashyatsi, to allege that Maimonides secretly adhered to the Karaite doctrine. More recently, some scholars have argued that Maimonides' repeated affirmation that the Oral Torah was revealed in Sinai at the same time as the Written Torah, was only an exoteric means to strengthen the tradition, but that he actually believed the Oral Torah was a human creation that was amenable to change with time.[31] Without going as far as postulating any such esoteric doctrine, Lasker notes that on some important issues, Maimonides' view is closer to the Karaites' stance than to the position of most Rabbinite thinkers of his time. Already in his *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Maimonides defended a minimalist definition of the Oral Torah (*Torah she-be-'al peh*). Contrary to most *Geonim* who considered that most rabbinic rulings were part of the Sinaitic revelation, Maimonides reduced the Oral Torah to a restricted and finite nucleus of legal interpretations of Scripture.[32] As we progress chronologically

contradict the theory of Kapah and his supporters (Lasker and Blidstein) regarding a change in Maimonides approach to the Karaites" (pp. 290-1). This theory seems indeed reasonable in view of the textual material.

28 See also Shapira, "The Jewish Law Perspective on Karaites", *op. cit.*, p. 296 (our translation): "The *Epistle to Yemen* was composed during his first years in Egypt and it is possible that with the years of his stay in Egypt, Maimonides got acquainted with the Karaites' way of life and nuanced his view on the possible danger they could represent." As a matter of fact, in Maimonides' time, the Rabbanite-Karaite relationship was one of appeased coexistence in the East, while it had been one of brutal rivalry in Iberia, Maimonides' native land. See Marina Rustow, *Heresy and the Politics of Community: the Jews of the Fatimid Caliphate*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2008, notably pp. 349-55.

29 Blidstein, "The 'Other' in Maimonidean Law", *op. cit.*, p. 187.

30 Lasker, "The Influence of Karaism on Maimonides", *op. cit.*; Id., "Maimonides and the Karaites: From Critic to Cultural Hero", *op. cit.* See also, Omer Michaelis, "'For the Wisdom of Their Wise Men Shall Perish': Forgotten Knowledge and Its Restoration in Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed* and Its Karaite Background", *The Journal of Religion*, t. 99, fasc. 4, 2019, pp. 432-466.

31 See notably Jacob Levinger, "The Oral Law in Maimonides' Thought" (Hebrew), *Tarbiz*, t. 37, 1968, fasc. 3, pp. 282-93.

32 For a good synthesis on Maimonides' view on the Oral Torah in his *halakhic* works, see Shlomo Kassierer and Shlomo Gilcksberg, *From Sinai to Sanhedrin: the Oral Law in the thought of Maimonides and Nachmanides*

in Maimonides' writings, new such "Karaite tendencies" appear such as the criticism of *derashot* expressed in the *Guide* and his focus, in this later work, on the Written Torah as regards the motivations of the commandments.[33]

Karaites as possible readers of the *Guide*?

To recapitulate the point where we have got so far, there are strong textual reasons to believe that Maimonides' view evolved from his youth to his maturity on two issues. In the *Guide*, he did not consider relevant any more to engage in the systematic allegorization of *aggadot*. By that time, he also had softened his *halakhic* position on the Karaites and would favor their progressive assimilation to the Rabbanite law, rather than their brutal repression. Moreover, the two occurrences of the term "Rabbanite" in the *Guide* appear in two contexts in which Maimonides minimizes the importance of *aggadot* (or "*derashot*") and of their allegorization. This, we propose, suggests that Maimonides' change of strategy regarding the *aggadot* is linked to his change of view on the Rabbanite-Karaite relationship. By specifying that this matter is only relevant for Rabbanites, Maimonides may be suggesting that they are not the sole addressees of his treatise. Now, the nature of Maimonides' change of view on this Rabbanite-Karaite relationship is debated: Blidstein considers it to be purely strategic, Lasker more profound and doctrinal. This bears consequences as to the implications of Maimonides' renunciation to the allegorization of the *aggadot*.

In line with Blidstein's view regarding Maimonides' change of attitude towards the Karaites, renouncing to the redaction of the *Book of Concordance* could be viewed as part of the strategy to assimilate progressively the Karaites into the Rabbanite stream. By the time of the redaction of the *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Maimonides considered vital to defend the rabbinic tradition against potential heresies. He therefore took a different stance than that of the *Geonim*, faced with the Karaite criticism of *aggadot*. As mentioned above, the *Geonim* tried to preserve the authority of tradition on *halakhic* matters by minimizing the authority of *aggadic* passages. On the contrary, Maimonides felt fit to reaffirm the authority and the truth of *aggadot* through their allegorization. Later on, he considered tactically more efficient to offer

(Hebrew), Ramat Gan, The Ludwig and Erica Jesselson Institute of Advanced Torah Studies – Bar Ilan University, 2007, pp. 26-9.

