ON THE QUESTION OF SCRIPT IN MEDIEVAL KARAITÉ MANUSCRIPTS:
NEW EVIDENCE FROM THE GENIZAH

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In this paper I shall examine a letter from the Taylor-Schechter Genizah collection concerning the works of the Karaite scholar Yeshu’ah ben Yehudah and discuss the light that it casts on the production of Karaite manuscripts in the Middle Ages.

T-S K25.230. Paper. 28.3 cm. x 22 cm. The beginning of the letter is missing. There are wide spaces between the lines. At some time after the Arabic letter was written, a scribe wrote a Judaeo-Arabic text both on the verso of the sheet and in the spaces around the lines of the Arabic letter on the recto. The sheet was folded to form two conjoined leaves.

Text

1. رسمته من خطاب الشيخ إبي الفرج فرقان بن اسد الأمر

2. لاجل النسخ المعول فيه على اعتمادته فسلم إلى جواين من الكلام في

3. العرووت برسم حضرته وذكر أنه قد كان استذاته دفعة بعد أخرى في

4. باب التفسير الذي كان التمس منه يظهر هل يورثه بخط عبرياني

5. ام عريبي فلم بره جواب بما يعتمدته في ذلك وانه منتظر ما يرد به

6. الجواب ليعمل نسخته وهو يخصه باجل السلم واكرمه ويصف من

7. شوقه وزائد وحشتة لحضرته ما لا يستوعب شرحه كتاب ولا يحتوي

8. عليه خطاب والله تعالى [ ... بقائه وبعد.]

Right margin

وانا شاكر لصحة [ وهو موصل الي نا علاني] الشكلين واخص حضرته

[ ... المحد...]

1 I am grateful to the syndics of Cambridge University Library for granting me permission to publish this fragment.
Textual notes
2. The final nun of جزرايئن is truncated and ligatured to the initial mim of مم.
6. Note the scriptio defectiva of the long a in the wordسلم. The phrase وهو يخصه باجل السلام follows a greetings formula that is common in medieval Arabic letters, see Khan, Arabic papyri: selected material from the Khalili collection (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 151.

Translation
1. I noted it from the letter of the elder Abū Furqān ibn Asad, the matter [ ]
2. concerning the authoritative copy for it,² and he delivered to me two parts of the treatise on
3. kinship bars to marriage for your honour and he mentioned that he had time and again requested instructions from you³
4. regarding the commentary, which you commissioned from him, (asking) you to indicate whether you prefer it in Hebrew script
5. or Arabic script, but you have not given him in reply any instructions for him to follow with regard to this. He is waiting to see what
6. your reply is, so that he may start work on your copy. He conveys to you his most gracious greetings and speaks of
7. his great longing for you, the description of which cannot be encompassed in a letter⁴ or contained
8. in a missive. God, exalted is he, [ ] . . . your life . . . [ ]

Right margin
1. I am grateful for the health [ ] he is coming to us . . . [ ] thanks [ ] he conveys to your honour [greetings].

From the contents of the letter one may infer that the writer is acting as an intermediary between Yeshu’ah ben Yehadah and the addressee. The beginning of the letter is missing. The first line and the first half of the second line refer to a letter of Yeshu’ah and an authoritative copy of some unspecified work. From what follows we learn that Yeshu’ah had delivered to the writer two parts of his treatise on kinship bars to marriage (תורות), so that he might convey them to the addressee. The writer also communicates the request of Yeshu’ah that the addressee reply to a query concerning the writing of the commentary that the addressee had commissioned from Yeshu’ah.

² Literally: 'The copy the imitation of which can be relied upon'.
³ In the Arabic the writer addresses the recipient in the third person.
⁴ I interpret the kitāb as having a meaning that is parallel with that of kitāb. The use of kitāb with the sense of 'letter' is common in medieval Arabic documents.
The extant portion of the letter does not contain an address. Yet it is clear that the addressee is Abū Al-Ḥasan Dāʾūd ibn Imrān ibn Levi. In the introduction to his short commentary to the Pentateuch, Yeshuʿah indicates that this man had invited him to write the work. Other Genizah documents show that Dāʾūd ibn Imrān (his Hebrew name was David ben Amram) was a very wealthy Karaite dignitary who had considerable influence in Egypt.

