Abstract: The rediscovery of Karaites, both in the literature and in the travels of seventeenth-century Protestants, is a phenomenon in the history of ideas that sheds light on the nature of the interaction between religion and erudition at that time, and especially on the way in which Judaism was viewed by scholarship. The Karaite was an ideal type at this moment in Protestant Europe—a Jew who adhered to an uncorrupted religion of “sola scriptura.” Karaite texts were integrated into the array of Jewish literature examined by Christian Hebraists, and even Catholic thinkers such as Richard Simon and scholars of rabbinic literature such as John Selden did not pass over this trend.¹

The interaction between religion and scholarship in early modern Europe offers a privileged vantage point from which to study the nature and metamorphosis of modern European culture. While it is indeed the case that erudition bonded, on an intellectual level, nations and consciences otherwise torn by religious conflict, it is important not to downplay the extent to which the intellectual concerns that nourished the religious controversy of the time not only left a mark, but even stimulated modern philology and scholarship, leading to innovations both in the methods employed and in the quality of the research conducted. In this context, we observe here one of the most fascinating practices in cultural history: the reactualization, in the seventeenth century, of a lost and distant

¹ This paper was first prepared in French for a conference at Collège de France, “Les premiers siècles de la République européenne des lettres, 1368–1638” (Paris, December 3–5, 2001). I would like to dedicate its publication in English to the memory of Richard H. Popkin (1923–2005).
past, in order to clarify, and ennoble, a current religious and scholarly obsession.

This demarche did not always follow the luminous royal path of major theological and literary disputes. It sometimes took place in obscure, out-of-the-way places nevertheless inhabited by a passion for erudition whose contours and objects may escape us. Indeed, the research and debates of this period, vivified in other times by a quest for both philological and religious truth, have often become opaque or incomprehensible to us; hence the need to explore the reasons of this intellectual world and attempt at least to grasp its historical significance and, I might add, its depth.

For certain great Protestant scholars, the history of the ancient Karaite sect was an ideal bridge to a project of identification with a Jewish past that was simultaneously idealized and brought into the present. The search for a rigorously scriptural Judaism that entirely rejected the talmudic and rabbinic tradition served at once as a mirror and an ally in the struggle against Catholicism. Certain fundamental principles of Karaism, such as faith being the sole condition for salvation, and the almost obsessive insistence on the study of Scripture combined with the demand for freedom of interpretation, exerted a magnetism on erudite Protestant circles. This Christian interest in the Karaite universe was not limited to the realm of exegesis and search for sources; it extended to voyages, epistolary relations, and conversation.

Most of the information and initial clarification as to the extent of the interest in Karaism in seventeenth-century Europe comes to us from eighteenth-century bibliographers and scholars, who later were and sometimes still are unfairly considered to have lacked historical sensitivity. And yet as early as 1681 Wagenseil published his collection of Hebrew texts against Christianity in a Latin translation, *Tela ignea Satanae (The Fiery Darts of Satan)*, which included *Hizzuk Emuna (The Strengthening of Faith*, 1593) by the Lithuanian Karaite Isaac ben Troki, who combined a strictly literal reading of the Old Testament with a thrust of rationalism denouncing the allegorical imagination at the base of the idea of the

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Trinity. In fact, Troki's book was written partly in response to attempts at conversion of the Karaites by various Catholic orders (particularly the Frères Prêcheurs). It is important to recall on this subject that Isaac Troki also drew on works by Polish Protestants for the elaboration of his arguments. Exchanges between Polish Protestants and Karaites were reciprocal, and we find that several Karaite scholars actively participated in a translation of the Bible by Polish Protestants, published by Simone Budny in 1572.