33 See most notably Maimonides' statements on "*lex talionis*": "And he who has deprived someone of a member, shall be deprived of a similar member: *As he hath maimed a man,* so *shall it be rendered unto him* (Lev 24:20). You should not engage in cogitation concerning the fact that in such a case we punish by imposing a fine. For at present my purpose is to give reasons for the [Biblical] texts and not for the pronouncements of the legal science. Withal I have an opinion concerning this provision of legal science, which should only be expressed by word of mouth." Maimonides, *Dalālat al-Ḥā'irīn*, 3:41, ed. Munk-Joel, p. 409, trans. Pines, p. 558. Cohen, *Opening the Gates of Interpretation*, *op. cit.*, chpt. 3, in particular pp. 181-4, suggests that Maimonides' attempt at interpreting the Biblical Law in the *Guide* independently of the rabbinic legal interpretations is not to be understood as an implicit critique of *halakhah*, but rather as the affirmation of the literal meaning of Scripture as a legitimate independent field of investigation with its own coherence.

an interpretation of the "science of the Law in its true sense" (*ʿilm al-sharīʿah ʿalā al-ḥaqīqah*),[34] as he calls the issue of the *Guide* in his introduction, which may be accepted by Rabbanites and Karaites alike, and therefore convince the latter rather than confront them.

However, rather than a purely tactic operation, Maimonides' substitution of a book dedicated to the "science of the Law in its true sense" (that is the *Guide*) to his initial project of writing two exegetical books on prophetic parables and rabbinic *aggadot* might reflect a more profound reevaluation of the importance of the very difference between Rabbanites and Karaites – as might be derived from Lasker's interpretation. The use of the term "Rabbanite" in the passage of the *Guide* may be read as a hint that the difference between Rabbanites and Karaites is actually indifferent as regards the "science of the Law in its true sense." By rereading a series of key passages of the *Guide*, in which Maimonides defines explicitly or implicitly his intended reader, we now propose to test the hypothesis that this readership might include both Rabbanites and Karaites.[35]

In the passage of the introduction of the *Guide*, only the first type of literalist reader of *aggadot* is identified as a Rabbanite. For sure, the third type of men who take pains to find a secret meaning to the strange words of the Sages are also Rabbanites, but not so those of the second type who despise the Sages. And yet as we saw above, this does not prevent them from being referred to as "perfect men of virtue".

Maimonides' expression according to which despising the Sages implies "nothing that would upset the foundations of belief (*qawāʿid al-iʿtiqād*)" appears to conflict with the formulation of the eighth principle (*qāʿida*) of belief, in his famous list of thirteen principles (*qawāʿid*)[36] established in the *Introduction to Pereq Ḥeleq*. There, the belief in the revelation of the Torah (*Torah min ha-shamaim*, in Hebrew in the original) included both the Written Torah and its received interpretation (*tafsīruhā al-marwī*).[37] *Tafsīr marwī* refers, in the context of the eighth foundation as elsewhere in Maimonides' writings,[38] to a received interpretation in *halakhic* matters. Therefore,

[34] Maimonides, *Dalālat al-Ḥāʾirīn*, Introduction, ed. Munk-Joel, p. 2, trans. Pines, p. 5.

[35] This idea that Maimonides' intended readership was composed of both Rabbanite and Karaite may find resonance in his role as communal leader: "Although we have no explicit evidence of that, it is likely that in his capacity of *raʾīs al-yahūd* Maimonides represented also the Karaites toward the Muslim authorities." (Sarah Stroumsa, *Maimonides in His World: Portrait of a Mediterranean Thinker*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009, p. 40). A possible objection could be that Maimonides was the first to rule, in a *responsum*, that the Karaite bill of divorce was invalid according to Rabbinic law (Maimonides, *Teshuvot ha-Rambam*, ed. Blau, no. 351, pp. 628–9), a ruling that was interpreted, by some later jurists, as an implicit prohibition of marriages between Rabbanites and Karaites and consequently as a way to set a clear separation between the two communities. First of all, this text may antedate Maimonides' possible shift. Secondly, an interesting aspect of this *responsum* is precisely that it recognizes the marriage between the two communities and, as a matter of fact, such unions continued after his ruling. See Rustow, *Heresy and the Politics of Community*, *op. cit.*, p. 345.

[36] Maimonides, *Introduction to Pereq Ḥeleq*, ed. Kapah, p. 210.

