

Book against the People of the Equinox

How to fix the calendar was one of the most prominent issues of contention between medieval Rabbanites and Karaites. Whereas Rabbanites used fixed mathematical schemes for determining months and intercalating years, Karaites relied on the observation of natural phenomena, such as the appearance of the new crescent moon and the ripening of the barley (*aviv*).

However, Karaites themselves had no uniform opinion on calendar matters. The procedure of intercalating the year and determining the date of Passover on the basis of the barley crop was rooted in the biblical commandment to observe the month of *aviv* and celebrate Passover (Deuteronomy 16:1). However, it involved many unknown quantities that could not be unambiguously established on the basis of the biblical text. While all Karaites agreed that *aviv* referred to barley in a certain stage of ripening, they held different opinions about the exact ripening stage that one was to look for, the time and place of the investigation, and the amount of crops in the correct stage of ripening that had to be present in order to celebrate Passover.

Some Karaites in Iraq preferred a different method altogether. Instead of the barley crop in the state of *aviv*, they relied on the vernal equinox as a criterion for celebrating Passover, defined as the time when the sun enters the constellation of Aries. Their arguments against the *aviv* and in favour of the equinox are known from a legal work on the commandments composed by the Karaite Levi b. Yefet.¹

These so-called “people of the equinox” met with opposition from Jerusalem scholars associated with the Karaite Academy (*dār lil-’ilm*) in that city. One of the scholars who wrote against the equinox method was Abū Ya‘qūb Yūsuf ibn Ibrāhīm al-Baṣīr (Heb. Joseph ben Abraham ha-Ro’eh; b. in 960s or 970s, d. between 1037 and 1039).² Originally from Persia or Iraq, Yūsuf al-Baṣīr moved to Jerusalem at the end of the 10th century and became one of the most brilliant members of the Karaite Academy, whose works belong to what is now known as the Golden Age of Karaite literature.

Al-Baṣīr’s polemical treatise against the supporters of the equinox was known from mentions in his other works but never previously identified. Recently, I came across a title page and introduction of this work in T-S K6.63. A search for joins on the Friedberg Jewish Manuscripts Society’s platform quickly revealed that additional fragments of the work are found in T-S Ar.50.121, T-S AS 154.512, and T-S Ar.28.36. The fragments are on parchment in an 11th-century hand and refer to al-Baṣīr as deceased, suggesting that they were copied not long after his death.

T-S K6.63 verso

אלכתאב עלי אצחאב

אלאעתדאל ללשיך

1 Levi b. Yefet, *Book of Commandments*, completed in 1006/1007 (Oxford, Bodl., Reggio 5, fols 16r-16v).

2 Gregor Schwarb, “Yūsuf al-Baṣīr”, in: *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*, Executive Editor Norman A. Stillman. Consulted online on 26 July 2019

אבו יעקוב יוסף בן אברהם

אלבציר נו נפ

Book against the people
of the equinox by the Šaykh
Abū Ya‘qūb Yūsuf b. Abraham
al-Baṣīr, may his soul be at rest

T-S K6.63 recto

למא ראית אידך אללה שתאת
אלנאס פי אמר אלעיד לאגל
תאכר אלאעתדאל ען וגוד אלאביב
ותעויל בעצהם עליה סאלתנא
אמלי כלאם פיה ואלאגתהאד
פי איצאח שבההם וחלהא
פאגבתך אלי סואלך מע מסלתה
תעאלי אלעצמה מן כל גלט וזל[ל]
והו אלמתפצל באגאבה דלך
בלטפה וכרמה

When you, may God support you, saw the disunion of the people in the matter of the festival due to the equinox falling after the finding of the *aviv* and to some people's relying on it, you asked us to dictate a discourse about it and to take pains to make plain their errors and undo them. We have responded to your request, while asking the Exalted One to guard us from all errors and mistakes. He is the One who is gracious in responding to this in His benevolence and generosity.

From this introduction one can learn that Yūsuf al-Baṣīr composed the *Book against the People of the Equinox* at the request of someone who had noticed people celebrating Passover at different times due to their reliance on the equinox instead of the *aviv* – noticeable on those occasions when these two phenomena do not co-occur. Composing a book in response to a questioner is a trope in medieval Arabic introductions³ but the calendrical concern must have been real. The questioner was particularly troubled about years when the vernal equinox occurred after the *aviv* had been found and Passover celebrated by those relying on it. In such cases those relying on the equinox would not have celebrated with the rest of the Karaites but would have intercalated the year and celebrated

3 Freimark, Peter. *Das Vorwort Als Literarische Form in Der Arabischen Literatur*, Münster, 1967, pp. 36–37

Passover in the next month, ensuring that Passover fell in the spring season as marked by the vernal equinox.

Two questions arise in connection with the identified fragments. Firstly, what method did the “people of the equinox” use to establish when the equinox occurred? Various values could be found in Muslim astronomical tables and the traditional Jewish calculation of *tequfat Šemu’el* must have been known to Iraqi Karaites, too. It has, furthermore, been suggested that they may have observed rather than calculated the equinox.⁴ At this stage of my research it is unclear which values they used. Yūsuf al-Bašīr himself highlighted the existence of different values as a weakness of the equinox method when referring to it in his legal work *Kitab al-Istibšār*. He pointed out that the time of the equinox could not accurately be known since the values given in the astronomical tables (*zīj*) of Ptolemy and of al-Ma’mūn are not the same and the Rabbanite *tequfa* differs from them both.⁵

Secondly, it is not clear whether Iraqi Karaites were the only group of people who Yūsuf al-Bašīr polemicised against. On the one hand, his exposition appears from the surviving fragments to tackle the Iraqis’ arguments in favour of the equinox as they are found in Levi b. Yefet’s book. On the other hand, T-S Ar.28.36v mentions Sa’adya Gaon and T-S Ar.28.36r cites BT Sanhedrin 11b, two pronouncedly Rabbanite sources. In BT Sanhedrin 11b the ancient empirical rabbinic intercalation procedure is described, which was based on three criteria – the *aviv*, fruits of the tree and the equinox. Unlike the empirical Talmudic calendar, the calculated Rabbanite calendar used in the time of Yūsuf al-Bašīr, as well as today, does not depend on the equinox. Notwithstanding this, it seems possible that Yūsuf al-Bašīr subsumed Rabbanites under the “people of the equinox” for the purposes of his polemic.⁶

4 Haggai Ben Shammai, conference paper “Levi ben Yefet on the calendar - revisited” at the Research Workshop “Karaites Studies: The State of the Field”, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel, February 2012. A video recording of the talk is available at <https://youtu.be/WxWHccHJraY> (accessed on 2 August 2019)

5 *Kitab al-Istibšār fī al-farā’id*, discourse 3, chapter 4, see Ms. SP RNL Evr.-Arab. I 1793, fol. 104a.

6 In his *Book of Commandments*, Levi b. Yefet states that the Rabbanite calculations is “close to the equinox” (Oxford, Bodl., Reggio 5, fols 16r).