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Masorettes and Translators – Karaites and Czech Brethren

Stanislav Segert

This article was written as Mr. Simeon Szyszman asked for a contribution to *Bulletin d'Études Karaites* which he was publishing in Paris. After Mr. Szyszman became seriously ill, this valuable journal ceased its publication.

The author of this article is very grateful for the opportunity to publish it in *Religio*. This short article may be considered a modest commemoration of Simeon Szyszman, who devoted most of his life to preserving and reviving the precious heritage of his Karaite community.

A comparison between Karaites and Protestants goes back to the 16th century. In religious polemics the Catholics reprimanded the adherents of the Reformation for their exclusive reliance to the Bible and their rejection of the tradition by comparing them with the Karaites.¹

In this short article, the Karaites are compared to one branch of Reformation Christianity, the Czech Brethren. Both these communities were relatively small. Their strength was based on the devotion to the Bible as rule for the community and for the life of the individual. This devotion led them to provide the best available biblical text. Karaite Masorettes produced the most reliable text of the Hebrew Bible, Czech Brethren cared about an appropriate translation of the Bible. The results of these efforts were eventually accepted by the majorities. Rabbanite Jews have accepted the Masoretic text of the Ben Asher school as authoritative. Roman Catholics, while rejecting and even destroying Czech Bibles produced by Brethren, used their translation as the basis for their Bible editions.

Some observations concerning parallel efforts of the minority religious communities to provide better biblical texts, and reactions of sometimes not

1 A. L. Sachar, *A History of the Jews*, New York 1940, 164; A. Zajaczkowski, *Karaims in Poland*, Warszawa (La Haye) – Paris 1961, 25-26, 78; H. H. Ben-Sasson, "The Middle Ages", in: H. H. Ben-Sasson (ed.), *A History of the Jewish People*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1976, 714.

friendly majorities to their work may be helpful in the ongoing discussion on the adherence of the Ben Asher family of Tiberias Masoretes to Karaism.²

Observations on structural similarities between two unrelated religious communities may throw some light on features which otherwise would not be so apparent.³ Such observations do not replace thorough and exact analysis of direct sources, such as colophons of Bible manuscripts, Masoretic treatises and accompanying poems.⁴ For his purpose the present author relies especially on information from the medieval sources, those in their original wording and even those intentionally changed in order to conceal references to the origin and purpose.⁵

Some analogies between Karaites and Czech Brethren based on their respect to the Bible as the unique norm may deserve attention. Their efforts for establishing the most reliable text of the Bible to be used by their communities can be considered as central. Providing the most reliable Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible, with vowels, accents and notes, or publication of a translation of a Bible based on its original languages, required concentrated efforts of relatively small communities. The results were not meant for the exclusive use of these communities, but were open to adherents of other

- 2 Pro: P. Kahle, *The Cairo Geniza*, Oxford² 1959, 75-86, 91-118; P. Kahle, *Der hebräische Text seit Franz Delitzsch*, Stuttgart 1961, 51-54, 59-88; N. Wieder, "The Qumran Sectaries and the Karaites", *Jewish Quarterly Review* 47, 1956/57, 108-109; N. Wieder, *The Judean Scrolls and Karaism*, London 1962, 59, 89-92; Z. Ben-Hayyim, "Ben Asher, Aaron ben Moses", in: *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 4, Jerusalem, 465; I. Yeivin, "The Vocalization of Qere-Kethiv in A", *Textus* 2, 1962, 148; I. Yeivin, "MS Leningrad L² [Hebr.]", *Textus* 10, 1982, Hebr. 52, 135; S. Szyszman, „La famille des massorettes karaites Ben Asher et le Codex Alepensis“, *Revue Biblique* 73, 1966; S. Szyszman, *Le Karaïsme: Ses doctrines et son histoire*, Lausanne 1980, (Bibliotheca Karaitica, A, 1), 50, 145, n. 23, 170-174; E. Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament* (E. F. Rhodes, tr.), Grand Rapids, Michigan 1979, p. 24, esp. n. 28. – Alleged Karaism: cf. M. H. Goshen-Gottstein, "The Authenticity of the Aleppo Codex", *Textus* 1, 1960, 36-37, 46; cf. D. S. Loewinger, "The Aleppo Codex and the Ben Asher Tradition", *Textus* 1, 1960, 88-92. – Contra: A. Dotan, *Ben Asher's Creed: A Study of the History of the Controversy*, Missoula, Montana 1977 (Masoretic Studies, 3), esp. 39-64, 79, references to his previous publications, 126-127; I. Ben-Zvi, "The Codex of Ben Asher", *Textus* 1, 1960, 5-6, 12-13; M. Noth, *The Old Testament World*, (V. I. Gruhn, tr.), Philadelphia 1966, 304; "probably not Karaites but rather rabbinites" (German original, Berlin 1962, p. 270, has "Rabbaniten"); Karaite interest gave new impetus, leading to the fixing of the Masoretic text.
- 3 Cf. S. Segert, "The Unity of the New Covenant – The Unity of Brethren", in: *Jewish Studies: Essay in Honour of... Gustav Sicher*, Prague 1955, esp. 71-72, 74, 78; S. Segert, „Makkabäer und Hussiten“, *Communio viatorum* 2, 1959.
- 4 Cf. P. Kahle, *The Cairo Geniza...*, 83-86, 92-96; P. Kahle, *Der hebräische Text...*, 60-63, 74-75, 80-82, 84-86; I. Ben-Zvi, o.c., 3-4, 14-16; S. Szyszman, „La famille des massorettes karaites...“, 537-538.
- 5 Cf. I. Ben-Zvi, o.c., p. 14, n. 32, p. 15, n. 36; P. Kahle, *Der hebräische Text...*, p. 85, n. 10, p. 86, n. 18; cf. S. Szyszman, „La famille des massorettes karaites...“, 537-538.