[37] Maimonides, *Introduction to Pereq Ḥeleq*, ed. Kapah, p. 214.

[38] See the indexed references, Cohen, *Opening the Gates of Interpretation*, *op. cit.*, p. 548, s.v. *Tafsīr marwī*.

disrespecting the Sages' words in *aggadah* and consequently their philosophical knowledge does not formally contradict this principle of belief. Still, it is reasonable to think that the faith in a tradition of interpretation involves showing respect to those who transmit it. It thus seems that Maimonides had a different conception of the foundations of belief at the time of the redaction of *Guide* from that of his youthwork, or at least that the type of foundations he refers to in the introduction of the *Guide* is different from the one in the *Commentary on the Mishnah*.[39]

Moreover, the portrait Maimonides makes of his "perplexed" addressee could be read as neutral regarding the faithfulness to the rabbinic tradition. The perplexed is "a religious man for whom the validity of our Law (*ṣiḥḥat sharīʿatinā*) has become established in his soul" and is "perfect in his religion (*dīn*)". The term *sharīʿah*, religious law, may refer to the Scriptures and their oral interpretation. But in the very next sentence, *sharīʿah* is clearly used to refer to Scriptures only:[40] after studying the words of the philosophers, the perplexed is "distressed by the externals of the Law (*ẓawāhir al-sharīʿah*)",[41] that is the external manifest sense of Biblical verses. Perfection in religion may therefore depend on the belief in the truth of the sole Written Torah.

Maimonides' following clause at the opening of the introduction regarding the issue of the *Guide* could also be understood accordingly:

> *The purpose of this Treatise is not […] to teach those who have not engaged in any study other than the science of the Law (*ʿilm al-sharīʿah*) – I mean the legalistic study of the Law (*fiqhihā*). For the purpose of this Treatise and of all those like it is the science of Law in its true sense (*ʿilm al-sharīʿah ʿalā al-ḥaqīqah*).*[42]

There are two "sciences of the Law", the science of the Law with no other qualification which refers to the traditional legalistic study (here, in his classical Hebrew translation, Samuel Ibn Tibbon renders the Arabic *fiqh*, by "Talmud")[43] and the science of the Law "in its true sense". If the treatise does not address those who did not study anything else than the science of the Law, this might be taken to mean that the access to the science of the Law "in its true sense" requires previous command of the science of the

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39 Leo Strauss, "How to Begin to Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*", in Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Pines, p. xxxi, remarked: "[Maimonides] is alive to the question raised by the Karaites. As he puts it, not only does criticism of the Talmudic Sages do no harm to them – it does not even do any harm to the critic or rather to the foundations of belief."

40 Cohen, *Opening the Gates of Interpretation*, *op. cit.*, p. 97, n. 13.

41 Maimonides, *Dalālat al-Ḥā'irīn*, Introduction, ed. Munk-Joel, p. 2, trans. Pines, p. 5. On the meaning of the term *sharīʿah* in the *Guide*, see Joel Kraemer, "*Sharīʿa* and *nāmūs* in the Philosophy of Maimonides" (Hebrew) *Teʿudah*, t. 4, 1986, pp. 185-202 and Abraham Nuriel, "On the Meaning of the Term *sharīʿah* in the *Guide of the Perplexed*" (Hebrew), in *Concealed and Revealed*, *op. cit.*, pp. 165-71, pp. 169-70.

42 Maimonides, *Dalālat al-Ḥā'irīn*, Introduction, ed. Munk-Joel, p. 2, trans. Pines, p. 5.

43 Moses Maimonides, *Sefer Moreh ha-Nevukhim*, Heb. trans. Samuel Ibn Tibbon, ed. Yehudah Even-Shemuel, Jerusalem, Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1987, p. 4.

Law – that is the oral tradition[44] – along with something else – that is the philosophical sciences. But an alternative reading could be that the science of the Law "in its true sense" is totally independent from the science of the Law *simpliciter*.[45] That those who studied *only* the science of the Law, that is the common Rabbanite students, are not the addressees of the *Guide*, may be construed as meaning either that the addressee has to be a *more than common* Rabbanite or that being a Rabbanite student is *not* a necessary characteristic of the *Guide*'s aimed reader.

