With what power is the scholar endowed by virtue of the knowledge he holds? What knowledge is he entitled to pass on to others? Who may claim the right to this knowledge and under what conditions? What place does the scholar occupy in the society in which he teaches and writes, and to what controls by the communal establishment should or should not his activities be subjected to? At certain junctures in medieval Jewish societies, these questions were at the center of violent controversies whose socio-political dimensions are significant. Such was the case, for example, in Provence from 1230 to 1233, and again from 1303 to 1306, during the period of great controversy provoked by the Maimonidean works and by philosophical and scientific studies in general. This was also the case two-and-a-half centuries later in Constantinople during a troubled period in the history of the Jewish communities, after the fall of the city to the Ottomans (1453) and before the mass arrival of the Jews expelled from Spain (1492), when a little studied controversy broke over the rapprochement between certain Rabbanate and Karaite scholars.

The history of conflict in the relations between the Rabbanites and the Karaites is marked, perhaps more than others, by these problems. According to one of the traditions which account for the emergence of the Karaite dissidence in eighth-century Babylon,² Anan ben David was led to found an independent sect in reaction to the appointment of his brother to the position

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of Exilarch, in spite of the fact that this appointment was ratified by the Muslim authority. This tradition holds that Anan ben David adopted the calendar characteristic of his sect, based on principles similar to those of the Muslim calendar, only to please the Caliph who had thrown him into prison. Whatever the historical accuracy of this tradition, its symbolic importance is beyond dispute. Furthermore, it is precisely the question of the transmission of knowledge which is at the heart of the age-old conflict between the two groups; the Karaites accepted exclusively the text of the Scriptures while rejecting the authority of the oral tradition embodied primarily in the Talmud.

In fifteenth-century Constantinople there was a turning point in the history of Rabbanite-Karaite relations, marked by efforts toward reconciliation.\(^3\) The literary and pedagogical activity of a writer like Mordekhai Comtino (1402-1482)\(^4\) is one manifestation of this little studied development. Even though Comtino had no formally defined communal responsibilities, he was nevertheless an important intellectual leader of his community, and his scholarly work and other activities ran headlong into prejudices and reservations of the socio-economic establishment.

Comtino’s work, like the work of other medieval Jewish authors, is composed almost entirely of commentaries—whether the commented text was canonical, as with the Pentateuch, or whether it was a “profane” scientific or philosophical text, such as the writings of an Abraham Ibn Ezra\(^5\) or a Moses ben Maimon.\(^6\) As such, his work is primarily a re-writing or a re-creation of a pre-existing literary heritage. Comtino’s “debits” are many.\(^7\) His texts are filled with citations, borrowings, and allusions, especially in reference to the Sephardi exegetic and philosophical tradition. His writing is nevertheless the work of a particular time and place. It is “indebted” as much to the history, conflicts, and personal experiences of its author as it is to his “sources”. The exegetic work is also a conjunctural work. It is the product of a given situation, written in answer to given questions in the framework of a historically defined set of tensions.

The study of Comtino’s commentary on the Pentateuch reveals the conjunctural nature of his work particularly well. This commentary both informs and is informed by the issue of the relations between knowledge and power as they were viewed by the Rabbanites and the Karaites of Constantinople in the second half of the fifteenth century.

The Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453 marked a turning point in the history of Byzantine Judaism. In particular, this event was followed by considerable migratory movements, both voluntary and imposed. Mehmet II, the Conqueror, wished to re-populate the city and, within the framework of this policy, many Byzantine Jews of the provinces were transplanted there. Karaites originally from various regions of the former Byzantine Empire,\(^8\) from Asia, the Crimea or southern Poland,\(^9\) who had first flocked to Adrianople, also began to settle in the new Ottoman capital.\(^10\) This conjunction created a favorable setting for the Karaite-Rabbanite rapprochement.

Byzantine Karaism, in a certain way, had intellectually prepared itself for this development. Aaron ben Yosef Ha-Rose (the Physician), called “Aaron the Elder” (c. 1250-1320),\(^11\) had suggested much earlier that every good Karaite had the duty to study the Mishna and the Talmud. These were the great texts of an oral tradition which was precisely the tradition in reaction to which Karaism had been established. In the introduction to his commentary on the Pentateuch, the Sefer Ha-Mivhar (The Book of Choice), Aaron the Elder stated that he himself would not hesitate to turn to the explanations of the commandments given in the Mishna, provided these were not in contradiction to the letter of the text.\(^12\) Byzantine Karaism had even opened up to the Jewish philosophical tradition of Aristotelian inspiration. Even an Aaron ben Eliahu of Nicodemia, “Aaron the Younger” (13287-1369),\(^13\) no longer held fast to the integral nature of the philosophical heritage of the Kalam.\(^14\) In fact, contrary to what one may be given to understand upon a first analysis, this author had broken with the atomist physics of the Kalam and had adopted the principles of the peripatetic structure of the universe, one composed of matter and form.\(^15\) These two major trends, the reapropriation of the rabbinical heritage and the spreading of Jewish peripatetics, were to become even more pronounced among the later Karaite authors such as Eliahu Bashyazi (c. 1420-1490), author of the great Karaite legal code Aderet Elihu (The Mantle of Elihu),\(^16\) and Kafir Afendopolu (14547-1525), brother-in-law and successor to Bashyazi.\(^17\) They were both students of Comtino.