creeds. For this reason no special markings indicating the origin of Bible texts in the minority communities were used. Access to Word of God was not submitted to external limitation. The care about exact wording was accompanied by successful efforts to give to Biblical texts the best available external appearance, whether scribal or typographic. Work on reliable Bible text or translation led to development of the study of language. Beginnings of Hebrew grammar and the first Czech grammar were motivated by efforts for better Bible texts.

The respect of the Karaites for the Bible as the only authority has been expressed since the 8th century reformer Anan ben David in various ways.⁶ In 16th century Poland a Karaite author did not hesitate to compare this Karaite respect to the Word of God to that expressed in the Christian New Testament.⁷

The Unity of Czech Brethren, founded as a specific religious community in 1457, continued Hussite tradition in accepting the Bible as the only authority contrary to the requirements of Church tradition. In 1432 Hussites participated in the Church council in Basle on the condition that the Bible will be the decisive authority. The preliminary agreement was made in Cheb: "The Arbiter of Cheb" had to decide.⁸ The spiritual father of the Unity of Brethren, Petr Chelčický, induced the new community to base all its doctrines and rules on the Bible.⁹

The Karaites relied on the authority of the Bible in its original Hebrew language.¹⁰ This recourse to the source was parallel to their critical attitude to tradition, even that derived from the Bible.¹¹ This effort to provide the most reliable Bible text led the great Masoretes of Tiberias to fix the consonantal

6 M. Waxman, *A History of Jewish Literature I*, New York-London 1960, 394-397; J. Heller – L. Nemoy, "Karaites", in: *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 10, Jerusalem 1971, col. 765, 777; N. Wieder, *The Judean Scrolls and Karaism*, London 1962, 57-58, 76-79; A. Zajaczkowski, *o.c.*, 11-12, 26; S. Szyszman, *Le Karaïsme...*, 178; but cf. H. H. Ben-Sasson, "The Middle Ages", in: H. H. Ben-Sasson (ed.), *A History of the Jewish People*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1976, 441-442, 448-450.

7 A. Zajaczkowski, *o.c.*, 25.

8 F. M. Bartoš, *The Hussite Revolution 1424-1437* (ed. J. M. Klassen), Boulder-New York 1986 (East European Monographs, 203), 81-82; A. Moinár (ed.), *Slovem obnovená: Čtení o reformaci*, Praha 1977, 87.

9 A. Novák, *Czech Literature* (P. Kussi, tr.; W. E. Harkins, ed.), Ann Arbor 1976, 55-56; J. Vlček, *Dějiny české literatury I*, Praha 1940, 187, 198, 210-212; J. Jakubec, *Dějiny literatury české I*, Praha 1929, 473-474; E. Petrů, „Petr Chelčický“, in: J. Hrabák (ed.), *Dějiny české literatury I*, Praha 1959, 272-274.

10 S. Szyszman, *Le Karaïsme...*, 26.

11 Cf. S. Szyszman, *Le Karaïsme...*, p. 28, n. 26; cf. H. H. Ben-Sasson, *o.c.*, 441-442.

text and to developing the most detailed system of vocalization and accentuation, which expressed adequately the traditional pronunciation and presentation.¹²

The relatively minor differences between the major Bible manuscripts produced by generations of Ben Asher family show the incessant effort to establish the most reliable wording of the Bible.¹³ Even the existence of the other school, that of Ben Naphtali,¹⁴ has to be understood as an expression of solicitude for a Bible text adequate to its role in the life of the community and its members.

