



**Barry Walfish, Mikhail Kizilov, eds.** *Bibliographia Karaitica: An Annotated Bibliography of Karaites and Karaism, Karaite Texts and Studies*. Leiden: Brill, 2011. li + 810 pp. \$327.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-18927-0.



**Reviewed by** Fred Astren (San Francisco State University)

**Published on** H-Judaic (June, 2012)

**Commissioned by** Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

## The Meaning of a Bibliography

The publication of this major bibliography represents the maturation of the scholarly field of Karaite studies. In part, that maturation stems from the fall of the Soviet Union, an event that provided access for Western scholars to the large and important collection of Karaite manuscripts collected by Abraham Firkovich (1786-1874), now housed in the Russian National Library in Leningrad. The editors, Barry Dov Walfish and Mikhail Kizilov, represent two post-Soviet academic trajectories in the field, with specific expertise in primary languages necessary for the study of Karaism in the Near East and in Eastern Europe, respectively. Walfish was the long-time driving force behind the undertaking, while Kizilov joined the project in 2000. Both are Karaite studies scholars in their own right, with many publications in the field.

Karaite Judaism, whose historical origins are found in the late ninth century, was in the Middle Ages characterized by the rejection of rabbinic tradition (and thus the Mishnah and Talmud) and the use of scripturalist strategies for halakhic and biblical interpretation. In contrast to Rabbanism (that is, rabbinic Judaism), me-

dieval Karaism embraced in varying degrees a strong millennialist outlook, quasi-ascetic tendencies, and as described by Zvi Ankori in *Karaites of Byzantium* (1959), a "Palestino-centric" orientation. Focus on the Land of Israel led many Karaites to immigrate, especially to Jerusalem, where a vibrant community and intellectual center developed in the tenth and early eleventh centuries. This age of florescence witnessed the production of a large corpus of Karaite literature written primarily in Judeo-Arabic. Much of this literary heritage was later translated into Hebrew as the Byzantine Karaite community began to eclipse communities in the Islamic Near East. By the later Middle Ages, other communities developed in the Crimea and eventually Eastern Europe, while Byzantine Karaites were transformed by the Turkish conquests of the fifteenth century. Karaite communities, though small, have continued to exist both in the Near East (now mostly in Israel) and Eastern Europe until today. Thus, over the course of a thousand years, literature by and about Karaites has been generated across a wide geography in such languages as Hebrew, Judeo-

Arabic, Greek, Turkish, Russian, Polish, and other Eastern European languages, as well as the Jewish languages of Judeo-Tatar and the Karaite Turkic Karaim.

In its 8,012 entries, *Bibliographia Karaitica* takes in primary and secondary sources in all of these languages and their corresponding scripts. It is organized into four parts (Generalia, History, Religion, and Culture) and thirty chapters, encompassing all periods and geographical regions of Karaite history. Part 4, "Culture," brings to the fore Eastern European Karaitica that may not be otherwise familiar to Jewish studies scholars who know Karaism from its more well-known medieval and Near Eastern contexts. In this setting, we are invited to consider Karaites and Karaism in terms of sociology, linguistics, ethnology, arts, and science, as opposed to more "traditional" categories such as halakha, biblical commentary, grammar, and polemics. In fact, entries for Eastern Europe comprise almost 40 percent of the material. The book is further organized using eight indexes, one of which ("Printing Index") is divided into seven subcategories. One welcome feature of this bibliography is the annotations, which provide context and additional information on the entries. Among the annotations are short biographies of Karaite scholars and scholars of the Karaites, which together constitute an incredibly useful embedded biographical dictionary. Another strong element of this work is that the entries include items that, while not primarily focused on Karaites and Karaism, include a section or number of pages that do so.

Walfish declares in the introduction that "many difficult classification decisions" were required in order to organize such a large amount of material. It is thus understandable that no item is entered more than once (p. lv). On the other hand, this feature requires the user to carefully scour the table of contents and indexes in order to be sure that all items relevant to his or her search have been located.