This opening up of the Karaite world, which some have attributed to a “weakness” and a need for renewal,\(^18\) had its counterpart among the Rabbanites. Comtino was often cited as one of those who had most demonstrated a respect for the Karaite school of exegesis.\(^19\) It has even been pointed out that the title under which Comitino’s Biblical commentary is sometimes cited is also the title of the Karaite Aaron the Younger’s commentary: Ketor Torah (The Crown of the Torah).\(^20\) This somewhat idyllic image is confirmed by a Karaite author of the first half of the sixteenth century, Yosef ben Moshe Begi. According to him, Comtino held the intellectual qualities of his Karaite contemporaries in highest esteem.\(^21\)
The reading of his commentary on the Pentateuch reveals the intensity of his relations with Karaism, although these relations are by no means without ambivalence and tension. It would be impossible, in fact, to fully grasp the import and the scope of Comtino’s enterprise without taking into account one of its essential dimensions, the confrontation with the Karaite exegetic tradition. This confrontation is, on a first level, open and direct when it is linked to the discussion of limited questions, points of traditional contention between the Karaites and the Rabbanites. On another level the confrontation is veiled, indirect. In this guise, the confrontation is a constant, one of the major preoccupations of Comtino’s exegesis. The confrontation was not only a literary one. It also had a social and human dimension, for Comtino was also a teacher and among his students there were Karaites. Obviously, these three levels of confrontation are intertwined and inseparable; they clash with and illuminate each other.

THEMES AND FORMS OF THE ANTI-KARAITE POLEMIC IN COMTINO’S WORKS

Comtino often invokes the two major Byzantine Karaite commentators mentioned above, Aaron the Elder and Aaron the Younger. He cites both of them often, sometimes at length. When he cites them openly, that is, when their names appear in his text, they are systematically refuted, sometimes ironically, often vehemently. Though Comtino is given at times to remark with satisfaction that the Elder and the Younger both learned, exceptionally, not to persevere in their errors and to “waken from their sleep,” he more often reproaches them for having “opened their mouths in vain” and for having been smitten by God “with madness, blindness, and astonishment of heart.” Certainly the two Karaite commentators are not always so fiercely attacked nor are they the sole objects of his attack. Even Ibn Ezra, whom Comtino particularly revered and whom he had chosen as master and guide, sometimes receives the brunt of a criticism which is ironic, to say the least. This being said, to find in Comtino a vehemence equal to that which is felt in certain of his anti-Karaite attacks, we must look in another direction, to his responses to the objections of Shabtai ben Malkiel Ha-Kohen. This is, however, a case of an explicitly polemical work against a living contemporary (here a Rabbanite) with whom Comtino may well have had personal contact. One might wonder whether the vigor of certain attacks aimed at the long-dead Byzantine Karaite commentators (of whom Comtino could only have had a literary acquaintance) is an echo of the real, personal, contemporary debates between Comtino (or other Rabbanites) and the Karaites of Constantinople.

It is true that a writer may argue vehemently across the centuries without necessarily associating his vehemence to a contemporary context. Polemical exchange between the Karaites and the Rabbanites was traditionally virulent. It may be that Comtino was only following in this tradition. In addition, the moderation of certain of his criticisms is equally worthy of attention. Often he would merely note in passing that the Karaite commentator had made a mistake, that his point of view was erroneous. Therefore, it is appropriate to consider with caution the injurious qualifiers with which he regularly designates the Karaites: ha-nakhkhishim (“the nay-sayers”), ha-sedokim (“the Sadducees”). We know that the latter term, which is frequently found along with the former in the writing of Abraham Ibn Ezra, Comtino’s model, was considered particularly insulting by the Karaites. This may have been but a rhetorical tic, a habit Comtino had acquired from the practice of earlier commentators. It is also possible that these terms, when he wrote them, were deliberately charged with injurious connotations. In any case, the Karaite cited above, Yosef ben Moshe Begi, who would later undoubtedly exaggerate the respect in which his fellow Karaites were held by Comtino, still resented Comtino for having identified the Karaites, as had Abraham Ibn Ezra, Moshe Kapuzato, Shelomo ben Eliahu Sharvit Ha-Zahav (“the Golden Sceptre”) (c. 1420-c.1501-2) and others, with the Zadokite and Boethusian sects and for having characterized them as “nay-sayers” and as “perverse.”

The analysis of the rhetoric employed in his anti-Karaite attacks does not necessarily reveal the true nature of Comtino’s relation to the Karaite school of exegesis; nor does it bring any decisive evidence of the impact of contemporary debates between the Karaites and the Rabbanites in Constantinople on the elaboration of the commentary. The objections he raises concerning principles and methods may be more revealing. There is of course the classic objection: “In conclusion, their words neither add nor reduct a thing, for they have no tradition [to support them].” Elsewhere in his work, be it in the framework of a challenge or, on the contrary, of a reappropriation of the rabbinical heritage, Comtino reproaches the Karaites for insufficient knowledge or understanding of this heritage. Thus he holds that Aaron the Elder is unaware of the principle of notarikon. He claims further that the Karaites, in their refutation of certain traditional interpretations, forget that these interpretations are not, strictly speaking, exegeses of
the text of the Scriptures (whose true meaning they would reveal), but are orally transmitted traditions whose right to legitimacy is self-contained. He holds that these traditions only use the text as askhkhah, as “foundation” or as “support.” Generally speaking, the “ways of the Talmud” have remained closed to them and what the Karaites say about these ways has more to do with “bird-chirping” than with any “authentic knowledge.”