Troki's *Hizzuk Emuna, Munimen fidei* in Latin, would serve as inspiration—as shown in the case of Anthony Collins—for early-eighteenth-century radical English deism, which sought to divest itself of the normative aspect of pharisaic ritualism in favor of a more rarified, refined Judaism, purged of the transformations contributed by oral law and the rabbinic tradition. Clearly related to this is the production of the major text for knowledge of seventeenth-century Karaism, *Diatribae de secta Karaerorum* (*Diatribe on the Sect of the Karaites*, 1703), produced thanks to scholarly exchanges between Jacob Trigland, professor of Hebraic antiquities at the University of Leiden and one of John Toland's most beloved masters, and the great-grandnephew of Isaac Troki. But the place of honor in this eighteenth-century literature rightfully belongs to Johann Christoph Wolf's *Bibliotheca hebraea* (*Hebrew Library*, 1715), a veritable guide through the labyrinth of modern disputes on Karaism.

From the end of the sixteenth century, in all of erudite Europe—from Leiden to Mainz, from Paris to Venice, from Basel to Oxford, from Leipzig to Uppsala—a powerful philological and religious interrogation seems to have been concentrated on the origin of the Karaites.

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4 This text can be read in an English translation: *Faith Strengthened*, introduction by T. Weiss-Rosmarin (New York: Ktav, 1970).


8 This text was reprinted by Johann Christoph Wolf at the end of his *Notitia Karaerorum* (Hamburg, 1714). *Journal des Sçavants* (June 1715), pp. 687–694, gives a full, detailed review.

Modern historiography traces the origin of the Karaites to the eighth century and characterizes them as a group that rejected rabbinic law as transmitted in the Talmud but fully accepted the twenty-four books of the Hebrew Bible, which they considered to be the sole and unique foundation of Jewish law (thereby differing from Samaritans, who accepted only the Torah). But identifying and characterizing Karaites was not always so simple. This is true particularly of the seventeenth century, when the unavowed search for the perfect “Protestant Jew” (a sort of imaginary Jew who lived according to the Lutheran ideal of the free examination of Scripture) produced a play of interlaced projections in which Karaites, Sadducees, Samaritans, and Essenes were alternatively thought of as identical or as separate. This was on one level a connection to the past, the sources, and scriptural exegesis; on another level the domain was enriched by direct relations between Christian Hebraists and their Jewish contemporaries, who were sometimes correspondents or friends and often masters in the study of Hebrew. On a third level was the possibility of actual interaction with Karaites, who not only were a sect to be discovered in the closed world of the past but could be met in Constantinople, Lithuania, and Poland, where they tried, among others, to find ancient manuscripts. This three-dimensional reality is an important means to approach the mentality of the scholars interested in Karaism, to grasp the spirit of the times. Further, it leads us straight to the heart of one of the central questions raised by current scholarship: the nature of the Judeo-Christian encounter that was undoubtedly a founding element of modernity.

Early on, the great scholar Joseph Scaliger (1540–1609) tried to put some order into the dispute between Nicolas Serrarius (1555–1609) and Johannes Drusius (1550–1616) around the hypothesis that the Karaites were simply descendants of the ancient Sadducees. Serrarius obtained a scathing judgment, related in *Elenchus trihaeresii Nicolai Serarii* (Refutation of the ‘Three Sects’ of Nicolas Serrarius), reprinted by Trigland in the early eighteenth century. Serrarius was taxed with nothing less than “*in Graecis puerum, in Hebraicis infantem, in historia harum haereseon nullius judicii*” (“his command of Greek literature is that of a child, of Hebrew literature that of an infant; as to the history of these sects he is entirely uninformed”). The biting ease of Scaliger’s words was no doubt

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sustained by the friendly opinion of Philippus Ferdinandus, a recently converted Polish Jew with whom he studied the Talmud. Scaliger himself tells us that Ferdinandus gave him excellent firsthand information on the Karaites, with whom he was quite familiar for attending their synagogue in Constantinople. Aside from this testimony, Scaliger also drew on the knowledge of the historian and astronomer Abraham Zacuto, a Spanish Jew who had lived briefly under royal protection in Portugal after the expulsion. At the end of this trajectory, Scaliger confidently maintained that the Karaites must not be identified with the Sadducees. Differing from other Jews solely in their refusal of the Mishna and Talmud, the Karaites, contrary to the Sadducees, believed in the resurrection as well as reward and punishment after death.

