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From Scripturalism to the ‘Chain of Tradition’: Between Rabbanite and Karaite Judaism [†]

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Abstract: This article focuses on the controversy and theological polemics advanced by the Jewish-Karaite movement against one of the central concepts of mainstream Rabbinic Judaism—the Oral Torah and the legitimacy of its transmission (“Chain of Tradition”). This process passed through a series of formative stages of Karaism: from radical scripturalism fundamentally rejecting any transmitted tradition to the gradual development of alternative “authentic” Chain of Tradition, adjusting its principles to vital social and intellectual needs. This case of intra-confessional Judaic debate is presented here in the wider context of comparative religious phenomena. In fact, this paradigm present in different forms in the other Abrahamic religions can be viewed as a search for balance between the oral and written traditions. In spite of numerous differences between religions, this paradigm explains to some extent the similarity in arguments of the intra-confessional polemics in Abrahamic religions, as well as the similarity in the argumentation of Muslim, Christian, and Karaite polemicists against the Talmud.

Keywords: the ‘Chain of Tradition’; scripturalism; Karaism; Christianity; Islam; religious polemics



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1. Introduction

One of the central issues in every religion is transmission of tradition—its history, principles of faith, and practices. This transmission finds its expression in textual practices that rely to varying degrees on an oral or written tradition, and is in the hands of specific social groups, or only of selected members in these groups, in accordance with gender, age, social status, and other criteria. Another principal issue that has often been a point of contention between various sects¹ and currents within monotheistic religions is the question of balance between the written and oral tradition, and even of the very legitimacy of the latter.

Judaism attaches great importance to memory, and this finds its expression in Bible verses.² In addition, Judaism has included an oral transmission of tradition from its early stages (Neusner 2004; Yerushalmi 1982, pp. 5–25). It sees the study of the Torah (meaning “teaching” or “instruction”, and by extension the “Law”, which exposes the expressed will of God), both Written and Oral, as compulsory for every male over five years of age. Therefore, Jewish communities have always been distinguished by a relatively high level of mass literacy in comparison with their neighbors, especially in medieval Europe.

One of the central concepts regarding the transmission of religious heritage in Judaism is the Chain of Tradition (*shalshelet ha-qabbalah*, Hebrew)³—the unbroken chain of transmission of the Torah through the succession of rabbinic scholars from its initial reception by Moses at Mount Sinai (Exod. 19–20) up to contemporary times. There is a need to emphasize here that the very concept of the Torah in Rabbinic Judaism covers not only the “written Torah” (i.e., the Hebrew Bible, although there is a discussion in the sources concerning which books Moses received on Mount Sinai), but also the oral tradition (Schorsch 1998). According to the Rabbinic view, the Torah’s most prominent commandments and concepts require further explanation, with its text possessing extended meaning, including also what

is called the “Oral Torah” (or Oral Law): exegesis, principles of faith, and the interpretations of sages about the Torah’s literal meaning, concepts, and laws, which are not explicitly expressed in the text of the Hebrew Bible. All these, according to the Rabbinic perception, were originally given to Moses at Mount Sinai, and from Moses were transmitted to the Sages, and so forth continuously from one generation to the next.⁴

Unlike Jewish, Christian, and Muslim common consensus about Moses receiving the Torah on Mount Sinai from God, the concept of Oral Torah (Jaffee 2001) was frequently attacked inside and outside of Judaism, by Judaic sects and currents as well as by other Abrahamic religions, and its Chain of Tradition was frequently defined as a human falsification. In some cases, the Oral Torah received additional, and even different, interpretations with a complementary Chain of Tradition, among various currents in Judaism. The most ancient opponents of Jewish oral, and even biblical tradition, were Samaritans.⁵ This was also the case in medieval and modern times, with the Karaite, Sabbatian, and Hasidic movements. These alternative or complimentary chains could include a specific tradition; for instance, the chain of Kabbalistic tradition, or the tradition transmitted by the Karaite priests, or by the dynasties of some Hasidic rabbis. The processes of emergence of oral traditions and their transmission, similar in some degree to those present in Judaism, also occurred in Islam and Christianity, and were the subject of intra-confessional controversy and polemics in these religions.

The aim of this article is to focus on the fundamental controversy over the concept of the Oral Torah and its Chain of Tradition between mainstream Rabbanite Judaism and the Karaite movement (which emerged as a total rejection of the transmitted tradition), and to trace the main argumentation of both sides. In spite of the specific traits of the Karaite case, which will be presented here, we see this case of an intra-Judaic controversy in the wider context of comparative religious phenomena, as a paradigm common to various religions—the search for a balance between oral and written traditions. We suggest that this phenomenon usually includes, on the one hand, attempts to substantiate the divine source of the oral tradition as a part of the major canonical written text and, on the other hand, radical scripturalism, which emerges as a reaction to the growing influence of the oral tradition, its authorities and institutions. In practice, radical scripturalism, which totally rejects a transmitted tradition as alien to the major canonical text, eventually gives way to the creation of a new chain of tradition.