The principal questions which afford Comtino the occasion to attack his Karaite predecessors are of course those which have been at the center of polemics between Karaites and Rabbanites for generations. These are more or less lengthy investigations into the problems of the calendar (primarily concerning the method for establishing the neomina and the determination of embolic years), of the extent of the interdiction concerning the consumption of certain animal fats, of forbidden unions, of the number of daily prayers, and others.

We might ask whether Comtino brings new developments to the debate on these classic questions, and whether it was even his intention. It is certainly true that, although he may be following a tradition, he does not hesitate to make his own contribution to the work. He explicitly states as much in his introduction to his commentary on the expression mihorat ha-shabat (“the day after the shabbat”). “And so, having seen Abraham Ibn Ezra cite Saadia Gaon in order to prove this truth and to contribute himself in establishing it, and to respond to the ‘nay-sayers’ (ha-makhtishim) who say that that is Saturday (shabat be-reshei), I said to myself that I, too, could offer my contribution (amarti eene gam ani helki).” Comtino does indeed see himself as a link in a chain. Nevertheless, he actualizes the debate, cites the later Karaite exegetes, responds to objections they might have raised against A. Ibn Ezra or others. This literary “updating” of an ancient debate may be the sign of its renewal in the midst of the Jewish community of Constantinople. The questions which Comtino addresses, in themselves not new, may reflect issues of concern for his contemporaries.

The fact is that Comtino’s commentary on several of these questions is cited, and refuted, by Eliahu Bashiyazi who, after having been Comtino’s student, became one of the leaders of the Karaite community in Constantinople. Bashiyazi cites Comtino on the setting of the neomina, on the meaning of the word aviv, on the meaning of shabbat in Leviticus 23.11, and on the problems associated with the shehita (ritual slaughter). Comtino’s exegesis did not remain without echo. It immediately became the object of analysis and refutation in the Karaite world.

PSHAT AND KABALA

It may not be sufficient to indicate, as has been done thus far, only instances of explicit confrontation with the exegetic heritage of Byzantine Karaism. It may be that the relation of Comtino to Karaism is more apparent elsewhere, in an indirect, allusive confrontation, and that it is in the most subtle nuances of his writings that the man and his milieu are to be discovered.

One fact is worth noting. Unlike his model, Abraham Ibn Ezra, Comtino does not particularly explore Karaite exegesis in his own introduction to his commentary. He simply states that he holds the pshat (the obvious meaning) as his main concern and announces his intention not to stray from it.

Any interpretation which is not governed by the pshat must, if it be cited, have its source in the oral tradition (kabala). Even in this case, the pshat will be noted first. The pshat will not be set aside except in cases where it would be in contradiction to rules of logic and common sense (shikul ha-da‘at).

The pshat/kabala problematic is immediately mentioned as central. Comtino underscores the ambivalent nature of relations between the pshat and “handed-down” or “traditional” (mekubal) meanings. The pshat may be compatible with a traditional interpretation (may “support” it). It is also possible that the pshat “support” more than one interpretation. Finally, the pshat may be thoroughly incompatible with a given interpretation. Obviously, the third and final case is the most problematic. In fact, a traditional interpretation incompatible with the pshat “uses” the text of the Scripture as “support” (askhkhah); in no case does such an interpretation claim to be derived from Scripture.

In no instance could oral tradition, in a global sense, be understood as a “commentary” or an “interpretation” (perush) of written tradition. Together they form “one and the same Tora with its interpretation.” The content of the oral tradition is independent of the text of the Scriptures; there is no extracting it from the Scriptures, it is not latently present in the text; it has been independently transmitted and received al pe (“orally”). Having accepted this, it remains one of the commentator’s tasks to confront the oral tradition with the text of the Scriptures. This comparison will then allow “in return” (aharanit) a better grasp of the meaning of the oral tradition itself. Paradoxically, the understanding of the text of the Scriptures is no longer an end in itself. It becomes an instrument for the development of a better understanding of the laws of the oral tradition.
In Comtino’s project, then, ps’ha: and kab’ala maintain a complex rapport. Comtino refuses to sacrifice one to the other; he praises both of them. This tension is found throughout his commentary. Entire passages are marked, so to speak, with the stamp of this dialectic. Formulas of this type are repeated in a sort of leitmotif: “Our Elders, blessed be their memory, have said . . . But the way of the ps’ha: is different”;78 “The point of view of our Elders, blessed be their memory, is well known. . . . But according to the way of the ps’ha: . . .”;79 “Tradition (kab’ala) holds that . . . although according to the way of the ps’ha: . . .”80 From one example to the next, the level of tension between the two concurrent interpretations may vary. They are nevertheless always clearly distinguished, and Comtino does not necessarily seek to resolve each conflict. It also happens that Comtino personally aligns himself on the side of the ps’ha: “In my opinion, according to the way of the ps’ha: . . . Our Fathers however have passed on to us (heeti’ka)”81 that . . . 82