In the famous final parable of the palace at the end of the *Guide* (3:51), describing the different sort of men as more or less distant from the King chamber (an image of the knowledge of God), one could wonder to which category of men the Karaites belong. They could be assigned to those who turn their back to the palace, because of a "faulty speculation" or an "erroneous tradition". Maimonides insists these men "are those concerning whom necessity at certain times impels killing them and blotting out the traces of their opinions lest they should lead astray the ways of others".[46] This clearly refers to those who profess doctrines Maimonides identifies as idolatrous, in line with the Biblical obligation to destroy such beliefs. But this permission/obligation to kill also echoes Maimonides' ruling regarding Karaites in his youth, while he constantly described them as inscribed in an "erroneous tradition".[47]

Accordingly, the parable would read as a linear graduation, in which holding the authority of the Oral Torah is a requisite to access true knowledge of God: idolaters and Karaites turn their back to the palace, Rabbanite "ignoramuses who observe the commandments (*'amei ha-areṣ ha-'osqim ba-miṣwot*)"[48] face the palace but remain too far to catch a glimpse of it, Rabbanite "jurists" (*fuqahā'*) "who believe true opinions on the basis of traditional authority [...], but do not engage in speculation concerning the fundamental principles of religion (*'uṣūl al-dīn*)"[49] are those circling the palace without finding its entrance, those Rabbanite "jurists" who *also* engage in such a speculation alone are those who have entered the palace.

But nothing hinders including Karaites among the mass of the "ignoramuses who observe the commandments", or among the "jurists" since they have their own legal tradition, or even among those who "engage in speculation concerning the fundamental principles of religion", provided that the "principles of religion" are not

[44] See Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Yesodei ha-Torah*, 4:13, according to which entering the "Pardes" (that is studying physics and metaphysics identified as the deepest secrets of the Torah) requires the previous study of the *halakhah*.

[45] On whether the "science of Law in its true sense" can/ought to be separate from the "science of the Law", see Leo Strauss, "The Literary Character of the *Guide of the Perplexed*", in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1988, pp. 38-94, p. 39 and Isaac Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides (*Mishneh Torah*)*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1980, p. 360.

[46] Maimonides, *Dalālat al-Ḥā'irīn*, Introduction, ed. Munk-Joel, p. 455, trans. Pines, p. 619.

[47] See above, n. 23.

[48] Maimonides, *Dalālat al-Ḥā'irīn*, Introduction, ed. Munk-Joel, p. 455 (in Hebrew in the text), trans. Pines, p. 619.

[49] *Ibid*.

identified to the thirteen principles listed in Maimonides' youth, but are given the wider meaning of a philosophical justification of the belief in God.[50] In this second reading, being a Rabbanite Jew is not a condition to enter the King's palace, that is to access true knowledge of God.[51]

As is the case with most of the texts of the *Guide*, there is no possibility to propose a final interpretation of these passages. But Maimonides was evasive enough there to suggest that his treatise might be addressed to both Rabbanite and Karaite readers. And if being a Karaite does not impede the access to the science of the Law "in its true sense", then interpreting the *aggadot* allegorically is no longer a priority, while interpreting prophetic parables, as Maimonides did occasionally in the *Guide*, remains relevant.[52]

Karaites as a target of Abraham Maimonides' classification of *aggadot*

The interpretation of the *aggadot* was a central issue for the disciples of Maimonides, especially in the 13th and 14th centuries.[53] Maimonidean thinkers both in the East and in the West took over Maimonides' abandoned project of offering allegorical interpretations of the *aggadot*. If Karaism played a role in the change of Maimonides' approach to *aggadot*, did it play any role among his followers who revived the "younger Maimonides'" exegetical project?

A passage from a text of Maimonides' own son and close disciple, Abraham, reveals that the issue of Karaism was indeed at stake in his own approach to *aggadot*. After the death of his father, Abraham Maimonides became the leader of the Egyptian Jewish community, being appointed *Nagid* in 1213. As recalled by Paul Fenton, the Egyptian

50 On the debates about the meaning of *'uṣūl al-dīn* in this passage, see Andrew L. Gluck, "The King in His Palace: Ibn Gabirol and Maimonides", *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, t. 91, 2001, fasc. 3/4, pp. 337-57, p. 346, n. 19. Some scholars, like Menachem M. Kellner, *Maimonides on Human Perfection*, Atlanta, Scholars Press, 1990, pp. 13-31, interpret the expression in reference to the 13 beliefs.

51 For a discussion of the role of Torah in the access to the King's palace, see Howard Kreisel, *Maimonides' Political Thought: Studies in Ethics, Law, and the Human Ideal*, Albany, SUNY Press, 1999, pp. 191-3, who suggests Maimonides' second explanation of the parable – which classifies the different types of men according to their mastery of the diverse philosophical sciences – might be hinting at an access to the King's palace that is totally independent from the Torah. See also Nuriel, "On the Meaning of the Term *sharī'ah*", *op. cit.*, pp. 169-70, according to whom the term *sharī'ah* in the parable refers to a the idea of a divine law in general and not necessarily Judaism.