The presentation of the letter and its style indicate that the addressee was a dignitary of high rank. Large spaces are left between the lines. The words are arranged on an upward slant at the end of the lines. Both of these are characteristic features of high register correspondence at this period. The writer refers to the addressee in the third person. The clause fa-lam yaruddahu jawāb bi-mā yaṭamiduhu fi ḍālīka recalls the wording of phrases occurring in contemporary sources that refer to the execution of the orders of the ruler or of a highly placed official.

In the introduction to his short commentary on the Pentateuch Yeshuʿah states that Dāʾūd ibn Imrān arrived in Jerusalem in the month of Jumādā al-ʿakhir of the year 445 A.H. (September–October 1053 A.D.), to perform a pilgrimage and visit the holy places. During his sojourn he saw portions of Yeshuʿah’s commentary on Leviticus that had been recently completed. He announced to Yeshuʿah that he had decided to commission from him a commentary on the Pentateuch for his son, Abū Saʿīd Levi. The commentary that Yeshuʿah was in the process of compiling,
which presented lengthy discussions on selected biblical passages, was not suitable. He requested Yeshu’ah to compose a shorter commentary to all of the Pentateuch accompanied by a verse by verse translation into Arabic. The introduction gives details of the requirements of Dā‘ūd regarding the content and structure of the commentary.

Yeshu’ah states that Dā‘ūd ibn Imrān commissioned the commentary from him while he was preoccupied with other matters, which did not permit him to carry out his request. Only after Dā‘ūd had repeatedly pressed him, did Yeshu’ah determine to devote himself to its composition. Even then he still could not neglect his other tasks completely.

According to the Chronicle of Ibn Al-Hiṭṭī, Yeshu’ah began his short commentary to the Pentateuch in the month of Rābi‘ al-‘awwal of the year 446 A.H. (June–July, 1054 A.D.). Ibn Al-Hiṭṭī derived this date from a written statement to this effect by Yeshu’ah himself. We may infer from this that about ten months elapsed after Dā‘ūd’s visit to Jerusalem before work began on the commentary.

According to the introduction to the short commentary the delay was caused by Yeshu’ah’s reluctance to set aside his other tasks, especially his long commentary on Leviticus. From the Genizah letter we learn that the writing of Dā‘ūd’s copy of the work was delayed since Dā‘ūd was slow in replying to Yeshu’ah’s query as to whether he wished his copy in Hebrew script or in Arabic script. It is possible that the composition of the work was already complete, since the query concerned the writing of Dā‘ūd’s personal copy (li-ya‘mal nus katahu, line 6). An authoritative copy that served as a model for private copies is mentioned in line 2 of our letter (al-nasb al-mu‘awwal . . . ‘alā ‘itimāmihī), but it is not clear whether this was the model copy of the short commentary or of another work.

The letter mentions also Yeshu’ah’s treatise on kinship bars to marriage. The writer says that Yeshu’ah delivered to him two sections of this treatise, which were intended for Dā‘ūd. We learn from this that at least part of the treatise on kinship bars to marriage had been written before the completion of the short commentary.

Let us return now to the question that Yeshu’ah addresses to Dā‘ūd concerning the script. The question implies that Karaite authors at the time of Yeshu’ah (middle of the eleventh century A.D.) wrote copies of their Arabic works in either Hebrew or Arabic script and that the choice was determined by the preference of the person for whom the copy was made.

We do not know in what script Yeshu’ah finally wrote the copy of the short commentary that was delivered to Dā‘ūd. As has been

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9 For this work see H. Ben-Shammai, Pe‘amim, xxxii (1987), 16, and the literature cited there.
remarked, it is the script of Dā'ud's private copy that is at issue. This was not necessarily written in the same script as was the model copy of the work.