2. The Chain of Tradition and Its Theological Function

The Oral Torah, which was transmitted from teacher to disciple from ancient times, was forbidden to be written down during the Second Temple period (from 516 BCE to 70 CE). However, the Temple destruction by the Romans in 70 CE, and the subsequent upheaval and persecutions of the Jewish population in the Land of Israel, raised the necessity of transforming the Oral Law into a written text, as explained in the epistle of the tenth-century Babylonian sage, Sherira Ga’on (Rabinowich 1988, pp. 28–29; Grayzel 1968, p. 193). The Mishnah (study by repetition, compiled by the Tannaim), based on the teachings of the Pharisees, was the first major written collection of Jewish oral traditions and laws, which was edited, according to tradition, by the patriarch Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Nassi (the Prince) around the year 200 CE. The Mishnah was subsequently followed by a vast collection of commentaries—the Talmud (“learning”, “study”), being compiled by the Amoraim.⁶ It was then distributed by the Ge’onim—the Jewish scholars and heads of the Palestinian and Babylonian⁷ academies from the third to the seventh-century. The period of the Geonim in Babylonia (from the sixth to the early eleventh-century) saw the spiritual and political center for the major Jewish Diaspora under Islamic rule and the cultural influence of Islam from the Iberian peninsula to the Iranian plains. This was a formative period for Judaism, which adopted and developed the medium of the Oral Torah along with building its institutions (Brody 1998). This period saw the emergence of numerous Judaic currents, mostly rejecting the Oral Torah.

The literary genre focusing on this concept of a “Chain of Tradition” took shape in this period against the background of polemics advanced by Jewish movements, especially the Karaites, as well as by Christians and Muslims, who claimed that the Oral Law (the Mishnah and the Talmud) was not of divine provenance, but of human origin. Therefore, among the factors that gave rise to the works of this genre was the need to refer to earlier scholars in delivering legal decisions and the necessity of a firm basis for defense against the customary Muslim accusations alleging forgery of the Jewish Scriptures.⁸

One of the earliest texts in Rabbanite literature belonging to this genre is the introductory pericope of the Mishnah, the tractate *Avot* 1:1 (Ethics of the Fathers): “Moses received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, and Joshua to the Elders, and the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets transmitted it to the Men of the Great Assembly”.⁹ This and other related texts, which are in some ways similar to a historical chronicle, served an important theological purpose: to support unbroken stages of transmission of the Oral Torah, as embedded in the Mishna and Talmud, while emphasizing its historical continuity as received alongside the Written Torah by Moses at Sinai. The Oral Torah was then transmitted from one authoritative figure or institution to another, up to the time of the author (Yerushalmi 1982, pp. 31–32). One of the more prominent works in the Chain of Tradition genre is the *Seder Tannaim va-Amoraim* (Subsequence of Sages of the Mishnah and the Talmud). This anonymous composition gives the names of the individuals identified with the Torah transmission from Moses until close to the period of the Geonim, and includes legal dicta and opinions of Talmudic sages (Brody 1998, pp. 274–77). In the second section of his *Sefer ha-Galuy* (*The Book of Demonstration*), the prominent tenth-century sage, Sa'adya Ga'on, details the chronology of religious law in the Scriptural Era, the Second Temple period, and the Talmudic Era, seeking to demonstrate that the Mishnah and Talmud were orally transmitted throughout these periods without any interruption until being ultimately committed to writing (Harkavy 1891, vol. 5, p. 153).

The genre that developed around the Chain of Tradition was a literary hallmark of the medieval cultural environment in which Jewish and Muslim authors flourished. Already well-attested in early rabbinic literature, it was similar and possibly influenced by the style of writing accepted among Islamic scholars—*ḥadīth musalsal* or *isnad*—in which orally transmitted subjects or laws were enumerated and classified according to proximity to their source (i.e., Muḥammad), with the various stages of transmission (his disciples, the disciples of his disciples, and so forth) given in chronological order.

There are different opinions among scholars concerning the impact of these concepts on Jewish authors. Some of them underscore a similarity in form between *isnād* and the way in which the Talmud describes a given sage as recounting a rule or law on the authority of his predecessor (Horovitz 1917; Gutman 1950, pp. 190–93). According to Michael Cook, conversely “the whole notion of an oral tradition is something which Islam borrowed from Judaism” (Cook 1997, p. 508; Goitein 1955, pp. 59–61).