52 Actually, Maimonides mentions having replaced his project to write a book dedicated to the allegorical interpretation of prophetic parables by his statements on prophetology in the *Guide*: "With regard to the meaning of prophecy, the exposition of its various degrees, and the elucidation of the parables occurring in the prophetic books, another manner of explanation is used in this Treatise." (Maimonides, *Dalālat al-Ḥā'irīn*, Introduction, ed. Munk-Joel, p. 6, trans. Pines, p. 10). No such substitute is found with regard to the interpretation of *aggadot*, see Lorberbaum, "Changes in Maimonides' Approach to *aggadah*", *op. cit.*, p. 92.

53 See lately, the essays gathered in Howard Kreisel, *Judaism as Philosophy: Studies in Maimonides and the Medieval Jewish Philosophers of Provence*, Boston, Academic Studies Press, 2015.

historian Joseph Sambarī related that many Karaites rallied to Rabbanite Judaism under the influence of Abraham Maimonides.[54] However, the precise role played by Abraham Maimonides in these rallying remains unclear. According to Fenton, the Sufi orientation of his thought and practices may have contributed to seduce the Karaites, receptive to his pietist form of Judaism.

Abraham Maimonides' approach to *aggadot* may also have played a role in this phenomenon. In a passage belonging probably to his *Compendium for the Servants of the Lord* (*Kifāyat al-ʿābidīn*), completed *circa* 1232, he proposes a classification of the *aggadot*. This passage achieved posterity as its Hebrew translation was placed at the opening of most editions of the popular compilation of the *aggadic* passages of the Talmud, *ʿEyn Yaʿaqov*, under the title "Discourse on the *derashot*" (*Maʾamar ʿal odot derashot Ḥazal*). To this day, only fragments (which do not include the passage that we are interested in) of the original Arabic text have been found.[55]

Abraham Maimonides' classification of the diverse types of *aggadot* aims at determining the exegetical attitude that is appropriate to each type. The reader should therefore be led to identify those *aggadot* which do contain an inner meaning and should be interpreted allegorically. At the end of his *Maʾamar ʿal odot ha-derashot,* he associates explicitly his classification of *aggadot* with the struggle against Karaism:

> *And I trust that the explanations I have offered, will be sufficient for every thoughtful man (*mevin*); and that henceforth it will be easy for everyone to determine the exact part to which every* derash *[DL: here, an equivalent of* aggadah*] or deed (*maʿaseh*) belongs. And through this, he will avoid spreading evil reports (*leḥoṣiʾ dibbot*) upon their authors (*medabberim*), blessed be their memories, in the manner of* the Karaites, the fools and their like (ha-qaraʾim we-ha-kesilim we-ka-yoṣeʾ bahem). *This will also prevent a man from sinking in the mud of foolishness by believing in what is impossible, thus causing him to invent things which do not exist and events that never happened, and in this way, finally leading him to false conceptions about God, through His corporealization and the like. And this would happen to him because he interprets these* derashot *literally and believes in them in such a way (*beʾfarsho otam ha-derashot ʿal pi peshuṭam we-heʾemino otam ʿal derekh ha-hu*).*[56]

[54] Paul B. Fenton, "Karaism and Sufism", in Meira Polliack, ed., *Karaite Judaism: a Guide to its History and Literary Sources*, Leiden, Brill, 2003, pp. 199-212, p. 207.

[55] Eleazar Hurwitz, "*Derashot Ḥazal le-Rabbeinu Avraham ben ha-Rambam*", in Sydney B. Hoenig and Leon D. Stitskin, eds, *Joshua Finkel Festschrift*, New York, Yeshiva University Press, 1974, pp. 139*-68*.

[56] Abraham Maimonides, *Maʾamar ʿal odot ha-derashot Ḥazal,* in *Milḥamot ha-Shem*, ed. Reuven Margaliot, Jerusalem, Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1953, p. 98 (trans. Shmuel T.-H. Glick, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Ein_Yaakov_(Glick)/Introduction, with some changes, emphasis added).

Abraham clearly takes over the description of the different classes proposed by his father in the *Introduction to Pereq Ḥeleq*, as the terminological closeness of the two texts manifests.