Comtino often transcends the contradiction, as he announces in his introduction, appealing to the notion of asmakhtah.83 He nevertheless insists on the fact that the Elders’ use of the asmakhtah by no means negates their profound knowledge of the ps’ha: “They used this verse as asmakhtah, for they knew through kab’ala that . . . just as they had done in numerous other places for they knew the ps’ha: better than all who came after them.”84

Another type of expression merits equal attention. In a different manner, this formula actually reflects the same problematic: “We need the kab’ala to know . . .”85 “We could not . . . without the kab’ala”;86 “Without the kab’ala we would say that . . .”;87 “Without the kab’ala, we would think that . . . But it was passed down (kib’iu) to our fathers that . . .”88

Certainly Comtino never lets pass an opportunity to emphasize his faith in the truth and in the necessity of the oral tradition: “We know that the commandments require (zrikhot) the kab’ala”;89 “And we will favor their opinion though the ps’ha: be different”;90 “And we will believe what was handed down to our Fathers, for he who strays from it is as if he were straying from his life.”91 Such professions of faith, however, must not be taken at face value. They serve, rather, to underscore the tensions between the ps’ha: and the kab’ala repeatedly acknowledged and rendered explicit by Comtino. Obviously, the presence of these tensions is particularly evident in the legislative passages of scriptural text. The simple heeti’ka ha-ma-atikim (literally: “the transmitters [the Masters of the oral tradition] have transmitted”) which runs through entire sections of the commentary is enough to alert us. The repetitive and almost systematic nature of this phenomenon calls for explanation and study.

We could, in fact, suppose that Comtino has constantly in mind the question or the objection which might, at each step, be formulated by a contradicting opponent who is ignorant of, or who rejects, the oral tradition. This opponent is never explicitly designated; he is nonetheless always there, always present between the lines. It is not difficult to identify him.

These passages may often be profitably compared to parallel commentaries of Aaron the Elder or Aaron the Younger. This type of comparison reveals that the problematic ps’ha: is often none other than one of the interpretations chosen by the Karaites, or that the reaffirmed kab’ala is precisely the one which was contested or discussed by him. One example will suffice here, intentionally selected from one of the a priori less controversial narrative passages: “It came to pass ( . . .) that Reuben went and laid with Bithiah, his father’s concubine . . .” (Gen. 35.22). The text is apparently clear as to the nature of the act because it contains the expression va-yishkav (he laid). Here is what Comtino says about it:92

Our Fathers, blessed be their memory, interpreted (this passage by saying) that he had disturbed (bibil) his bed and that the Scriptural text had reproached him as if he had slept with her.93 But according to the way of the ps’ha: he did (in fact) sleep with her.

And here is what Aaron the Younger says:94

The text must be understood in its obvious sense, and what the drash (non-literal, homilectic interpretation) says about it is known to be [and appears] far-fetched.

By itself, this one example may not be significant. However, many more could be provided.95 Certainly, a convincing parallel could not be found for every one of the passages in question. It is not necessary that Comtino have always in mind the commentary of one or another precisely identifiable Karaite. It may also be that his only intention is to anticipate the objections or to respond to the questions of his Karaites students or readers.

The debate also surfaces at times and is expressed openly: “Here, our Ancestors, blessed be their memory, passed down (heeti’ka) that . . . Contrary to the opinion of the Sadducees according to which . . .”96 “Our Ancestors, blessed be their names, passed down (heeti’ka) that . . . And the nay-sayers (ha-makkhishim) have said . . . and their words are in vain. Let us put aside the kab’ala and [try to answer them] by following the laws of logic and of common sense (shikul ha-daat) . . .”97

The parallelism of vocabulary and structure between these explicit confrontations and the passages analyzed above, support the proposed
hypothesis, which is that when Comtino articulates his propositions concerning the *pshat/kabala*, it is likely that he is doing so in anticipation of a potential Karaite opponent, student, reader, or commentator. The confrontation with the Karaite world appears, then, as a constant in Comtino’s enterprise. It constitutes an essential dimension of his work. The confrontation goes beyond the limited framework of passages explicitly directed against Karaism on the subject of major, traditionally debated questions. It is also at work, implicitly but consistently, throughout the whole of the commentary.

**COMTINO, TEACHER AND ASTRONOMER**

The constancy of this preoccupation is surely not fortuitous. It can be wholly understood only if the social milieu in which Comtino’s exegetical work appeared and Comtino’s own status in this milieu are taken into account.

As has been noted, Comtino was writing in a heterogeneous Jewish society in which the Karaites and the Rabbanites coexisted and at a time when a rapprochement of the two groups was taking place. Through his agreement to offer his teaching to the Karaite public, Comtino became personally involved in this rapprochement. His literary production cannot be separated from his role as teacher. It was, in part, to comply with his students’ request that Comtino composed his commentary on the *Guide for the Perplexed* of Moses Maimonides. His commentary on the *Logical Terminology* of the same Moses Maimonides was dedicated to his student, Isaac Zarfati. His commentary on the *Yesod Mora* of Abraham Ibn Ezra was dedicated to another student, this one a Karaite, Yosef Revizi.

No dedication of this kind is found heading the commentary on the Pentateuch. It remains more than likely that the drawing up of such a text was, to Comtino’s mind, but a natural extension of his teaching activities and that his commentary was destined for an audience as diverse as were his students. Consequently, the ever present concern that we have uncovered in his work is more easily understood—the more so since the rapprochement of the two communities was not without conflict and the very idea of Rabbanite instruction for Karaites was not always unanimously accepted.