The Czech Brethren were for several generations content with Czech Bibles translated not from original languages, but from the Latin Vulgata.¹⁵ In its beginning, the Unity of Brethren simple access to the Bible and was critical, if not afraid, of influence of higher education.¹⁶ Only in middle of the 16th century, under the impact of the reforms of Luther and Calvin, the necessary attention to the original languages of the Bible was recognized. Jan Blahoslav (1523-1571), who learned Greek abroad, produced a Czech translation of the New Testament from the Greek original, but with respect to previous Czech translations.¹⁷ This translation was accepted with minor changes in the complete Bible published in six volumes in the years 1579-1593.¹⁸ The Old Testament was translated from Hebrew, from the Antwerps Polygot.¹⁹ One of the translators, Lukáš Helic, was a Jew from Poznan, converted to the Unity of Brethren.²⁰ Another translator, Nicholas Albertus Kamének, learned Hebrew at the Wittenberg University and became later

12 P. Kahle, *The Cairo Geniza*..., 75-82, esp. 80; S. Szyszman, *Le Karaïsme*..., 50, 170-174.

13 P. Kahle, *The Cairo Geniza*..., 75-80; S. Szyszman, *Le Karaïsme*..., 50.

14 P. Kahle, *The Cairo Geniza*..., 79-80, 115-118; I. Yeivin, "From the Teachings of the Massoretes (Hebr.)", *Textus* 9, 1981, p. 54 Hebr., 135; cf. A. Dotan, *o.c.*, 42-45.

15 A. Molnár (ed.), *o.c.*, 242-243; R. Říčan, "Dějiny Jednoty v přehledu", in: *Jednota bratrská 1457 - 1957*, Praha 1956, 30, 32; J. B. Čapek, "Vývoj a význam Jednoty na poli kulturním", in: *Jednota bratrská 1457 - 1957*, Praha 1956, 196-201; J. Mánek, *Bible v českých zemích*, Praha 1975, 26-27.

16 J. B. Čapek, *o.c.*, 194; J. Vlček, *o.c.*, 391-393; A. Novák, *o.c.*, 63-64.

17 A. Novák, *o.c.*, 64-67; R. Říčan, *o.c.*, 48-53; J. Vlček, *o.c.*, 410-413, esp. 418-420; J. Jakubec, *o.c.*, 687; A. Škarka, "Jan Blahoslav", in: J. Hrabák (ed.), *Dějiny české literatury I*, Praha 1967, 363-379, esp. 368-369; J. B. Čapek, *o.c.*, 210-215; J. Mánek, *o.c.*, 31-37; A. Molnár (ed.), *o.c.*, 152-154.

18 A. Novák, *o.c.*, 66-67; R. A. Auty, "The Bible in East-Central Europe", in: S. L. Greenslade (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the Bible III*, Cambridge 1963, 130-131; R. Říčan, *o.c.*, 71-73; J. Th. Müller, *Geschichte der Böhmischen Brüder III*, Herrnhut 1931, 291-294; J. Vlček, *o.c.*, 421-423; J. Jakubec, *o.c.*, 688-689; F. Svejkovský, "Rozkvět měšťanské literatury", in: J. Hrabák (ed.), *Dějiny české literatury I*, Praha 1959, 348, 359-360; A. Škarka, *o.c.*, 369-370; J. B. Čapek, *o.c.*, 218-220; J. Mánek, *o.c.*, 37-46; A. Molnár (ed.), *o.c.*, 243-244.

19 R. Říčan, *o.c.*, 72; J. Mánek, *o.c.*, 42-43.

20 J. Mánek, *o.c.*, 40.

Professor of Hebrew at the Charles University in Prague.²¹ This Bible translation was realized in Kralice, a small town in southwestern Moravia.²²

The activity of the Unity of Brethren was in many respects limited by the mighty representatives of the Habsburg rulers. The proportion of the members of the Unity of Brethren in Moravia was probably less than ten percent, in Bohemia relatively smaller. The majority of Czech people in the 16th and at the beginning of the 17th century confessed Protestantism, while the proportion of Roman Catholics was probably about ten percent.²³

The work on a Czech translation did not cease by the edition of the six volumes Bible. A revised edition in one volume was published in 1613, again in the town of Kralice.²⁴ This edition remains to the present day the most widely used Czech Bible text. It is still being reprinted by Bible societies.²⁵