Among the extant manuscripts of Yeshu'ah's Arabic short commentary on the Pentateuch, some are in Arabic script and some in Hebrew script. It should be noted that in the manuscripts in Arabic script the Hebrew is usually transcribed into Arabic characters. Manuscripts known to me that have been identified as portions of the short commentary are as follows:

In Arabic script
2. BL Or. 2559 fos. 1–53 (Catalogue no. 315).
3. BL Or. 2560 (Catalogue no. 316).
4. BL Or. 2581A fos. 1–4 (Catalogue no. 329) + T-S Ar. 41.18 (see G. Khan, Karaite Bible manuscripts from the Cairo Genizah [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990], 94–101).
5. BL Or. 2581A fos. 31–46 (Catalogue no. 329).

In Hebrew script
7. BL Or. 2398 (Catalogue no. 313).
8. BL Or. 2497 fos. 3–18 (Catalogue no. 314).
9. BL Or. 2497 fos. 3–18 (Catalogue no. 314).
10. BL Or. 2496 fos. 1–58 (Catalogue no. 317).
11. BL Or. 2496 fos. 59–66 (Catalogue no. 317).
12. BL Or. 2491 fos. 1–41 (Catalogue no. 93), copied in 1403 A.D. containing only the Arabic translation.

Only in the case of MS 12 do we have an explicit indication of the date of copying. Manuscripts of other Karaite Arabic works are likewise written either in Arabic script or in Hebrew script. Virtually all the manuscripts in Arabic script are early (eleventh to thirteenth centuries). A large number of Karaite manuscripts of Arabic works written in Hebrew script that are known to me were copied at a later period (after the fourteenth century). One may form the impression, therefore, that Arabic script is characteristic of early manuscripts and Hebrew script of later ones. Our letter demonstrates that at the time of Yeshu’ah (middle of the eleventh century) Karaite Arabic manuscripts were written in either Arabic or Hebrew script.

Most of the Arabic letters from the Genizah, the writers of which can be identified as Karaites of the eleventh century, were written in Hebrew script.\(^\text{10}\) The number of Arabic Karaite

\(^{10}\) For references see Khan, 'The medieval Karaite transcriptions of Hebrew into Arabic script', Israel Oriental Studies, xii (1992), 159, n. 15.
documents that were written in Arabic script, including the one under discussion, is smaller.\(^{11}\) One cannot draw conclusions regarding the distribution of Hebrew and Arabic script in Karaite Arabic documents of the period from those that are extant. On principle, only documents in Hebrew script were deposited in the Genizah. It appears that a small proportion of the Arabic documents that passed through the hands of the Jews of Fustat was added to the Genizah accumulation by accident rather than by design.

In the tenth and eleventh centuries, and probably also a little later, the Karaites wrote manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible in Arabic transcription. Extant manuscripts of this type come from either Palestine or Egypt. At this period the Karaite communities of Palestine and Egypt used also Bible codices in Hebrew script. We know this from the colophons of early medieval Bible manuscripts in Hebrew script.\(^ {12} \) Moreover, passages in the works of Karaite grammarians and exegetes of this period indicate that their grammatical descriptions of Hebrew words were based on the traditional Hebrew orthography of the Bible.\(^ {13} \)

Our letter demonstrates that, at this period, Karaite scribes produced copies of Arabic works in either Hebrew or Arabic script. This is confirmed by the existence of several manuscripts of Karaite Arabic works written in Hebrew script that contain colophons dating them to the eleventh or twelfth centuries.\(^ {14} \)

We may conclude, therefore, that all types of text that were written by the Karaites in Arabic script (i.e. Arabic compositions and documents and Hebrew Bible codices) were written at the same period also in Hebrew script.

Was the choice of the script completely free? It is relevant to note a passage in the Kitab al-'anwār of the tenth century Karaite Al-Qirqisi.\(^ {15} \) This scholar sought to justify the reading of Hebrew in Arabic script by arguing that written letters are merely the symbols of the language. The language would be the same whatever script it is written in. He, however, alludes to the fact that many of his co-

\(^{11}\) For references see Khan (note 10), 160, n. 16.