The Chain of Tradition figured widely in Jewish literary compositions, especially in the medieval Islamic cultural milieu. It was employed in one way or another in the environments where Karaite and Rabbanite authors lived, worked, and polemicized against each other, as well as against Muslims and Christians. A quintessential example of this genre is the work, *Sefer ha-Kabbalah* (*The Book of Tradition*), by the twelfth-century Spanish Jewish scholar, Abraham ibn Da'ud (Cohen 1967). In this work, Ibn Da'ud seeks to bring historical proof that the rabbinic oral tradition was a fulfilment of divine revelation, while the Karaites deviated from this uninterrupted Jewish tradition.

3. Karaism and Its Polemics against the Oral Torah

One of the movements in the Jewish world that rejected the authority of the Oral Torah was the one established by 'Anan ben David in eighth-century Abbasid Baghdad. 'Anan introduced his own legal regulations that he saw as stemming from the Pentateuch. Some principles of his teaching were later adopted by the Karaite movement, which emerged in the late ninth-century, and the figure of 'Anan was retroactively accepted as its founder,

with many of his followers joining the Karaite movement (Ben-Shammai 1993a; Gil 2003). The Karaite rejection of the Oral Torah attracted fierce criticism from the adherents of the Talmud, starting with the above mentioned Sa'adya Ga'on, who was the first recorded polemicist against Karaism (Poznański 1898), and following those polemics the Jewish world split into "Karaites" and "Rabbanites".

The Golden Age of Karaism in Jerusalem extended from the late ninth to the end of the eleventh-century. It came to an end in 1099 when Jerusalem was conquered by the Crusaders, who massacred its population. Karaism also spread to Egypt, Byzantium, North Africa, and during the late thirteenth to fifteenth-century in the Crimean Peninsula and Poland. The Karaite scholars of Jerusalem composed in Arabic a rich exegetical, philosophic, and legal literature, including polemics against the Rabbanites, where the concept of Oral Torah was the central target of criticism. As a result of the rejection of the Rabbinic transmitted tradition, Karaites differentiated themselves from Rabbanite Jews by various religious laws concerning the calendar, diet, incest, burial practices, and others. However, as a result of this rejection, a practical implementation of many of these laws was a matter of fierce debates among Karaite scholars for centuries.

Designating themselves as the "Mourners of Zion"—an ascetic group that observes the laws of mourning in memory of the destroyed Temple—they believed that they were living in the messianic epoch, and called on the Jews of the Diaspora to come to Jerusalem in order to accelerate the redemption (Erder 2003; Astren 2004, p. 270). The Karaite scholar, Daniel al-Qumisi, who relocated from Persia to Jerusalem, declared: "Rise and come to Jerusalem and let us return unto the Lord". He asked the Diaspora communities to send at least five people from each community: "But if you will not come because you are running about in tumult and haste after your merchandise, then [at least] send out five men of every city, together with their sustenance" (Nemoy 1976, p. 78). The leaders of these Karaite "Mourners of Zion" linked the return to the Written Torah and the abandonment of the Talmud with the return to the Land of Israel, viewing both aspects as parts of the messianic process. Perceiving the Talmud as an obstacle to the advent of the messianic redemption, they blamed the Rabbanites, most of whom believed that the return to Jerusalem had to be postponed until the coming of messianic times.

The Karaite rejection of the Talmud and the entire oral tradition, which took place against the background of their messianic aspirations, evinces a strong scripturalist tendency (Ben-Shammai 1993b, pp. 327–30) that became a part of their theological doctrine. This tendency found its expression in quite a strict adherence to a body of Scripture and its literal meaning, as a sole canonical basis of faith and religious law. However, as will be demonstrated further, in practice, over time they gradually deviated from this chosen course, creating their own transmitted tradition.

The scholars of Karaism, from its inception onwards, defined the oral tradition as a false and arbitrary invention of the rabbis, frequently identifying them with the Pharisees of the Second Temple period, in an attempt to strengthen their own authority. For instance, the tenth-century Jerusalemite Karaite sage, Yefet ben 'Eli, in his commentary on Zechariah 5:5–8 writes (see the Hebrew translation from Arabic in the redaction of Meira Polliack):

And in the end of the time of the exile those books which the people claim to have been (derived) from Moses will become obsolete, and no one will follow them. They will go back, rather, to the written Torah, as it is said (Deut. 30:8): "And you shall again obey the voice of the Lord", . . . and no one will turn to the Mishnah nor to the Talmud for they will know they are "a commandment of men learned by rote" (Isaiah 29:13) . . . He said (Zech. 5:8): "This is the wicked one"—and he called her a wicked woman in order to demonstrate that they (=the Rabbanites) are sinners before God. For they composed these (Talmudic) books and compelled the nation to believe in them and to act according to them and condemned to death those who disagreed with them . . . (Polliack 2006, pp. 82–83).