The results of the scholarly activity of Tiberian Masoretes were used by the entire Jewish community, by the Rabbanite majority and the Karaite minority. According to a note in one of the most important Bible manuscripts, that of Aleppo, this manuscript, provided with vocalization, accentuation and annotation by Aaron ben Asher, had to be accessible for study to both Karaites and Rabbanites.²⁶ This manuscript was originally in the possession of the Karaites; later, it belonged to a Rabbanite synagogal congregation.²⁷

The great authority of the Masoretic Bible manuscript of Ben Asher was acknowledged by Moshe ben Maimon (Maimonides).²⁸ This acknow-

21 J. Mánek, *o.c.*, 39-40; S. Segert – K. Beránek, *Orientalistik an der Prager Universität I*, Praha 1967, 30-49.

22 The Unity of Brethren was compelled by the Catholic political authorities to transfer its printing plant from the town of Ivančice to a smaller town where it was protected by its aristocratic owner, cf. J. Jakubec, *o.c.*, 689.

23 R. A. Auty, *o.c.*, 131; R. Říčan, *o.c.*, 86-87; A. Novák, *o.c.*, 75-78.

24 Already in 1596 a reprint in one volume was published; cf. J. Mánek, *o.c.*, 45-46.

25 Since 1887, cf. J. Mánek, *o.c.*, 55-57, with data about other editions and revisions. Recently a revision of the 1613 text is being prepared by B. B. Bašus and B. Pípal.

26 The dedicatory note in original Hebrew: P. Kahle, *Der hebräische Text...*, 84-86; I. Ben-Zvi, *o.c.*, 13-15, with English translation; French translation: S. Szyszman, „La famille des massoretes karaites...”, 537-538. Cf. P. Kahle, *The Cairo Geniza...*, 95-96. Significant changes against the original wording were introduced: *mb²lyhmqr' whrbnym* “from the Karaites and the Rabbanites” was changed into: *hbynh mhrbny* “from the possessors of understanding from the Rabbanites”, cf. I. Ben-Zvi, *o.c.*, p. 15, n. 36; P. Kahle, *Der hebräische Text...*, p. 86, n. 18 and 19. A. Dothan, *o.c.*, 36, does not acknowledge the original wording.

27 P. Kahle, *The Cairo Geniza...*, 106-109; P. Kahle, *Der hebräische Text...*, 80-89; I. Ben-Zvi, *o.c.*, 6-8, cf. p. 14, n. 32, where the original wording according to M. Nehmad, *hqr'ym* “the Karaites”, is quoted; it was replaced by *hbkny* “the wise ones”.

28 I. Ben-Zvi, *o.c.*, 7-9; M. H. Goshen-Gottstein, *o.c.*, 17-18, 23-24, 27-29, 36-39, 42-46, 55-58; Penkower's detailed study of 1973, published in 1981, cf. esp. 99.

ledgement is interpreted as denial of the Karaite origin of this model manuscript.²⁹ The other interpretation may be based on deservedly high esteem for this manuscript of the Hebrew Bible, without reference to its origin.

Those manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible which are considered the most reliable, the Leningrad Codex, which is complete,³⁰ and the Aleppo Codex now preserved – with some gaps caused by the events of 1948 – in Jerusalem³¹ originated in the Ben Asher school.³² Because of their present importance, the question of the adherence of their scribes and editors has come up again. The Karaite origin is being denied; arguments based on the study of related medieval texts, as well as general considerations have been put forward.³³

After the Battle on White Mountain in 1620 and the Renewed Land Ordinance of 1627, Czech lands were submitted to recatholization by the Habsburg rulers.³⁴ The Bibles published by the Protestants were confiscated, and many were destroyed.³⁵ But in the second half of the 17th century the need for Bible in Czech language was felt by the Catholic church. In spite of its Protestant origin in the Unity of Brethren, the text of the Kralice Bible was used as substantial help for the Catholic edition, the so-called Saint Wenceslas Bible.³⁶ Victorious majority used the Bible translation efforts of the suppressed minority.

The Masoretic Hebrew Bibles of the Ben Asher school do not exhibit any special markings pointing to the Karaite character of their producers. This can be considered intentional: These Bible manuscripts had to serve the entire Jewish community.³⁷ This lack of specific Karaite features influences the recent discussion about the adherence of the Massorettes of Tiberias.