\(^{12}\) For references see Khan (note 10), n. 6.

\(^{13}\) For references see Khan (note 10) n. 79.

\(^{14}\) Budapest, National Academy A280 (Kauffman), Yusuf Al-Bašīr, Kitāb al-Istibār, copied in 1021; London, BL Or. 5565 E, f. 15, copied in 1030; St. Petersburg, Firkovitch II, Hebrew-Arabic 1/1811, Yusuf Al-Bašīr, Kitāb al-Istibār, copied in 1034; St. Petersburg, Firkovitch II, Hebrew-Arabic 1/4419, All ben Sulaymān, commentary on the Pentateuch, copied in 1072–3 (cf. A. Ya. Borisov, Palestinskii Sbornik II, 1956, 112); Paris, Alliance 234 H, copied 1198; St. Petersburg, Oriental Institute B 231, copied in 1198. I am grateful to Professor M. Beit-Arié for providing me with this information from the records of the Hebrew palaeography project.

religionists adhered to the traditional notion of the holiness of the Hebrew script and language and objected to the reading of texts in Arabic script on the Sabbath. Could this mean that the use of Arabic and Hebrew script concurrently by Karaites at this period reflected differing views concerning the holiness of the Hebrew script?

In the case of Hebrew Bible manuscripts it appears that the distribution of Hebrew and Arabic script was determined by more than the personal choice of individuals. We know that the accurate manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible that the Karaites kept as models were written in Hebrew characters. Manuscripts of the Bible in Arabic transcription were copies intended for private use. This is shown by the fact that most of the transcriptions are not accurately vocalized. Many lack accents and some lack even vocalization. They do not include Masoretic notes. Moreover a large number are accompanied by a translation and commentary.

In the transcriptions the Hebrew is represented in Arabic characters with various types of orthography. One may classify these according to fullness of representation of vowels. The resulting scale of varying degrees of scriptio plena does correlate, to a certain extent, to chronological progression, though there seems to have been an historical overlap between many of the orthography types. This scale of increasing fullness of orthography reflects the attempt to represent the maximal amount of the phonetic details of Hebrew.

The Karaites did not transcribe all types of Hebrew text into Arabic characters. During the period in which the transcriptions of the Hebrew Bible were made, Karaite scribes wrote also Hebrew legal documents and manuscripts containing Hebrew poetic compositions and the texts of prose works in Hebrew such as those by the earlier Karaite authors Daniel Al-Qūmīsī and Benjamin Al-Nahawendī. I know of no manuscript of such Hebrew works that is written in Arabic script. The Karaites transcribed into Arabic only the Bible, the Hebrew liturgy (which consisted essentially of biblical verses) and quotations from the Mishnah and a few other rabbinic works. These texts are distinguished from the ones mentioned earlier by the fact that they all had an oral tradition of transmission. The Hebrew Bible was transmitted in an oral reading tradition and a written tradition concurrently. The transcriptions represent in Arabic characters the oral tradition. This is demonstrated by the fact that where the oral tradition differs from the written tradition of the Bible, i.e. where the qere differs from the ketib, the transcriptions correspond to the qere. The model manuscripts of the Bible in Hebrew script preserved the written tradition. There are recent studies that have presented evidence that Jewish liturgy and rabbinic texts relied on an oral tradition of transmission until the early Middle Ages.16

16 See the contribution of S. C. Reif to this volume.
No doubt another factor that led the Karaites to introduce such a radical change to the writing of Bible manuscripts was their sectarian opposition to mainstream Rabbanite Judaism. In several places in the Karaite sources there are allusions to the unreliability of the written tradition of the Hebrew Bible at the hands of Rabbanite scribes.\(^{17}\)