Yefet ben 'Eli expresses here fundamental Karaite views concerning the Rabbanite oral tradition. He perceives it as a false manmade teaching and views its creation and

existence as a sin before God. Yefet believes that the people will eventually abandon it, ushering in the messianic times. In addition, he expresses the scripturalist expectation that the people will return exclusively to the Written Torah. The word “return” in Hebrew (*shav*) has the same root as the word “repentance” (*teshuva*), and frequently appears in Karaite sources. These sources follow the Biblical pattern, which appears especially in the prophetic books: the prophets’ exhortation to return, invoking their allegory of a wicked adulterous woman as an image of Israel that has betrayed God (Ben-Shammai 1993b, pp. 319–20). Yefet, however, aims this allegory at the Rabbanites, who, according to the Karaite view, have betrayed God by creating an alternative, false Torah.

M. Polliack underscores that the Karaite conception of the innate falsity of the Oral Torah is inextricable from their ideological attempt to explain the plight and exile of the Jewish people, with its rejection enabling a spiritual uplift from a perpetual state of sin (Polliack 2006, p. 84).

The Karaite author, Jacob al-Qirqisānī, in his book, *Kitab al-Anwar wa-l-Maraqib* (The Book of the Watchers and the Book of the Luminaries), written in Arabic in 937, attributes the “Rabbanite heresy” already to the First Temple period, as resulting from the rift between the competing kingdoms of Judah and Israel. According to the Bible (Kings I, 11:26; Chronicles II, 9:29; 13:22), Jeroboam son of Nebat (reigned in the first decades of the tenth-century BCE) led 10 of the 12 Tribes of Israel into secession, under the reign of Solomon’s son Rehoboam, thus splitting Solomon’s domain into the kingdom of Judah and that of Israel. Becoming king of Israel, Jeroboam began to spread heresies and to make changes in the commandments of the Torah. According to al-Qirqisānī’s anachronistic claim, as a result of Jeroboam’s deeds, numerous heretic sects deviated from the “true” Judaism, among them the Rabbanites, Samaritans, Sadducees, and Boethusians, while the Karaites in these times remained loyal to the dynasty of David (Chiesa and Lockwood 1984, pp. 95–102). In fact, this episode occurred some 1800 years before the actual Karaite–Rabbanite split.

A later Karaite author, Caleb Afendopolo (d. 1509) from Istanbul, criticizes in his book *Ten Sayings*, the Rabbanite approach of applying principles of deduction to the Pentateuch and of viewing the results of such deductions as authentically representing the Torah. In addition, Afendopolo raises an anti-Rabbanite argument quite common among the Karaites that was intended to demonstrate the manmade nature of the oral tradition: “If this tradition of theirs was true, why would there be division among those who received it, one saying this and another saying that?” (Afendopolo 2000, pp. 13–15).

4. The Karaite Alternative “Chain of Tradition”

H. Ben-Shammai, in his discussion of the nature of the Karaite scripturalism, underscores that although the scripturalist standpoint of ‘Anan ben David was expressed in his total rejection of the Talmud, he created his own legal tradition in his *Book of Laws*, written in Aramaic, calling his adherents to “Search well in the Torah and do not rely on my opinion” and encouraging individual commenting on the Torah. However, the scripturalism that appeared in the early Karaite movement itself about 150 years after ‘Anan (in the middle of the ninth-century) had a different tendency (Ben-Shammai 1993b, pp. 327–28). Behind the Karaite appeals to return to the Law of Moses stands the belief that Scripture has only one single correct meaning, which may be hidden but is to be revealed at some stage. Thus, the Karaites rejected the very principle of a transmitted tradition, including one originating in individual exegesis or even the existence of different opinions—a view similar to that of the Essenes in the Second Temple period (Ben-Shammai 1993b, p. 329).

This view was quite different from the medieval Rabbanite approach proclaiming that “the Torah has 70 faces”—a statement initially appearing in *Bamidbar Rabbah*, the undated medieval collection of commentaries on the book of Numbers (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 13:15). The typological number 70, which happens to be the alpha-numeric code (Gematria) for the Hebrew word “multiplicity”, is used to reinforce the notion that plurality of opinions and interpretations of the Scripture is legitimate, and, as such, viewing the Oral Torah as an opened medium for creativity, without reducing it to the sole “correct” official opinion.