Scaliger’s serious efforts at historical comprehension of the Karaites were not always taken up by scholars after his death. A notable exception, the biblicist Jean Morin (1591–1659), member of the Oratory of Paris, succeeded in dating the Karaite schism back to Anan ben David in the eighth century; Morin also published, in Hebrew, an excerpt from the preface to the commentary on the Pentateuch by the Karaite Aharon ben Yosef. However, the same cannot be said of the “two Buxtorfs,” as Richard Simon called them. Johannes Buxtorf the Elder (1546–1629), in his Synagoga judaica (The Jewish Synagogue), insisted that the Karaites were indeed a continuation of the ancient Sadducees, whereas the younger Johannes Buxtorf (1599–1664), the great Hebraist of Basel, made a determinat contribution to the dissemination of knowledge of Karaism with the entry qaray in his Lexicon. But the younger Buxtorf simply reproduced the rabbinic vision of Karaism without having any direct relation to the sources. As Diderot’s Encyclopédie later recalls, emphasizing the rarity of Karaite manuscripts, “Buxtorf had not seen a single

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13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., pp. 511–512.
one.”¹⁸ Buxtorf’s dismissal of Karaism is punctuated by the fact that he published a Hebrew-Latin translation, with commentary, of the apologetic tract written by R. Yehuda Halevi to defend Judaism against attacks from Christianity and Karaism, *The Kuzari*, a text symbolic of normative halachic Judaism.

Johann Heinrich Hottinger (1620–1667), professor of ecclesiastic history at the University of Zurich, concluded in his *Thesaurus philologicus* (*Philological Thesaurus*) that, contrary to what one could too frequently read, the Karaites of his times should definitely not be compared to Samaritans and Sadducees. He seems to have dominated more than his contemporaries the patrimony of information on Karaism then available.¹⁹

The myth of Karaism in the seventeenth century was broad enough to have an effect even on those whose interest in Judaism was usually expressed through the study of rabbinic literature. John Selden (1584–1654) exemplifies this. Selden, one of the most respected English scholars of his day—Thomas Hobbes called him “the library of England”—advanced scholarship on the juridical aspects of Karaism.²⁰ His interest in these “heretics of Judaism” is remarkable and unexpected, considering the devotion that his works convey to the rabbinic tradition and particularly to the corpus of Maimonides. Following on the testimony of Ralph Cudworth,²¹ we can know that Selden had access to the manuscript of Eliya ben Moshe Bashyazi’s *Keli Nehoshet* and a copy of Yehuda Poki’s tractate on incest, printed in Constantinople in 1582 (the same very rare work that the Orientalist Johann Benedict Carpzov [1639–1699] says he secretly obtained through a Jew from Kraków).²² Selden was one of the first to explore the juridical aspects of the Karaites and their social organization (such as laws of marriage) in his famous studies *De anno civili*

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¹⁸ Cf. the “Caraïtes” entry, where the antirabbinic controversy is explicit: “The writings of the Karaites are not well known in Europe, though they are more deserving of attention than the rabbinical writings.”


²⁰ Selden was particularly interested in the juridical aspects of the Jewish tradition. Cf. John Selden, *De anno civili et calendario veteris Ecclesiae, seu reipublicae judaicae, dissertatio* (London, 1644); Selden, *Uxor hebraica seu de nuptiis et divortiis veterum ebraorum libri tres* (Frankfurt, 1646); Selden, *De synedriis et praefecturis juridicis veterum ebraorum libri tres* (London, 1650–1653).


(On the Civil Year, 1644), Uxor Hebraica (The Hebrew Wife, 1646), and De Synedriis (On the Councils, 1650–1653).