Similarly, the Czech Bible translations produced by the Unity of Brethren do not exhibit specific features referring to their origin. Even the preface is formulated in generally Christian rather than narrowly confessional terms.³⁸

29 A. Dotan, *o.c.*, 39-41. – Cf. M. H. Goshen-Gottstein, *o.c.*, 17-18.

30 P. Kahle, *The Cairo Geniza...*, 110, 131-132, 135; P. Kahle, *Der hebräische Text...*, 76-79.

31 Cf. I. Ben-Zvi, *o.c.*, 2-3.

32 I. Ben-Zvi, *o.c.*, 1, 5-9; M. H. Goshen-Gottstein, *o.c.*, 17-18, 26; P. Kahle, *The Cairo Geniza...*, 106-107; P. Kahle, *Der hebräische Text...*, 82.

33 I. Ben-Zvi, *o.c.*, 5-6; A. Dotan, 13-29.

34 R. Říčan, *o.c.*, 86-87; A. Novák, *o.c.*, 76-77.

35 J. Jakubec, *o.c.*, 924-925; J. Vlček, *o.c.*, 59-60, 64-65; R. A. Auty, *o.c.*, 131.

36 The basis was the Czech Ultraquist Bible of Venice (1506). J. Jakubec, *o.c.*, 903; R. A. Auty, *o.c.*, 131; J. Merell, *Bible v českých zemích od nejstarších dob do současnosti*, Praha 1956, 95-96; J. Mánek, *o.c.*, 52-54, with references to later Catholic Bible editions using Kralice translation as model.

37 Cf. *supra*, n. 26.

38 The preface to the first volume of the Kralice Bible (1579) begins: "To priests and ministers of the Lord's people, those who perform divine services in Czech language..."

Even the names of the translators are not expressly indicated, but concealed in artistic combinations of their initial letters.³⁹

The high quality of Hebrew Masoretic text produced by the Ben Asher school is graphically presented in the most careful scribal realization and an aesthetically satisfying arrangement of script on pages.⁴⁰

The Bible editions of Czech Brethren are considered in their country as the highest achievements of typography in the period of Renaissance.⁴¹

Efforts to provide a reliable text of the Hebrew Bible are related to the beginnings of the study of the Hebrew language. The Masorete Aaron ben Asher in his book on accents significant statements which served as basis for the later development of Hebrew grammar.⁴²

After translating the New Testament into Czech, Jan Blahoslav considered it his duty to write a grammar of Czech language which would serve as example and rule for the translators of the Old Testament. This first Czech grammar was completed in 1571.⁴³

These general observations on structural similarities between two religious communities and their parallel efforts to provide better Bible texts are presented as modest contribution for discussion.

Czech original presented by A. Molnár (ed.), *o.c.*, 243.

39 Cf. M. Daňková, *Bratrské tisky ivančické a kralické*, Praha 1951.

40 Cf. 12 reproductions of pages of the Aleppo codex, in *Textus* 1, 1960, after 16; cf. in P. Kahle, *Der hebräische Text...*, plates 1-18; a study of illuminations in the Cairo Codex of the Prophets (Tiberias, 895 A. D.) by R. H. Pinder Wilson and R. Ettinghausen, 54-59, 95-98.

41 Cf. J. Merell, *o.c.*, 95; M. Daňková, *o.c.*

42 J. Heller – L. Nemoy, *o.c.*, col. 765; but cf. M. Waxman, *o.c.*, 166, 397.

43 It was used according to manuscript copies, published in print only in 1857, by I. Hradil and J. Jireček, in Vienna. – Cf. R. Říčan, *o.c.*, 52; J. B. Čapek, *o.c.*, 213-214; A. Novák, *o.c.*, 65; J. Vlček, *o.c.*, 424-431; J. Jakubec, *o.c.*, 690-693; A. Škarka, *o.c.*, 374-376.

RESUMÉ

Masoreti a překladatelé – Karaité a Čeští bratři

Jak židovská skupina karaitská začátkem středověku, tak protestanti a zvláště Čeští bratři v závěru středověku se řídili výlučně biblí a neuznávali pozdější tradice. Karaité uplatňovali tyto zásady péčí o spolehlivé opisy hebrejské bible; vzorné opisy byly uznávány jako autoritativní i jejich rabanitskými kritiky. Karaitské rukopisy z Ben Ašerovy školy jsou základem nyní používaných vědeckých edic. Čeští bratři se věnovali pečlivému překládání bible do češtiny v 16. a začátkem 17. století. Jejich bible vydané v Kralicích na Moravě byly používány též katolickými vydavateli v době protireformace. Toto strukturální srovnání dvou navzájem vzdálených jevů je předkládáno jako podnět k diskusi.

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