

Description for the general public

For many centuries Karaism was the main, after rabbinic Judaism, religious trend within the Jewish world, and as such, had a significant impact on the latter. This notwithstanding, the study of Karaism is often being marginalized in Jewish Studies. Furthermore, relatively little attention has been paid (especially in Poland) to the history of Judaism in the Middle Ages and to Jewish writings of the time, despite the fact that this era was extremely important for the development of Jewish culture in general, and Karaism in particular. The proposed project will partly fill the abovementioned “gaps” in research.

Generally speaking, the objective of the project is to conduct research on the perception of Karaites and Karaite religion by the rabbanite Jews in the Middle Ages, analyzed in the broader context of the ongoing religious debates of the time. The publication of results of a research devoted to this subject may shed a new light on these debates and on the relationship between rabbanite Jews and Karaites, not only in the middle ages, but also in subsequent periods (e.g. in the multicultural Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth). So far, scholars have been mainly interested in the ways in which the Karaites themselves, and, to a lesser extent, Muslims, perceived and described Karaite history and religion. The proposed project will focus on the reverse situation, in which representatives of rabbanite Judaism tell the story of Karaism, trying not only to indicate the reasons for the split that occurred in medieval Jewish world, but also to explore the essence of Karaism. Yet, the planned monographic study will discuss not only the ways in which the Karaites were perceived by the rabbanite Jews, but also the reception of some rabbanite narrative threads and theological as well as historical concepts in later Karaite literature, and as such it may inspire further in-depth studies on intercultural borrowings, as well as trans-religious migration of certain literary motifs. An additional objective of the project is to translate from Judaeo-Arabic (i.e., a dialect of Middle-Arabic used by the Jews in medieval period, most frequently written in the Hebrew alphabet) Judah Halevi's *Kuzari* into Polish. It is the most important rabbanite text describing the Karaite religion – its genesis and essence – as well as its adherents, and at the same time, one of the most important Jewish philosophical-religious texts from the Middle Ages and beyond. The publication of a Polish translation of this tractate will give Polish readers and scholars an access to the masterpiece of Jewish philosophical-religious literature, hitherto almost completely unknown. By doing so, it will contribute to the enhancement of Jewish studies in Poland in general, and studies of medieval Karaism and Jewish thought in particular. In addition, the project will contribute to disseminating knowledge on the often neglected part of the Polish national heritage resources by using, among other things, almost unknown and hitherto little explored source materials, preserved in manuscripts or old prints, and housed at the Library of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw

Realization of the project will start with finding, if necessary, identifying and collecting source materials, which contain descriptions of the Karaite religion (its origins and essence) and its followers. These descriptions are scattered throughout a variety of works and treatises, not all of which have been published. Subsequently, the above-mentioned tractate by Judah Halevi will be translated into Polish and annotated. The next stage will consist of conducting a research on the translated text and other collected source materials, which will be subjected to in-depth and comprehensive comparative analysis, paying special attention not only to the historical context of the ongoing fervent religious debates (whose perfect exemplification is *Kuzari*), but also to the evolution of certain themes and concepts appearing in rabbanite narratives, as well as their subsequent reception by the Karaites (diachronic approach). In addition, the rabbanite reports will be compared with those written by medieval Muslim authors (synchronous approach).

The study will lead to a wider discussion of the perception of Karaites by the followers of other religions, or religious factions within Judaism. Within the project, an attempt will be made to have a closer look at the historical and literary context in which the analysed texts emerged and to provide answers to a number of questions relevant to this subject, such as: What were the overarching goals of writing this reports on the origins of the Karaite religion within rabbinic Judaism? How they differ from the narratives created by the Karaites? Who were the target readers of these texts and who actually read them? Why and by whom were they written down? Were they composed out of polemical reasons, or rather an expression of scientific inquiry of their authors? And, more broadly, why are these questions relevant to our understanding of the relations between these two major factions of Judaism in the Middle Ages? Finally, in what sense do these texts they contribute to our knowledge of the complex relations between the Rabbanite Jews and Karaites not only at that time, but also in later periods (for example in Poland)? The planned study puts forward two hypotheses. Firstly, that the interest in Karaism of medieval rabbanite authors largely resulted from a desire to take a stand in the ongoing religious debates. Secondly, that the manner in which representatives of rabbanite Judaism in the Middle Ages perceived and described Karaism had a significant impact on subsequent self-perception of the Karaites.