A problem shared by those exploring Karaism for its juridical teachings, as well as those interested in understanding and categorizing those I dared call “Protestant Jews,” was that sources were rare and difficult to find.

Thus, the scholarly voyage appeared as a necessary expedient, whatever its nature—diplomatic, peregrinatio academica (academic voyage), or anthropological research discovering surviving Karaita communities. The Arabist Golius reports that during a voyage to Constantinople he saw several Karaita manuscripts buried in crypts. Unfortunately, the most significant material garnered from these travels and studies—as the cases described below of Rittangelius and Peringer prove—has not come down to us.

Johannes Stephanus Rittangelius (d. 1652), a converted Jew and professor of Oriental languages at Königsberg, traveled to Lithuania in 1641 to visit the Karaita community of Troki and entertained a correspondence with some members of the community thereafter. But his manuscripts were drowned when pirates attacked the galleon on which he was sailing to Holland.

Gustav Peringer, who was trained in Oriental languages at the University of Uppsala (where he held the chair in Oriental languages in 1681), perfected his studies under the direction of Wagenseil in Altdorf and Hiob Ludolf in Frankfurt; he was fluent in Hebrew and Arabic but also mastered Turkish and Tartar. His learning and research journey started in Uppsala, this time at the invitation of King Charles XI. We learn from his account of this voyage that he penetrated the regions of Poswol, Nowomiasto, Kronie, Troki, and Lyck, where he encountered Karaita communities that spoke Tartar. Peringer reports that the Karaites of

23 Cf. Hottinger, Thesaurus philologicus, p. 42.


26 Peringer’s letter to Hiob Ludolf, known under the name Epistola de Karaitis Lithuaniae, was published by Wilhelm E. Tentzel in his periodical, Monatliche Unterredungen Einiger Guten Freunde (July 1691), pp. 572–575.
those regions were “moribus, lingua, religione, imo & facie a Rabbanistis, quorum feracissima est haec regio, valde diversi: lingua illis materna est Tartarica sive potius Turcica” (“They differ greatly from the Rabbanites, who are much more abundant in this region, in their customs, their language, their religion, and even their faces; their language is Tartar, or rather Turkic”).

He tells us that, contrary to what several scholars still thought, “non Pentateuchum solum, ut aliis creditu est, sed universos Veteris Testamenti libros pro Canonicis recipiunt” (“They accept as canonical not only, as others believe, the Pentateuch, but all the books of the Old Testament”). The surprise of scholarly discovery and the emotion of the encounter with human beings living according to the rules of ancient Karaism juxtapose and confront in his testimony. The results of his scholarly effort, as with the collections of Rittangelius, are lost to us: the dozens of manuscripts he had gathered and annotated in the course of his lessons at Uppsala disappeared in the great fire of the royal palace of Stockholm in 1697.

Peringer was soon followed by Johann Uppendorff, rector of both the German school of Stockholm in 1676 and the Lycée of Riga the following year. Uppendorff was an Orientalist of great value, with a lively interest in Jewish and Karaite traditions. Toward the end of his life he started to work on a treatise, Commentationes de ritibus judaicis (Thoughts on the Jewish Rites), which remained unfinished.

Uppendorff went to Lithuania to meet several Karaite scholars, accompanied by his friend David Caspari, professor of philosophy at the Gymnasium of Riga and later superintendent of the city. Excellent relations were established, culminating in the extension of an invitation to the Karaite Shlomo ben Aharon to give lessons in his academy in Riga.