These very questions were at the origin of one of the crises which marked the internal history of the Jewish community in Constantinople at the end of the fifteenth century. There was even a *herem* (ban) pronounced to forbid Rabbanite teachers from accepting Karaite students. The interdiction applied not only to the teaching of oral law but also to the written law and to the literal interpretation of the Scriptures as well as to the whole of the secular sciences (logic, physics, metaphysics, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music, and ethics). Such a measure, no doubt legitimized as the rejection of religious dissidence, also had a political dimension—for the Chief Rabbi of the city, Moshe Kapsali, had put his position at risk in this confrontation between the “intellectuals” and a group of leading citizens. Later, when he in turn had become leader of the Jewish community in Constantinople, Eliahu Mizrahi was called upon to judge the validity of this *herem*. To justify his decision invalidating the *herem*, Mizrahi was to invoke the authority of his master, Comtino, who was among those who had accepted Karaites students who had pledged themselves to respect the Rabbanite masters, living and dead, and not to profane the feast days of the Rabbanite calendar. Mizrahi did not neglect to point out that the previous warnings of Moshe Kapsali, including the *herem*, had had very little effect on the activity of these teachers. This demonstrates the relative independence of the latter from a weak central authority without any real means of coercion.

It is in such a context, and within such a perspective, that Comtino writes his abundant and diverse work. The commentary on the Pentateuch is but one part of it, along with several philosophic commentaries and numerous scientific works. The diversity of his production reflects that of his teaching. We have seen, however, that the pronounced interdiction applied to all teaching, including that of the secular sciences.

In fact, for Comtino as well, knowledge is indivisible and he draws upon the whole of knowledge in his exegesis. Comtino considers that a knowledge of secular science is indispensable to whoever would penetrate the meaning of the Scriptures. This is why he announces in his introduction that he intends to call upon, when necessary, the sciences of grammar, logic, physics, astronomy, arithmetic, geometry and metaphysics.

Such a profession of faith is not, of course, original. It takes on a particular meaning, however, in the socio-historical context within which it is expressed. Secular sciences could indeed play a mediating role between the Karaites and the Rabbanites. It has already been noted that a Karaite such as Aaron the Younger, in as early as the fourteenth century, was cognizant of the progress in science and philosophy, notably in the Rabbanite world, and considered that the Karaites could participate in this progress without renouncing their identity or breaking with their ancestors. Later Eliahu Bashiyazi, one of Comtino’s Karaite students, would even insist that mastery of the secular sciences was a necessity and would offer a descrip-
tion of the course of study to be followed which is not without parallel to the fields of study covered in the work of his teacher.91

In Comtino’s commentary, sciences often play a mediating or neutralizing role in the debate between the Rabbanite and the Karaite exegeses. An example will illustrate this.

Commenting on Leviticus 12.2 (“If a woman has conceived seed [ki tzria] and born a man-child”),92 Comtino recalls the idea of the Fathers of the oral tradition according to which “if the woman is the first to emit the seed, then she conceives a boy.”93 He next applies himself to responding to the objection raised by the Karaite, Aaron the Elder:94 “If it is so, then why [do we find a little further]: ‘But if she bear a maid-child [verse 5]?’” In a third movement he remains not at all within the confines of the polemic and re-examines the factors which determine the sex of a child, this time from a resolutely “scientific” point of view. In particular, he emphasizes the influence of the stars: it is the celestial configuration at the moment of conception which determines the sex of the child. Returning then to the contested opinion of the Fathers of the tradition, Comtino offers the hypothesis according to which the astral configuration which determines the sex of the child may also cause a precocious emission of seed on the part of the woman. In this case, “the opinion of our Elders, blessed be their memory, would be correct.” What Comtino forgets to indicate is that at the conclusion of his argument, the element considered the cause by the Elders has become rather a sign or an epiphenomenon; the primary and essential cause lies elsewhere.

Such an example clearly demonstrates the neutralizing function which the secular sciences could fill, becoming a sort of “common ground” where Karaites and Rabbanites could meet and transcend the habitual limits of the debates in which they were opposed.

That the herem forbidding the Rabbanites to disseminate knowledge to the Karaites included the “Greece” sciences is completely comprehensible. Eliahu Mizrahi was correct when he recalled that the sciences could be considered the common property of all, Jews, Christians (goymim) and Muslims (yishmaelim)—the pronounced interdiction thereby striking down what might be considered an ancient and respectable tradition of cultural and intellectual exchange.95 Comtino himself seems to have been one of the great Rabbanite teachers of the time who did not reserve their teachings for Jews alone (Rabbanite or Karaite) but opened it to all, Jews, Greeks, and Muslims.96

One of the sciences most often employed by Comtino in his commentary was astronomy (or astrology, there is no real distinction made between the two).97 Discussions of astronomy are numerous and lengthy in his work.98 This phenomenon could be accounted for in many ways. It could even be explained as simply indicative of a personal penchant on the part of the author for this science.99 In the socio-historical context with which we are dealing, however, it assumes a very particular significance.