One can find several typological parallels between the aforementioned features of medieval Karaite Bible manuscripts and the Bible manuscripts of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Dead Sea Scrolls emanated from a sectarian Jewish community who had broken away from mainstream Judaism and lived in a cenobitical community in Qumran. The Bible manuscripts exhibit various types of orthography. Some manuscripts have an orthography which is very close to that of the model medieval biblical manuscripts. Others have either a more defective or a more full orthography than the standard so called ‘Masoretic’ orthography. The fact that the official orthography of the biblical text was already fixed explains why at least some of the Qumran biblical texts conform more or less to the standard orthography with its mixture of defective and full forms. It is relevant to note that biblical texts found in Wadi Murabba’at in the Judaean Desert datable to a period only slightly later than that in which the Qumran manuscripts were produced all conform closely to the standard orthography. Why were biblical manuscripts with non-standard orthography written in the Qumran community? The circles from which the Wadi Murabba’at texts came were loyal to pharisaic Judaism and were likely to follow the orthography of the biblical text which the authorities had fixed. The Qumran community, on the other hand, were hostile to the pharisaic authorities under whose auspices the orthography was fixed. It is, therefore, not surprising that their observance of this standard was no more than half-hearted. One should also note Kutscher’s suggestion\(^{18}\) that the texts with conspicuously full orthography such as IQIsa\(^{\text{d}}\) may have been popular texts. The expanded orthography was probably intended to guide the reader in private study with regard to the vocalism of the text.

Our letter attests to the existence of an authoritative copy of a work by Yeshu’ah ben Yehudah that acted as a model for copyists (al-nash al-mu’awwal...‘alā ‘itimāmihi).

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\(^{17}\) For references see my article in *Israel Oriental Studies*, xii, 172–6, and also Khan, ‘Al-Qirqisani’s opinions concerning the text of the Bible and parallel Muslim attitudes towards the text of the Qur’an’, *Jewish Quarterly Review*, lxxxi (1990), 61–73.

We have references to model manuscripts of the works of other medieval Jewish authors. For instance, a manuscript of Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* (Bodleian, MS Huntington 80 [catalogue no. 577]) contains a ratification by the author stating that it was 'corrected against my book'. We know that Maimonides frequently revised and corrected the autograph authoritative copies of his works.  

The Genizah letter provides further evidence for the view that the medieval Karaites were equally at home in both Arabic and Hebrew script. There are grounds for believing that the use of Arabic script for Arabic was motivated by sectarian opposition to the Rabbanites rather than by a greater absorption into Islamic culture than the Rabbanite Jews, who regularly wrote Arabic in Hebrew characters. We have seen that the Karaites were constrained in their divergence from Rabbanite practice regarding the production of manuscripts in Hebrew. Their writing of Hebrew in Arabic script was restricted to the representation of a Hebrew oral tradition in private manuscripts. It appears that a similar restraint on deviation from Rabbanite practice did not apply to the production of manuscripts of Karaite Arabic works. The Genizah letter demonstrates that private copies of Karaite Arabic works were written in either Arabic or Hebrew script. We learn about the script of model manuscripts from a publication of the Russian scholar A. Ya. Borisov, who discovered in the Firkovitch collections a number of autograph manuscripts of the Karaite author Aḥī ibn Sulaymān. The colophons of some of these indicate that the author copied them for himself. It can be assumed that an autograph copy by the author for himself would have served as an authoritative copy. One of these manuscripts (Firkovitch II Hebrew-Arabic 1/4419) is in Hebrew script and the others are in Arabic script. Here, then, we have an instance of an author keeping personal copies of his own work in both Arabic and Hebrew script, presumably to be used as exemplars for copies in either script according to demand.

19 See C. Sirat, 'La composition et l'édition des textes philosophiques juifs au moyen âge: quelques exemples', *Bulletin de Philosophie Médiévale*, xxx (1988), 224–32. For further discussion of authoritative copies of medieval Hebrew works see the contributions of I. Ta-Shma and M. Beit-Arié to this volume.

20 See my article in *Israel Oriental Studies* (note 10).

21 *Palestinskii Sbornik* II (note 14), 109–14.