27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
30 Cf. Nova Literaria Maris Balthici et Septentrionis (Lübeck, 1698), pp. 183–184. Uppendorff was at the time professor of Oriental languages in Dorpat (now Tartu). This interest is also attested to by the type of dissertations proposed to his students, such as the one defended by his “Respondens” Wilhadus Fabricius, Contra Abusum Philologiae S. Hebraeae in Theologia Polemica (Kiloni, 1671). I wish to express my gratitude to Mrs. Aija Taimiņa of the Latvijas Akadēmiskā bibliotēka in Riga for her help in my research.
31 For Caspari’s biography, see Allgemeines Schriftsteller und Gelehrten Lexikon, vol. 1 (Mitau, 1827), pp. 334–338. He is the author of several works on ethics and political philosophy.
32 At his invitation he wrote a treatise on the differences between Karaites and rabbinitists; cf. also, for an analysis of this text, A. Neubauer, Aus der Petersburger Bibliothek (Leipzig, 1866), pp. 1–29 (part in Hebrew).
However, the decisive passage in the progress of field studies of Karaism must be attributed to the diplomatic activity of Levinus Warner (1619–1665), resident of the United Provinces in Constantinople. Warner's significant contribution to the field can be found partly in his writings, as one would expect, but moreover in his acquisition of thirty fundamental Karaite manuscripts that entered into the collection of the university library of Leiden near the end of the seventeenth century. These texts provided the basis for subsequent scholarship, from Trigland to Spanheim to Jacques Basnage to the developments of Abraham Geiger, one of the founders of German Reform Judaism (Wissenschaft des Judentums), and to Fürst, in the heart of the nineteenth century.

We have already mentioned relations between Lithuanian Karaites and Polish Protestants. These encounters were made possible not only through the linguistic skills of Christian Orientalists but also through Karaite youth who had learned Latin and Polish at the University of Vilnius, founded by the Jesuits in 1579. Several of these young Karaites perfected their studies in European universities. Despite the loss of a very large number of irreplaceable manuscripts, the intellectual and religious products of the Karaites can still be reconstituted thanks to the Firkovič collection. Naturally, the collections of Saint Petersburg, often referred to by scholars, and the libraries of Vilnius should be included.

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36 Some manuscripts from the Firkovič collection, conserved in the Saltikov-Ščedrin Library in Saint Petersburg, yield information about the travel journals of three Karaite scholars in Europe. See Neue Denkmäler der jüdischen Literatur in St. Petersburg: 3 Reisebeschreibungen von 3 karaischen Gelehrten. (1) Samuel ben David, aus dem Jahre 1641–1642. (2) Moses ben Elijah Halevy, aus dem Jahre 1654–1655. (3) Benjamin ben Elijahau, aus dem Jahre 1785–1786 (Lyck, 1865); Kondratowicz-Syrokomla, Wycieczki po Litwie w promieniu Wilna, vol. 1 (Wilno, 1857), pp. 82–85. It is also worth noting in passing that Simha Pinsker, father of the leading Zionist figure Leon Pinsker, devoted many years to the study of Karaism, using the material in the Firkovič collection. Concerning this and the famous dispute which arose about supposed forgeries in this collection, see the entry in Encyclopaedia Judaica, s.v. "Firkovich, Abraham."

37 The manuscripts conserved in the Firkovič collection (under the code F 305) of the Lietuvos mokslų akademijos biblioteka, with abundant writings on hymns and prayers, repentance and salvation, but also on astronomy and medicine, are of particular interest. Manuscripts conserved in the Vilniaus Universiteto Biblioteka should also be mentioned.
There is a noticeable absence of Italian figures on this international scene. There was a longstanding belief in the seventeenth century that there were Karaites in Italy, but this was due to the misinterpretation of a passage by Leone da Modena. This misinterpretation first appeared in Johannes Buxtorf’s *Synagoga judaica* and was disseminated in the better-known work of Wagenseil. It was not the case that there were Karaites in Italy, however, and it should come as no surprise that in post-tridentate Italy, relentless adepts of *sola scriptura* were not very much in vogue.