However, this strict Karaite perception of the existence of a single correct meaning of the text of the Scripture underwent a transformation through the late Middle Ages, becoming more versatile and less binding under the influence of the growing Rabbanite exegetical and philosophical literature. For instance, the later Byzantine Karaite exegete and philosopher, Aaron ben Joseph (c. 1250–1320), who widely quotes in his exegetical book, *Sefer ha-Mivhar* (*The Book of the Chosen*), numerous Rabbinic sources and opinions to support his interpretation of the Scripture, openly discusses the importance of the multiplicity of exegetical possibilities (Aaron ben Joseph 1835, 10r). We can see a noticeable influence on Aaron ben Joseph of numerous Rabbanite scholars, whom he quotes, and especially of the interpretive approach and literary style of the Spanish Rabbinic exegete and philosopher, Abraham Ibn Ezra's (c. 1092–1167) Torah commentary *Sefer ha-Yashar* (Book of the Upright One) (Frank 1990, pp. 100–2).

As the text of Scripture does not always explain or clarify itself in cases of ambiguities, terms or concrete details of legal precepts, and requires responses, the Karaite scholars were forced to seek creative ways to cope with this challenge, gradually developing their own Chain of Tradition.

As a parallel to the abovementioned tractate *Avot* of the Mishnah, tracing the Torah transmission from Moses onwards, Karaite authors, starting with the abovementioned passage of al-Qirqisānī, began to construct a continuous line of Karaite tradition. Such is the case of the *Sefer ha-Miṣvot* (The Book of Commandments), a polemical text against the Rabbanite Chain of Tradition, written in Arabic by the fourteenth-century Cairene Karaite author, Yefet ben Ṣa'ir the Physician (Chiesa and Goldstein 2016). In this book, which utilizes many arguments of al-Qirqisānī, a description of the stages by which the “authentic” Torah was transmitted by two Karaite chains of tradition—one of priestly Karaite figures and the other of princes (*nesi'im*)—stretching from Moses to 'Anan ben David is presented, an a-historical tracing of Karaism back to the Second Temple period. Yefet ben Ṣa'ir seeks to deconstruct the very concept of an Oral Torah, though creating at the same time a Karaite “true” Chain of Tradition.

The Chain of Tradition gradually developed by Karaites included certain rabbinic laws, although not as valid components of the Oral Law as transmitted by the Rabbanites, but as tools for clarifying prescriptions indicated in the text of the Hebrew Bible, and reinforced by custom and tradition—what Karaites called “the yoke of inheritance” (*sevel ha-yerushah*) or “the concatenated transmission” (*ha atakah mishtalshet*). This last concept includes laws, exegesis, and items of any other sort identified with the Karaite faith or tradition, which had been ostensibly transmitted continuously from one generation to the next, but not explicitly written in the Torah. The traditions regarding the schism between the Karaites and Rabbanites were also viewed by the Karaites as belonging to their Chain of Tradition, and were cited by Karaite authors in their rebuttal of the “false tradition” of the Rabbanites.

Karaite scholars defined a number of principles of scriptural interpretation, which enabled them, among others, to develop their own transmitted tradition and make legal decisions on its basis. They introduced additional hermeneutical principles for the derivation of the literal meaning of the biblical text (*peshat*) and of the conclusions derived from Scripture by logical analogy (*hekkesh*)—these two last concepts being also common in the Rabbanite tradition. Among the Karaite additional principles were the use of knowledge based on human reason and intelligence (*hokhmat ha-da'at*, in Arabic *'aql*), and of the consensus of the community (*edah*, *kibbus*, in Arabic—*ijma'*) concerning certain elements of the oral tradition—both principles borrowed from Islam (Cohen 1967, pp. xlv–xlvi).

The Karaite Chain of Tradition continued to develop during the following centuries, with a selective approach towards Rabbanite Judaism, utilizing in some cases the opinions of given Rabbinic authorities to enhance the validity of the Karaite arguments, and rejecting or ignoring in other cases claims by these same authorities if they contradicted the Karaite standpoint. The crucial point in the Karaite development of an alternative transmitted tradition was the reforms of the Karaite sage, Elijah Bashyatchi (c. 1420–1490) of Istanbul

(Lasker 2008, pp. 96–125), a disciple of prominent Rabbanite scholars of his time. Bashyatchi enumerated his moderate legal decisions in his law code, *'Adderet Eliyahu* (The Cloak of Elijah), concerning issues that were still the subject of debate among Karaite scholars, such as the laws of incest, ritual slaughter, lighting Sabbath lamps, establishing the calendar, and more. Bashyatchi follows in his legal decisions to a large extent Rabbanite practice and tradition, widely quoting their opinions, especially those of Maimonides (Moses ben Maimon or Rambam, 1138–1204), whose views strongly influenced Bashyatchi also in the sphere of philosophy. However, Bashyatchi's reforms, which aimed at bringing the Karaite legal practice to consistency, caused a strict controversy among the scholars and did not put an end to their debates through the ages.