Understanding the different sorts of *derashot* will prevent the "thoughtful man" (*mevin*) from "spreading evil reports" (*le-hoṣi' dibbot*) upon the Sages, just like Maimonides father wrote of the men of the second class (the "derogative literalists"), in the *Introduction to Pereq Ḥeleq* that "they come to [...] bring ill-repute to that which has no ill repute" (Arabic: *wa-tashnīʿ mā laysa bi-shanīʿ* and, in the classical medieval Hebrew translation of Salomon bar Joseph ben Jacob ha-Rofe': *moṣi'im dibbah ʿal mah she-eyn bo dibbah*).[57] The "risk of sinking in the mud of foolishness by believing in what is impossible (*yiṭbaʿ be-yiven ha-sikhlut ba-devarim ha-nimnaʿim*)" corresponds to the first class of men of the *Introduction to Pereq Ḥeleq*, about whom Maimonides father wrote: "For him, the impossible things are all of necessary existence (Ar.: *wa-taṣayyar ʿindahu al-mumtaniʿāt kulluhā wājibat al-wujūd*, Heb.: *ha-nimnaʿot kullan hen eṣlam meḥuyyavot ha-meṣi'ut*)".[58] In the introduction to the *Guide*, he wrote referring to those men that: "a rash fool (*jāhil*), devoid of any knowledge of the nature of being, does not find impossibilities (*mumtaniʿāt*) hard to accept".[59] Both of these mistakes stem, according to Abraham Maimonides, from "interpret[ing] the *derashot* litteraly and believ[ing] in them in such a way (*be-farsho otam ha-derashot ʿal pi peshuṭam we-he'emino otam ʿal derekh ha-hu*), just like the men of the first and second classes of Maimonides father's *Introduction to Pereq Ḥeleq* did (1st class: Ar.: *taḥmiluhu ʿalā zhāhirihi wa-lā tata'wwaluhu bi-wajh,* Heb.: *ma'aminim otam ʿal peshaṭam we-eyn soverin bahem perush nistar be-shum panim*;[60] 2nd class: Ar.: *ḥamluhu ʿalā zhāhirihi,* Heb.: *we-hevinu otam kefi peshuṭam*).[61] For all these similarities, an element which is absent from his father's text appears in that of Abraham: Abraham explicitly assimilates the category of the "derogative literalist" to the Karaites.

It seems that Abraham Maimonides adopted a new approach to the issue of Karaism, that involved starting anew his father's abandoned project regarding the interpretation of *aggadot*. While the mature Maimonides father neutralized the difference between Karaites and Rabbanites in his exposition of the "science of the Law in its true sense", Abraham reaffirmed this difference by proposing a defense of *aggadot* based on their precise classification. In the *Guide*, Maimonides included the men of the second class, the "derogative literalists", among the "perfect men of virtue". Abraham, just like his father in his youth, qualifies them as "fools" and includes Karaites among them. But he also gambles on the capacities of every "thoughtful man" (*mevin*) to avoid the

[57] The translation of Salomon bar Joseph ben Jacob ha-Rofe' is found facing the Arabic text in Moses Maimonides, *Einleitung to Chelek*, ed. Joshua Holzer, Berlin, M. Poppelauer's Buchhandlung, 1901, p. 9, cf.Id., *Introduction to Pereq Ḥeleq*, ed. Kapah, p. 200 (and Kapah's note 43 on the translation).

[58] Maimonides, *Einleitung to Chelek*, ed. Holzer, p. 8, cf. Id., *Introduction to Pereq Ḥeleq*, ed. Kapah, p. 200.

[59] Maimonides, *Dalālat al-Ḥā'irīn*, Introduction, ed. Munk-Joel, pp. 5-6, trans. Pines, p. 10.

[60] Maimonides, *Einleitung to Chelek*, ed. Holzer, p. 8, cf. Id., *Introduction to Pereq Ḥeleq*, ed. Kapah, p. 201.

[61] Maimonides, *Einleitung to Chelek*, ed. Holzer, p. 9, cf. Id., Introduction to Pereq Ḥeleq, ed. Kapah, p. 201.

mistakes of the literalist readers of *aggadot*. And possibly Karaites might be included among those who share these common faculties of comprehension. On the one hand, his classification of *aggadot* aims at responding the Karaite critique in order to strengthen the Rabbanite belief. On the other hand, it might be a way to help rallying Karaites, already attracted by his own Sufi version of Rabbanite Judaism, by lifting the obstacle constituted by some *aggadot* which are liable to harm the credibility of the oral tradition as a whole.

It is not unreasonable to envisage the writings of Maimonides' descendants as inscribed in the continuation of the direct teaching of the master, therefore disclosing and amplifying ideas that were already present in his thought even though not expressed explicitly. Some scholars thus envisage the Sufi orientation of Maimonides' son and grandsons as a sign that the *Guide*'s secret doctrine was actually a mystical one inspired by Islamic mysticism.[62] In any event, Abraham Maimonides' association of Karaism with the necessity to provide the appropriate interpretation of *aggadot* may be interpreted either as a strategical change vis-à-vis his father or a hint that both subjects were already linked in the father's approach.