The chronological limit, the *terminus ad quem* of our colloquy, 1638, coincides with the birth of Richard Simon and the publication of two key works of Jewish scholarship, by Simone Luzzatto (ca. 1582–1660) and Leone da Modena, who was to be the chief rabbi of Venice. Luzzatto maintained in his *Discorso circa il stato de gl’Hebrei* (*Discourse on the State of the Jews*), published in Venice in 1638, that the Karaites were simply a “residue” of ancient Sadducees.

As we know, widespread knowledge of the *Historia de’ riti Hebraici* (*History of the Hebrew Rituals*, 1637, second expurgated edition 1638) by the chief rabbi of Venice is largely due to the work of Richard Simon, the eminent Hebraist of the Oratory. Simon had already shown his sympathy for the Jews when he came to the defense of the community of Metz. Hebrew student and friend of Jona Salvador, Simon published his translation of Leone da Modena’s *Riti* in 1674. The aforementioned chronological limitations keep me from broaching the subject of his intellectual elaboration

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38 Cf. Wagenseil, *Tela ignea satanae*, p. 596: “Nam quod in nova editione Buxtorfianae Synagogae Judaicae p. 3 legitur, quasi inter alias regiones Italia quoque Karraitae incolant, ibidemque habeant Synagogas, et secundum ritus vivant suos, atque in hac re ad R. Leonis de Modena libelli ejus de Ritibus Hebracorum provocatur autoritatem, id secus se habeat, nec quid a R. Leone est proditum.” (“What Buxtorf writes in the new edition of his *Jewish Synagogue* on p. 3, that Karaites also live in the other areas of Italy, and that they also have synagogues and live according to their own rites, where the authority he cites as proof is R. Leone da Modena and his pamphlet *On the Rites of the Hebrews*, should be considered incorrect. R. Leone did not make such a claim.”)


around Leone da Modena’s text. However, we should note the significance of the fact that Simon wrote a *Supplément sur les Caraïtes* (*Supplement on the Karaites*) and added this to his French translation of *Riti*.

But let us return for a moment to Modena’s work, truly a key text for understanding the intellectual and religious stakes then presented under the Karaite masque. First, Modena, who openly claimed to present authentic Jewish life, with its rites and ceremonies, *against* the disparaging vision of a Buxtorf, nonetheless offered a “minimalist” version of the ritual side of Judaism: respect for standards, for halacha, but refusal of attitudes considered unnecessarily superstitious. Moreover, Modena showed no inclination to Kabbala, which he claimed had become too allegorical, too fanciful, too steeped in Neoplatonism and neo-Pythagorism—in short, too Christian.\(^42\)

After all, Modena’s should be seen as a political response to two opposite and equally pertinent dangers to the Jewish communities: isolation or assimilation. This led him to a position that was at the same time critical and tolerant with respect to the Karaites, and to a cautionary approach to the potentially dangerous dissemination of rationalist, almost deist ideas, of the likes of Uriel da Costa.

In conclusion, the Karaite theme, rediscovered in the seventeenth-century Republic of Letters, reveals the unexpected and apparently incomprehensible convergence of hyperrationalism and strict biblicism. It was not merely a fancy of erudition; it was one of the detours taken by the effort to think modernity.

Several years later, Richard Simon, writing to a Protestant friend, De Frémond d’Ablancourt, called him “My dear Karaite,” and signed himself off “The Rabbinit.”\(^43\) If what I have sketched out thus far is not false, we cannot believe Simon.

University of Rome—La Sapienza

\(^{42}\) This vision was accepted not only by Simon, but all the way to Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*. Cf. the “Caraïtes” entry: “Their theology differs from that of other Jews only in that it is more free of trifles and superstitions, because they do not add any faith to the explanations of the kabbalists, or to the allegorical meaning, which is often more subtle than reasonable.” On the complexity of Jewish identity in the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries, cf. especially Yosef Kaplan, “Karaites” in Early Eighteenth-Century Amsterdam,” in David S. Katz and Jonathan I. Israel, eds., *Sceptics, Millenarians and Jews* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 196-236.