

HISTORY OF THE KARAITE JEWS

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WILLIAM HARRIS RULE

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KARAITE JEWS**

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HISTORY
OF
THE KARAITE JEWS

רַב־בַּיִת. דָּר.

BY

WILLIAM HARRIS RULE, D.D.

רבי יוסי אומר כל המכבר את התורה נופו מכבר על הבריות
וכל המחלל את התורה נופו מחלל על הבריות:

'What is written in the Law?—How readest thou?'

4

LONDON
LONGMANS, GREEN, AND CO.
1870

PREFACE.

THE BOOK now presented to English readers is the first volume in our language that has been entirely devoted to the history of Karaite Jews. Writers on Jewish history have usually given a chapter, an appendix, or a few common-place unstudied sentences to this branch of their subject. The subject in itself was deemed interesting, but so scant and imperfect were the materials that it was impossible to treat it satisfactorily.

Two hundred years ago, James Trigland, a learned Dutch theologian, advanced far beyond his predecessors in the study of Karaism. His industry was rewarded by valuable contributions from intelligent Karaites, and two or three other scholars followed his example. Their works or materials collected for further study are contained in the *Thesaurus of Sacred Oriental Antiquities*, which consists of works on Hebrew and Jewish subjects, brought together by Blasius Ugolinus in thirty-four sumptuous folio volumes, but sealed from the sight of all who cannot or will not break through the Latin and Hebrew swathings that cover those precious remains from the hard-wrought servants of the Press in these busy times. Since Trigland's time little has been done to bring Karaism to light until very recently. Professor

Kosegarten, of the University of Jena, roused the learned again to some feeling of interest by his publication of portions of the 'Book of the Crown of the Law,' by Aaron, son of Elijah the Karaite, with translation and notes, in the year 1824. But this, too, is a Latin book.

The precious materials furnished by Ugolinius and Kosegarten; contributions of travellers within the last half-century; miscellanea collected from other Hebrew sources in the course of study; Karaite liturgies; fragments published from the Firkowitsch manuscripts; all these being duly acknowledged in the following pages, and collated with Biblical and other subsidia of historical study, have enabled the author to essay the composition of what he may presume to call a History of the Karaite Jews.

Dr. Julius Fürst completed last year his '*Geschichte des Karaërthums*,' the fruit of much patient labour. It is chiefly an account of eminent Karaites, obtained from the mass of manuscript literature now referred to, and laid up in the libraries of Odessa and St. Petersburg, added to the little that had been previously extant in Europe. Fürst's history is not only valuable on its own account, but is an extremely useful aid to study with the '*Anmerkungen*,' or passages extracted from the Hebrew originals, and most copious references to those originals, from first to last. That work is entirely different from the present in its arrangement, and if it is ever translated into English, as it well deserves to be, the object pursued and course taken in each of the Histories will be found entirely distinct and independent.

By whomsoever written, the history of the Karaites

is comparative. They are a people honourably known by faithful maintenance of the principle of submission to acknowledged authority, and also by firmness in exercising their own reason in order to ascertain the sufficiency of that which claims to be authoritative. Nothing with them is authoritative which is not Divine—God only is to them the fountain of authority. They profess willingness to submit to Him, and to submit at any cost. This is the normal principle of Karaism. Submission to human authority in matters of faith and religious duty, unless that authority be manifestly supported by Divine Revelation, they justly consider to be no better than blind and servile superstition.

They pay unbounded reverence to the Written Law of God, contained in the Old Testament. They utterly reject what is called the Oral Law, and is now contained in the Talmud—at least, so far as it can be made out by those who spend their life in learning.

The Talmud, however, is but the latest edition of the Oral Law—the last collection of traditions and miscellaneous writings for the illustration or exposition of the traditional sentences; and we have now to mark the divergence of two parties—the faithful followers of God's Law, and the votaries of human tradition. In other words, we have to trace the progress of a schism from the beginning; and to select at discretion a point from which to commence the story anywhere along the widely wandering lines of progress would be to lose sight of all that gave its peculiar character to the schism itself, from first to last. Hence arose a necessity for the first eight chapters of this book, from Chapter I., which defines the canon of

Inspired Scripture, to Chapter VIII., which briefly characterises the body of traditions: that is to say, from the point where all Israelites were once agreed, onward to the opposite brinks of the great gulf of an impassable division.

A deliberate survey of the gradual progress and consummation of the Karaite schism obviates the controversy that would otherwise arise, and prevents difficulties otherwise insoluble; whereas, to begin our history with Ahnan, for example, and to date the origin of Karaism from the year 750, or even at the beginning of the Christian era, would be contrary to every known antecedent, would shift us on to ground utterly untenable, and would, if that were possible, reduce one of the most important divisions recorded in the religious history of the Hebrew people to the insignificance of an unquiet uprising against ecclesiastical authority. This is what the Rabbanites might wish to do, but justice and truth forbid us to attempt it. That would now be impossible.

Neither may we consent to darken history by taking up the allegation that the Karaites are descended from the Sadducees. A dispassionate survey of the whole period from the closing of the Canon of the Old Testament by Simon the Just to the compilation of the Mishnah, while it shows what influences operated on the Jewish mind, and tended to bring about the decisive separation of two great parties, makes it clear as day that Sadduceeism and Karaism are just as contrary the one to the other as unbelief and faith. On this ground the author takes his stand without fear of successful contradiction, and here he differs from Jost and some other