Concluding remarks: hints of a Karaite reception of philosophical interpretations of *aggadot*

In the West, especially in Provence in the 13th century, the allegorical interpretation of prophetic texts and rabbinic *aggadot* constituted an important part of the literary activity of Maimonidean philosophers. It is not surprising that Karaites should not be mentioned among the people against whom the *aggadot* ought to be defended, since these authors did not have any direct contact with Karaites. When Moses Ibn Tibbon justifies his project to interpret allegorically the *aggadot* in the Introduction of his *Sefer Pe'ah*, he rather mentions the "Gentiles who despise us and the Sages who composed the Talmud, because of the *aggadot* which seems beyond comprehension and are impossible according to nature".[63]

Nevertheless, one mention of the Karaites in one of the most important treatises of allegorical interpretation of the *aggadot* written in Provence had a remarkable posterity in the Karaite discourse. It is taken from Levi ben Abraham of Villefranche's *Livyat Ḥen*, a 13th century treatise divided into two parts: part one is an encyclopedia

[62] These interpretations are mostly based on *Guide*, 3:51. See David R. Blumenthal, *Philosophic Mysticism: Studies in Rational Religion*, Ramat Gan, Bar-Ilan University Press, 2006 and Warren Z. Harvey, "Du mysticisme au-delà de la philosophie : Maïmonide et Spinoza", in Danielle Cohen-Levinas, Géraldine Roux, et Myriam Sebti, eds, *Mystique et philosophie dans les trois monothéismes*, Paris, Hermann, 2015, pp. 341-6. For the writings of Maimonides' grandsons, see 'Obadyah Maimonides and David Maimonides, *Deux traités de mystique juive*, ed. Paul B. Fenton, Lagrasse, Verdier, 1987.

[63] Moses Ibn Tibbon, *Sefer Pe'ah*, in *Kitvei Mosheh Ibn Tibbon*, ed. Howard Kreisel and Colette Sirat, Ben Gurion University Press, Beer Sheva, 2010, p. 83.

of the Aristotelian sciences and part two a series of philosophical-allegorical exegeses of Biblical and rabbinic texts. Like his Provencal colleagues, Levi ben Abraham of Villefranche did not refer to the Karaites to justify his practice of interpreting the *aggadot* allegorically. However, in one passage, he criticizes the "Sadducees and the Karaites" for starting counting the Omer the day after the first shabbat after Pessah and not after the first day of the festival itself like the Rabbanites do.

Even though the passage criticizes a Karaite practice and associates it with that of the Sadducees, this text was quoted by the Byzantine Karaite thinker Caleb Afendopolo in the 15th century, next to Yehuda Halevy, in order to prove that even Rabbanite thinkers distinguished between the Sadducees and the Karaites and that therefore, the two groups are indeed different.[64]

> *Likewise, in his book* Livyat Ḥen*, 3rd discourse, 2[0]th gate, the Rabbanite sage R. Levi ben R. Abraham ha-Levi wrote, when he mentions the fixation of the Christian festival [Passover] always on Sunday: "The reason why they fix the festival always on Sunday is their taking the words* the day after shabbat *(Lev 23:16) literally, like the Sadducees and the Karaites do."[65] From the words of both of these men [Yehuda Halevi and Levi ben Abraham], it appears that the Karaites are distinct from the Sadducees and the Baytosites.*

The quotation from Levi ben Abraham was later on quoted by several Karaite authors and paved its way until the 18th century Crimea in the *Dod Mordekhai* of Mordekhai ben Nissan[66] through the 17th century Lithuania in the writings of Simḥah Isaac Lutzki's *Oraḥ Ṣaddiqim*[67] and the early 16th century Byzantium with Joseph ben Moses Beghi's *Qiryah Ne'emanah*.[68]

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64 Caleb Afendopolo, *'Aseret Ma'amarot*, IV, Bodleian Library MS. Oppenheim Add. 4° 123, 63b. https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/inquire/Discover/Search/#/?p=c+0,t+,rsrs+0,rsps+10,fa+,so+ox%3Asort%5Easc,scids+,pid+ffb1f24a-5608-4026-9320-c541b1c04afb,vi+85c00849-39f5-4db1-9509-1d3cd2ff5075.