Another editorial decision was to "err on the side of inclusion," a determination that draws our attention to two issues (p. lv). In one sense, the range goes beyond what most scholars consider to be primary and secondary academic sources to include newspaper and magazine articles. The strength of this approach is that the user can decide for himself if an entry is relevant, and thus the range of the bibliography moves toward encompassing all things Karaitic. On the other hand, some of the material comes from a pseudo-scholarly discourse that seeks to prove that Eastern European Karaites are of Turkic ethnicity and correspondingly do not have ancient

Near Eastern Jewish origins. To some extent, the debate over Turkic versus Semitic identity comes from Eastern European Karaites' own strategies of distancing themselves from Jews, beginning in the early nineteenth century. However, the question is best understood in the dual contexts of anti-Semitism and the Soviet communist ideology that privileged ethnicity and devalued religion. On this matter, the editors both reveal their critique of that position in the annotations, but claim a kind of classificatory agnosticism by providing references for both sides of the debate. Whatever the merits of the arguments, this bibliographical and ethnographical question highlights significant differences in the experiences of Karaites of Christendom and Karaites of Islam, as described by William Brinner.[1]

The most obvious observation that comes from a review of this vast repository of information is that for a millennium Karaites have contributed to and participated in Jewish history, religion, and culture in many areas, including biblical commentary, Hebrew grammar and the Massorah, philosophy, and halakhah. That such a long history and extensive literature is to be considered the legitimate object of attention within the field of Jewish studies has not always been taken for granted. Not so very long ago, a paper in Karaite studies delivered at the annual meeting of the Association for Jewish Studies might have attracted baited questions that sought to elicit answers more from the storehouse of Karaite-Rabbanite polemic than from the specific topic at hand. The tension that such a moment exemplifies comes from over a century and a half of confrontation between the study of Karaites and Jewish studies in general, the latter often having been dominated by the study of rabbinic Judaism or shaped by the personal rabbinic-oriented identities of scholars. This tension within the Jewish studies establishment goes back to Simhah Pinsker's publication of *Likute Kadmoniyot* (1860), which exploded traditional assumptions regarding the rabbinic character of Jewish history by presenting a huge volume of documentary evidence on Karaite Judaism that could not be ignored. The subsequent shock of the "discovery" of the Cairo Geniza, not only revealed hitherto unknown Jewish pasts, but established that the study of medieval Jewish history in Islamic lands would necessitate scholarly consideration of the heterogeneity of Jewish societies and the challenge of non-rabbinic forms of Judaism to Rabbanism. In a way, *Bibliographia Karaitica* conclusively puts the last nail in the coffin of a 150-year-old controversy over the question of whether Karaite studies is or is not Jewish studies, a dispute whose arguments seem to have finally died away

within scholarly circles.

The sensitive reader is overwhelmed to think about the amount of work involved in compiling, preparing, and publishing this work. It is especially impressive that the editors claim to have examined approximately 90 percent of the items firsthand. It was a monumental undertaking for which scholars in Karaite studies should have much gratitude. Mention should also be made of the importance of the series, Karaite Texts and Studies, another monument to the maturity of the field of Karaite studies. *Bibliographia Karaitica* is a major reference work that

will remain of great use for Jewish studies scholars working in many areas of specialization long into the future. We eagerly await an online version that is hinted at in the introduction.

#### Note

[1]. William M. Brinner, "Karaites of Christendom-Karaites of Islam," in *The Islamic World, from Classical to Modern Times: Essays in Honor of Bernard Lewis*, ed. C. E. Bosworth, Charles Issawi, Roger Savory, and A. L. Udovitch (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 55-73.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

**Citation:** Fred Astren. Review of Walfish, Barry; Kizilov, Mikhail, eds., *Bibliographia Karaitica: An Annotated Bibliography of Karaites and Karaism, Karaite Texts and Studies*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. June, 2012.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=32741>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.