5. The Karaite Criticism of the Oral Torah—Between Islam and Christianity

The Karaite criticism and polemical arguments against the Oral Torah, in spite of fundamental differences, have a number of parallels in Islam and Christianity. These religions, which accept to different degrees the divine roots of the Written Torah (*Tawrāt*; Old Testament), polemicize in various ways against the Oral Torah. This similarity raises the question of the influence of these religions' arguments on Karaism, or conversely of a possible Karaite influence on their polemics against the Talmud.

The influence of Islamic concepts, some of which have been mentioned above, on early Karaism is accepted by numerous scholars (Adang 2003; Lasker 1989; Cohen 1967). Islam has its own transmitted tradition (Lazarus-Yafeh 1975, pp. 156–76), the *ḥadīth*, which, however, occupies in the hierarchy of its religious texts a more limited place relative to the Quran (Polliack 2015, p. 248/9, n. 9) than the Talmud in Judaism occupies relative to the Written Torah. The *ḥadīth* has been at the center of debates in Islam concerning its validity, especially between the Sunni and Shi'ite denominations (Cook 1997). Its criticism emerges against the background of growth in the number of *ḥadīth* with each generation, and numerous contradictions in *ḥadīth* literature. There is an attempt among scholars to compare Shi'ism and Karaism (especially the use by Karaites of interpretive terminology, a typical principle of Shi'ite Qur'anic exegesis), or to find an influence of the former on the latter, especially concerning messianic concepts (Erder 2018). However, Muslim scholars, for whom the concept of transmitted tradition was not alien, focused their anti-Judaic polemics on the texts of the *Tawrāt*, charging the Jews (as well as Christians) with *tahrīf*—falsification of their scriptures, expunging references to the advent of Muhammad, and misrepresenting their contents (Perelman 1974; Goldziher 1872). Muslim authors viewed the Written Torah and its Jewish Rabbanite interpretation as a collection of falsified texts, attributing the initial forgery to Ezra the Scribe (Boušek 2012, pp. 292–93, 299–300), who was accused of having altered the original version of the Written Torah, introducing blasphemous assertions about some Biblical figures as well as anthropomorphic tendencies. Such a view was also common among Karaite scholars but with some divergences: Ezra the Scribe, for instance, was perceived as a true Karaite by the Byzantine eleventh-century author Elijah ben Abraham (Akhiezer 2018, p. 30).

In contrast, the Oral Torah (Mishnah and Talmud) played quite a marginal role in Islamic polemics. Even so, in addition to criticisms of Jewish interpretations of Scripture, that were in fact a polemic against the Oral Torah (Bar-Asher 2019, pp. 93–97), a limited number of Muslim writings directly criticized “al-Mishna” and “al-Talmud”. Among them were the writings of Ibn Ḥazm, Samaw'al al-Maghribī, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, al-Maqdīsī, and al-Maqrīzī (Boušek 2012).

One of the points shared between Muslims and Karaites in their polemics against the Oral Torah was their fierce critique of anthropomorphisms (*tajsīm*) appearing in various Rabbanite texts, including kabbalistic ones. This was a common issue especially among Karaite scholars, who strictly abstained from any use of anthropomorphic images or traits of God in their writings. In addition to their fierce attacks on the use of anthropomorphic concepts in the Rabbinic literature, the Karaite translations of the Bible into Arabic evince a special tendency: inventing creative ways of translation of “problematic” (anthropomor-

phic) Biblical expressions,¹⁰ avoiding translating them literally (Zawanowska 2016). Such critiques of the Karaite scholars can be found, for instance, in the writings of Yefet ben Eli (Vajda 1982), as well as in al-Qirqisānī's legal code "The Book of Lights", where he cites rabbinic representations of God (Chiesa and Lockwood 1984, pp. 124–25). Al-Qirqisānī's younger contemporary, Salmon ben Yeruḥam, devotes four chapters in his polemical work, *Milhamot ha-Shem* (Wars of the Lord), to anthropomorphism in the Talmud and in other rabbinic sources, especially in the kabbalistic genre, *Shi'ur Qomah* (the Measures of the Divine Body) (Davidson 1934). The same criticism of corporeal representations of God appears in Muslim sources, such as al-Mas'udī's universal history, and Ibn Ḥazm. The latter devotes a significant part of his anti-Judaic polemic to this issue, providing numerous anthropomorphic stories from rabbinic writings, though mostly without referring to the sources. One of these, for instance, is a narrative of God weeping about the destruction of the Temple and expressing remorse for exiling the Jewish people from the Land of Israel (appearing in the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Berakhot, 7a). Ibn Ḥazm erroneously identifies a fragment from the *Shi'ur Qomah* genre with the Talmud: "... The book says that the length of the Creator's forehead, measured from its upper part to its nose, is 5000 cubits. God forbids that we should ascribe form, size, limits, and boundaries to him!" (Boušek 2012, pp. 295–96).