In fact, one of the sciences particularly privileged by Comtino in his teaching was the science of astronomy. It is worthy of note that he taught astronomy to two highly important individuals, both of whom were to be called to leadership roles, one in the Rabbanite community and the other in the Karaite community. The first was the Rabbanite Eliahu Mizrahi, author of a commentary on the Almagest of Ptolemy100 and successor to Moshe Kapsali as head of the Jewish community in Constantinople. The other was Eliahu Bashyazi,101 himself head of his community and author of the legal code Aderet Eliahu.

We know that in the Karaite world the knowledge of astronomy and a mastery of the problems of the calendar—one of the principal areas of discord between the two communities102—was considered a source of power. According to the Karaite, Abraham Bali (second half of the fifteenth century, early sixteenth), if Yosef Revizi, who was one of Comtino’s Karaite students, was one of the great men of his generation, it was because it was “according to his instruction that the seomerenia was fixed.”103 In the same way, for Kaleb Afendopolou, astronomy is the “superior science” and Comtino, his teacher, is the “astronomer sage” (ha-hakham ha-tokhen)104 par excellence.

It is a fact that Comtino’s exegetic work takes into consideration—if only to reject it—the intellectual heritage of the Byzantine Karaite school. But above and beyond the polemical treatment of traditionally litigious questions between the two communities, there is also a constant, implicit, but altogether perceptible and perhaps more profound preoccupation with the confrontation between the pschat and the kabala which is no doubt the echo of an intimate debate between the Rabbanite teacher and his Karaite students. In this debate, secular, philosophical, and scientific knowledge may act as mediator and neutralizer.

These three lines of force in Comtino’s exegetic work reflect a social reality which in turn illuminates the work. To our knowledge, Comtino had no specific communal responsibilities. Any leadership he held was an intellectual one. The fact remains that he was the teacher of each of the leaders of the two large communities which formed Jewish society in Constantinople at the end of the fifteenth century, the Rabbanite and the Karaite communities. Comtino the exegete cannot be separated from Comtino.
the teacher. In the same way, the whole of his activity, literary and pedagogical, cannot be separated from one of the great debates of ideas which moved Jewish society in his time. This debate of ideas was also a political debate because it revolved around the question of the legitimacy of and the potential restrictions of the transmission of knowledge—all transmission of knowledge (written law, oral law, religious science, secular science) being at once a manifestation of power and a transmission of power. In the final analysis, the debate once again puts the spotlight on the place and the independence of the Jewish scholar vis-à-vis the community and its institutions.

NOTES

1 See especially Charles Touati, “La controverse de 1303-1306 autour des études philosophiques et scientifiques,” Revue des Etudes Juives 127 (1968): 21-37. See especially what is said about the social status of Levi ben Abraham (pp. 31-32) and of the interference of the Spanish Jews in the community affairs of southern France (p. 33).


3 On Byzantine Karaimism, see the now classic work of Zvi Ankori, Karaites in Byzantium. The Formative Years, 970-1100 (New York and Jerusalem, 1959).

4 Since the pioneering work of Hayim Yonah Gurland, (Ginsz Yisrael be-St. Petersburg 3 (1866) and Talpiot 1 (1895): 1-34 (special pagination of the Toledot anshe shem section), Mordekhai Comitino or Khotariano (on this name see: Steven Bowman, The Jews of Byzantium, 1204-1453 (Alabama, 1985), 149 n. 68 has not been the subject of a specific, in-depth study, although certain authors have been interested in him indirectly and even to publish short extracts of his works. For the latest work, see Jean-Christophe Attias, Le commentaire biblique. Mordekhai Komito ou le hérméneutique du dialogue (Paris, 1991).

5 Of this author Comitino wrote commentary on the Yesod Mora [The Foundation of Fear], the Sefer Ha-Shem [The Book of the Name], and the Sefer Ha-Ehad [The Book of the One].

6 Comitino wrote a commentary of the Logical Terminology (the only one of his works ever to be printed in its entirety, Beur Milot Ha-Higayon (Warsaw, 1865)). He also commented on the Guide for the Perplexed.

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7 See Attias, Le commentaire biblique, chapter 4.
9 Heinrich Graetz, History of the Jews, trans. from the German (Philadelphia, 1894), 4:269.
11 Literally, “the first Aaron,” in Hebrew, Aharon Ha-Rishon.
12 Introduction, folio 9a, Sefer Ha-Mivhar (Gozloum, 1834). Also cited by Z. Ankori, “Eliahu Bashyazi, the Karaite. A Study of the Traditions He Recorded Relative to the Beginnings of Karaism in Byzantium” (in Hebrew), Tarbiz 25 (1956): 201. On this reevaluation of the Talmudic heritage by the Byzantine Karaites, see Ankori, Karaites in Byzantium, 239-45.
14 On this heritage see Colette Sirat, La philosophie juive médiérale en terre d’Islam (Paris, 1988), 53-93.
17 See Ankori “Eliahu Bashyazi,” 309.
18 Danon, “The Karaites,” 309.
23 Aaron the Elder is cited by name twenty-two times, Aaron the Younger, eleven times.
24 BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 42r (on Gen. 38.26).
25 According to Job 35.16.
26 According to Deut. 28.28. These accusations appear in BN ms.
exact order, the first two letters of the term ZiMa (debauchery). To which Comitino responds that Aaron the Elder would not have made such an objection had he known the principle of notarikon—which authorizes the breaking down of a word and the reading of a word as an acronym—the principal letters of the word kumas (kaf, mem, and zain) become, in that order, the first letters of each of the words which form the expression Kan Mekom Zima.