65 The quoted passage is found in the part of the *Livyat Ḥen* dedicated to astronomy, see Levi ben Abraham ben Ḥayyim, *Livyat Ḥen*, III, chap. 20, Ms Vatican ebr. 383, 92a. The chapter is mistakenly referred to as III, 2, in the quoted ms of Afendopolo's text – a mistake that is found repeatedly in later Karaite quotations of the text. A similar text on the fixation of Passover and *Shavu'ot* is found in Levi ben Abraham ben Ḥayyim, *Livyat Ḥen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*, ed. Howard Kreisel, Beer-Sheva, Ben Gurion University Press, 2007, VI, chap. 18, p. 482. There, the Karaites are not quoted but only the Sadducees and the Christians. In another passage, the assimilation of the Karaites with the Sadducees is clear: "Many in this generation were leaning towards the Sadducees and the Karaites, believing only in what there is a prooftext in Scriptures." Levi ben Abraham ben Ḥayyim, *Livyat Ḥen: The Secrets of the Faith and The Gate of the Haggadah*, ed. Howard Kreisel, Beer-Sheva, Ben Gurion University Press, "*Sha'ar ha-Haggadah*", p. 237.

66 Mordekhai ben Nissan, *Dod Mordekhai*, Vienna, Schmid, 1830, 2a. See Jean-Christophe Attias, "Conférence de M. Jean-Christophe Attias", *Annuaires de l'École pratique des hautes études*, t. 105, 1996, p. 260.

67 Simḥah Isaac Lutzki, *Oraḥ Ṣaddiqim*, 20a, in Mordekhai ben Nissan, *Dod Mordekhai*, *op. cit*. Many thanks to Prof. D. Lasker for communicating me these references.

68 Quoted in Jacob Mann, *Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature,* vol. 2: *Karaitica*, New York, Ktav Publishing House, 1972, p. 307. On this author, see Ofer Elior, "Attitudes toward Science in the Karaite Community of Istanbul: The Case of Joseph Beghi", *Jewish Quarterly Review*, t. 108, 2018, fasc. 3, pp. 295-315.

Why should Afendopolo have read so closely Levi ben Abraham's *Livyat Ḥen*? Though this question would deserve further investigation, we can venture two provisional answers. First, Byzantine Karaites would certainly find interest in the first part of *Livyat Ḥen* forming an encyclopedia of the Aristotelian sciences, at a time when their main scientific frame had moved from the *kalām* still reflected in Aharon ben Eli's influential *'Eṣ Ḥayyim* (14th century) to Aristotelianism.[69] But it should also be recalled that in the 15th century, Rabbanite masters played a key role in the training of important Byzantine Karaite scholars in the sciences, such as Mordekhai Komtino,[70] the Rabbanite master of Afendopolo and Eliahu Bashiatsi. It is therefore possible that in such a milieu of Rabbanites teaching Karaites, *Livyat Ḥen* was being circulated not only for its encyclopedic part, but also for its second part dedicated to the allegorical interpretation of *aggadot*, as a polemical tool against such Karaite pupils. In any event, these Karaite quotations from *Livyat Ḥen* are yet another invitation to envisage the Maimonidean tradition of allegorical interpretation of *aggadot* against the background of the Rabbanite-Karaite confrontation.

The well-founded idea that Maimonides' view changed between his youth and his maturity, on both the necessity to allegorize *aggadot* and on the status of the Karaites, as well as the contexts in which the term "Rabbanite" features in the *Guide*, led us to the conclusion that both subjects were indeed linked in Maimonides' eyes. His renunciation to write a systematic treatise of allegorical interpretation of *aggadot* in favor of the redaction of the *Guide* may be understood as a tactic change of attitude toward the Karaite: it was a way to attract them in the Rabbanite camp by offering a text which did not depend much on the admission of the rabbinic tradition. It may also bear the stronger consequence that, for Maimonides by the time he was writing the *Guide*, belonging to the rabbinic tradition was not a prerequisite to access the "science of the Law in its true sense". While the link between allegorizing the *aggadot* or not and Karaism remains silenced in Maimonides' texts, it is explicit in the writings of his son Abraham. Finally, the fact that Karaites were acquainted with Levi ben Abraham's *Livyat Ḥen*, in the 15th century Byzantium, suggests that, by then, referring to the allegorization of *aggadot* by a Maimonidean philosopher may still have been a strategy used by Rabbinites to rally their Karaite pupils.

[69] For an overview of the study of science among Byzantine Karaites in the 15th and 16th centuries, see Elior, "Attitudes toward Science in the Karaite Community of Istanbul", *op. cit.*, pp. 295-302.

[70] On Komtino, see Jean-Christophe Attias, *Le commentaire biblique : Mordekhai Komtino ou l'herméneutique du dialogue*, Paris, Éd. du Cerf, 1991.

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