Some Muslim authors make a distinction between Karaites and Rabbanites, although their accounts are usually quite superficial. They are aware that the Karaites reject the oral tradition, and like Muslims fix their calendar on the basis of lunar observation, and even express some level of sympathy with the Karaites when this matches their polemical agenda (Adang 2003, p. 195). Samaw'al al-Maghribī expressed this distinction in favor of the Karaites claiming that they are "free from the absurdities of the Rabbanite legists", making the further questionable assertion that they are, thus, "better prepared to embrace Islam" (Boušek 2012, p. 302).

The Christian anti-Judaic polemics, which at their early stages were also directed against Jewish interpretation of the Scripture, focused from the thirteenth-century onwards on the criticism of the Mishnah and the Talmud (Funkenstein 1971). The main arguments of these polemics were the claims that the Jews had neglected the divine Hebrew Bible in favor of later invented false texts. This criticism reflects a tendency, especially common among Dominican polemicists, to prove that the Talmud was a harmful book, full of superstitions, blasphemy against Jesus and Christianity, and anthropomorphic images of God. In addition, one of their polemical arguments was that the Talmud causes a "spiritual blindness" among the Jews preventing them from recognizing the "Christian Truth". This can be seen, for instance, in the classic work of the Dominican missionary Raymundus Martini (1220–1284), *Pugio Fidei*, written in 1278 (Martini 1651). Citations from the Talmud, both real or falsified by the Christian polemicists, were used by them during public disputations, such as those of Barcelona in 1263 and Tortosa in 1413/4 (Limor 2010; Cohen 1982).

The later Christian anti-Talmudic polemics even took on an intra-confessional character following the emergence of Protestantism. Protestants equated their own controversy with Catholics with the Rabbanite–Karaite schism. They perceived Karaites as "Proto-Protestants", adherents to a movement that rejected the obsolete and false oral tradition and returned to Scripture as the sole legitimate source of authority, therefore, readying them to be the first Jews to convert to Christianity. Protestants saw Karaism as an enlightened movement of rational principles, as the antithesis of the dogmatism, irrationality, and superstition of the Pharisees (Rabbanites), the Talmud being compared by Protestants to the late and false apostolic tradition of the Catholic Church (van den Berg 1988; Akhiezer 2018, pp. 107–18). Among seventeenth-century European Protestants and some Catholics, the word "Karaite" became a synonym for "Protestant", while "Rabbanite" (or "Pharisee") became synonymous with "Catholic" (Kaplan 1987, p. 307).

The anthropomorphisms in Rabbanite literature were also one of the targets attacked by Christian polemicists, such as the twelfth-century Spanish Jewish convert, Petrus Alfonsi. They frequently used in their writings the same examples from Rabbinic literature, such as

the abovementioned kabbalistic concepts or anthropomorphic stories, which were attacked by Karaite and Muslim polemicists (Cohen 1967, p. xlv; Resnick 2006; Lasker 1993). In parallel to the case of the Karaites in Islamic lands, there is an ongoing scholarly debate as to whether Christians used Karaite arguments against Rabbinic Judaism in their own polemic against the concept of the Oral Torah, or whether the Karaites borrowed some Christian arguments in their anti-Rabbanite polemics.

As we can see, in spite of numerous distinctions between the monotheistic religions, the very concept of oral tradition, as well as the polemics around its legitimacy and the ways of its transmission, is a common phenomenon. In Islam, we find a controversy between Shiites and Sunnis, as well as between various schools of Islamic thought inside these denominations on the authenticity of the Sunni oral tradition, and an absence of full consensus between the confessions concerning the authenticity of the entire corpus of the *ḥadith*. In early Islam, this criticism found its expression in total rejection of the *ḥadith*, or some cases of a selective approach following defined criteria (Abu-Alabbas 2017; Hansu 2016). The Christian controversy between Catholics and Protestants also includes polemics between adherence to the existing transmitted tradition and a quite radical scripturalism. On the one hand, a shared use across religious boundaries of polemical arguments against the Oral Torah was quite possible in specific cases, due to the fact that Karaites, Muslims, and Christians (especially through the mediation of converts) read each other's polemical texts (Robinson 2012, pp. 80–81). On the other hand, we can perceive a continuous tendency among the Abrahamic religions and confessions to look for a balance between the written and oral tradition, as well a similar argumentation in their polemics against the oral transmitted tradition. The Muslim and Christian position on the controversy about the Oral Torah in Judaism reflected to some extent their inter-confessional polemical discourse concerning their own transmitted tradition. It was mainly defined through the use of terms that were a part of their own conceptual world.