39 See for example BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 85v (on Exod. 22.3).
40 BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 110v (on Lev. 3.9).
41 See, among others, BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 51v-53r (on Exod. 12.1) and folio 126v-128r (on Lev. 23.11). On the importance and the meaning of these debates concerning the calendar, see Ankori, Karaites, 288. On Comitino and the Karaite calendar, one might consult Jean-Christophe Attias, “Un temps pour enseigner, un temps pour apprendre. Karaites et Rabbinistes à Constantinople au XVe siècle,” in Politique et religion dans le judaïsme ancien et médiéval, ed. Daniel Tollet (Paris, 1989), 187-98.
42 See for example BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 105v-111r (on Lev. 3.9) and 159v (on Deut. 12.15). On the importance attached to this question, see Ankori, Karaites, 288.
43 BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 121v-122r (on Lev. 18.11-22).
44 BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 32r (on Gen. 24.63).
45 BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 126v-127r (on Lev. 23.11): “[and he the high priest] shall wave the sheaf before the Lord, to be accepted for you; on the morrow after the shabat [mi-mohorat ha-shabat] that the priest shall wave it.” The entire question centers on the meaning which should be attributed to the word shabat: “Saturday” (according to the Karaites) or “feast-day” (according to the Rabbanites). The date of the Sukot depends on the exegetical choice made (see Lev. 23.15).
47 See, for example, BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 110v-111r (on Lev. 3.9).
48 Adere Etliahu, folio 5r-6r.
49 Adere Etliahu, folio 33v. For the Karaites, each spring, it is the observation of the maturation of the barley in Holy Ground—the so-called system of the aviv—which allows the beginning of a new annual cycle to be determined and the intercalation of a supplementary month to be decided (see Ankori, Karaites, 292).

27 See BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 3r (Introduction).
28 See for example the way Comitino deals with A. Ibn Ezra’s interpretation of certain proper names: BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 22v (on Gen. 14.3). The admiration Comitino held for his model did not preclude another path (than that of the pshat): “then we will turn to the right or to the left, according to the case”). It was his independence of mind that was at the origin of the violent conflict which opposed him to his contemporary, Shabbai ben Malkiel ha-Kohen.
29 University Library of Leiden, ms. Or. 4779, folio 297v-324v. See note 30.
30 See: BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 112v (on Lev. 8.16); folio 113r (on Lev. 9.9); folio 114v (on Lev. 11.1) and folio 160r (on Deut. 14.22).
31 See for example BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 64r (on Exod. 11.6) and folio 120v (on Lev. 16.13).
34 On Moshe Kapurzato Ha-yevani (“the Greek”), who was himself often cited (and contested) by Comitino, see Mann, Texts and Studies, 2:709.
35 See Bowman, The Jews of Byzantium, 147.
36 Mann, Texts and Studies, 2:305.
37 BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 128r (on Lev. 23.24).
38 BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 107r, on Exod. 35.22: “And they came, both men and women, as many were willing-hearted and brought bracelets, and earrings, and rings, and tablets (kumaz) all jewels of gold... ” The debate was about the meaning of the term kumaz. Aaron the Elder contested that, in conformance with a traditional interpretation (The Babylonian Talmud, Shabat, 64a. See Rashi ad loc.), this word might be linked to the expression: kan mekom zima (literally: “here is the place [of] debauchery,” an allusion to the place on the body where this would be worn): “the zain would have had to precede the mem” (Sefer Ha-Mivhar, Exodus 70v-v, compare with A. Ibn Ezra, Perushei Ha-Tora [Commentaries on the Pentateuch], published, presented and annotated by Asher Wiezer, Jerusalem, 1976), 2:228 (long commentary on Exodus) in the word kuHaZ in order that the last two letters of the name of the jewelry would also be, in
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55 BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 2r (Introduction).
56 BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 2v (Introduction). Compare with A. Ibn Ezra, Perushai Ha-Tora, 1:6 (Hebraic pagination): “for there is no difference between these two Tora.”
57 Comitino, BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 2r (Introduction).
58 Ibid.
59 Comitino, BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 18r (on Gen. 8.13).
60 Comitino, BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 19v (on Gen. 10.8).
61 Comitino, BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 103v (on Exod. 34.6).
62 On the concept of haataka (transmission), on the word itself and its usage in the Rabbinite world (especially in the works of A. Ibn Ezra) and in the Karaite world, see Poznanski, “Anan,” 182. See also Ankori, “Elaihu Bashyazi,” 195 and Ankori, Karaites, 224-39.
63 Comitino, BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 110r (on Lev. 2.13). One may also consult, on the same theme, among others: folio 39v (on Gen. 35.22); folio 70r (on Exod. 15.25); folio 113r (on Lev. 9.1); folio 125v (on Lev. 21.14); folio 133r (on Lev. 27.29); folio 137r (on Num. 8.2); folio 138r (on Num. 10.3); folio 160v (on Deut. 15.12), etc.
64 See for example Comitino, BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 32r (on Gen. 24.63); folio 95v (on Exod. 29.14); folio 82v (on Exod. 21.8); folio 98r (on Exod. 30.38); folio 150r (on Num. 27.11); folio 159r (on Deut. 12.4).
65 Comitino, BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 83v (on Exod. 21.9).
66 Comitino, BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 115r (on Lev. 11.32).
67 Comitino, BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 118r (on Lev. 14.6). See also: folio 115r (on Lev. 11.29); folio 116v (on Lev. 13.12); folio 119r (on Lev. 15.25); folio 120r (on Lev. 16.8); folio 122v (on Lev. 19.10); folio 123r (on Lev. 19.19); folio 123v (on Lev. 19.27); folio 124r (on Lev. 20.8); folio 125r (on Lev. 21.2); folio 125v (on Lev. 21.14); folio 126v (on Lev. 22.23 and 23.10); folio 128r (on Lev. 23.15); folio 128v (on Lev. 23.40); folio 129r (on Lev. 24.8), etc.
68 Comitino, BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 65r (on Exod. 12.18).
69 Comitino, BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 85v-v (on Exod. 21.37). See also, among others, folio 109v (on Lev. 1.4); folio 119r (on Lev. 16.17).
70 Comitino, BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 2r (Introduction). Compare with A. Ibn Ezra, Perushai Ha-Tora, 1:5 (Hebraic pagination): “And all of these commandments require (zrikho) the kabala and the tradition (masoret).”
71 Comitino, BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 76r (on Exod. 19.15).
72 Comitino, BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 108v (on Exod. 40.17).
73 Comitino, BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 39v (on this verse).
74 Compare with the Babylonian Talmud, Shabat, 55b. See the commentaries of Rashi and of A. Ibn Ezra, Perushai Ha-Tora, 1:104 (Hebraic pagination).