The rabbi, exegete, kabbalist, and philosopher Elijah Benamozegh (1823–1900) from Livorno, in his apology of the Rabbinic oral tradition, which he presents in the wider context of the paths of transmission of traditions, claims that all European cultures, from the Hellenistic period and early Christianity, developed initially as an oral transmitted tradition. He sees in such a tradition a basis and universal form, which enables the stable retention of human knowledge, which is a condition for science and progress (Benamozegh 2020, p. 14).

6. Conclusions

The Karaite case is a striking example of the fight against the legitimacy of the Rabbinic Oral Torah and the ways of its transmission. Emerging in the early phases of the Karaite movement, this process reached its peak in the phenomenon of radical scripturalism, fundamentally rejecting any transmitted tradition, while the further development of Karaism resulted in creating its own, alternative, “authentic” Chain of Tradition. The Karaite case reflects a paradigm common to other Abrahamic religions, that, in spite of numerous differences, passed through similar formative stages. This paradigm includes an emergence of opponents who express their total or partial rejection of the oral tradition of the mainstream religion, and who claim their strict adherence to the Divine canonical text received by revelation. They conduct polemics against the authenticity of the oral tradition and its transmission, focusing on a scriptural approach. This is followed by further abandonment, in practice, of this strict scripturalism, as these opponents adjust their teaching to vital social and intellectual needs, while keeping the original principle of their total devotion to the Scripture as an ideal. This process reflects to a large extent the search for a balance in the tension between keeping an immutable canonical text and the creative dynamics of a tradition in every generation.

In spite of fundamental distinctions between Abrahamic religions, this paradigm explains to some extent the similarity between their arguments of intra-confessional polemics,

as well as the similarity of argumentation of Muslim, Christian and Karaite polemicists against the Talmud.

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Notes

- ¹ An identification of the Karaites as a sect, common in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries scholarly literature, concerns to a large extent the relationship between the mainstream religion, on one hand, and schism, on the other. This bisection is rooted in the Christian perception and expressed in the contrasting typology of Church and sect (Troeltsch 1931). The various aspects of a sect (which cannot be discussed in the frame of the present article) have been analysed by a wide range of studies in recent decades, and the concept has undergone a revision resulting in the revelation of additional dimensions within it (Akhiezer 2018, pp. 14–15; Cohen 1989, pp. 124–27; Stock 1983; Rustow 2007). The Karaites themselves notably employed the phrases “sect of the Karaites” (*Kat ha-Qara'im*) and “sect of the Rabbanites” (*Kat ha-Rabbanim*), using the term neutrally to denote a group or stream. Due to the complexity and polysemy of the term “sect”, it is common today among scholars to use the terms “movement”, “community”, “stream”, and “current” (Ben-Shammai 2003, p. 22), in accordance with the context, and we follow this tendency.
- ² See, for instance: “Remember the days of old, consider the years of ages past” (Deut 32:7), or “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there” (Deut 24:18).
- ³ *Kabbalah/qabbalah*—the transmitted tradition of any kind in Judaism (the meaning of its root q'b'l' in Hebrew is to receive).
- ⁴ Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, known as Rashi, an important eleventh-century French Jewish exegete, interprets the words of God to Moses in the passage from Exodus 34:27 as follows: “Write down these commandments, for in accordance with these commandments I make a covenant with you and with Israel” as an indication of the Oral Torah as being a foundation of Judaism. Rashi writes in his comment: “But you are not permitted to write down the Oral Torah . . . ” Rashi’s notion is that God also transmitted other commandments to be preserved in an oral form, and that this verse alludes to the existence of two Torahs—the Written and the Oral—both the legacy of Mount Sinai.
- ⁵ Samaritans’ arguments in this controversy and their own biblical and legal tradition deserves a separate study. See (Bóid 1989).
- ⁶ The “speaker”, or “interpreter” (Aramaic). Generally, the term Amora was applied in the Land of Israel as well as in Babylonia to the teachers that flourished during a period from about 200 to 600 CE. The activity of the Amoraim was devoted primarily to expounding upon the Oral Law (the Mishnah). The Jerusalem Talmud was compiled in the Land of Israel from the third to the sixth-century CE, while the compilation of the Babylonian Talmud occurred from the fifth up to the seventh-century.
- ⁷ This region included the territories of contemporary Iraq, Iran and parts of Central Asia.
- ⁸ On scripture as general category across religions see (Graham 1993).
- ⁹ Men of the Great Assembly (*Anshei Knesset Ha-gdolah*), a counsel of sages established according to the tradition by Ezra the Scribe (after returning to Jerusalem from the Babylonian exile in 539 BCE), the greatest scholarly assembly which counted 71 sages, who were responsible for passing judgments, served as a legislative and administrative council, issued religious enactments and maintained and classified Jewish oral law.
- ¹⁰ See, for instance “God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm” (Deut 5:15); “The eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous and his ears toward their cry” (Psalm 34:15).

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