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75 Aaron the Younger, Keter Tora [The Crown of the Tora] (Gozlow: 1866). Gen. folio 74v (on this verse).
76 Compare, for example, Contino and Aaron the Younger on Gen. 9.21. (BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 19r and Keter Tora, folio 39r); on Exod. 21.23 (BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 82r and Keter Tora, folio 69r); on Exod. 30.23 (BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 97v and Keter Tora, folio 104v); on Exod. 30.38 (BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 98r and Keter Tora, folio 105v); on Num. 27.11 (BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 150r and Keter Tora, folio 42r); on Deut. 19.17 (BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 162v and Keter Tora, folio 22v); on Deut. 20.10 (BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 162v and Keter Tora, folio 23r); on Deut. 21.11-12 (BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 163r and Keter Tora, folio 24r).
77 Comitino, BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 120v (on Lev. 16.13).
78 Comitino, BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 82r-v (on Exod. 21.7).
79 Trinity College Library, Cambridge; ms. Hebr. 126, folio 2r.
80 Moshe Maimonides, Beur Milot Ha-Higayon. Introduction by Comitino.
81 He wrote the famous letter calling the Jews of Germany to come settle in Ottoman territory are one in the same, see J. Hacker, “The Jewish Society of Salonica in the 15th and 16th Centuries. A Chapter in the History of Jewish Society in the Ottoman Empire” (in Hebrew) (Diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1978), Appendices 2-12.
82 Garland, Ginzei Yisrael, 10.
83 On this affair one might consult Meir Benayahu, Rabbi Eliahu Kapsali of Candia (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv, 1983), 42-45.
84 Cited in this order by Eliahu Mizrahi, Responsa (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 5698 [1938]) Responsum 57:176.
85 Ibid.
86 Which he did in ibid., Responsum.
87 On Comitino as teacher of E. Mizrahi, see Avraham David, “Rabbi Mordekhai Comitino teacher of Eliahu Mizrahi” (in Hebrew), Kiriath Sefer 45, no. 2 (Adar 5730 [1970]): 299.
88 Mizrahi, Responsum 57:179-80.
90 Comitino, BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 3r (Introduction).
91 Bashyazi, Aderet Eliahu, folio 82r. Compare this passage with Comitino, BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 53r (on Exod. 3.13).
92 Comitino, BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 116r.
93 Compare with *Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot* 60a, *Nida* 28a and 31a. Compare with A. Ibn Ezra, *Perushim Ha-Tora*, 3:35. See also the commentary of Nahmanides on the same passage.

94 See *Sefer Ha-Mivhar*, Leviticus, folio 19r.

95 Mizrahi, *Responsa*, 176.


98 See especially, Comtino, BN ms. Hebr. 265, folio 8v-9r (on Gen. 2.4); folio 13v-14r (on Gen. 4.7); folio 31r (on Gen. 24.3); folio 36v (on Gen. 31.19); folio 64v (on Exod. 12.12); folio 88v (on Exod. 23.25); folio 104r-106v (on Exod. 34.10); folio 129v (on Lev. 25.8).

99 Comtino is the author of opuscules on the method of building a sundial, an astrolabe, and the astronomical instrument called *al-safiha* as well as of a *Commentary on the Persian Tables* (see Gurland, *Ginzei Yisrael*, 3-5).

100 Ovadia, “Rabbi Eliahu Mizrahi,” 79.

101 As is recalled by a Karaite author of the eighteenth century, Simha Yizhak Luki (Mann, *Texts and Studies*, 2:1418).

102 See note 42.

103 Gurland, *Ginzei Yisrael*, 32.