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Karaism

Karaism (Heb. *qara'ut*), the form of Judaism which claims to adhere to a more literal interpretation of the Bible (*miqra'*) than that of the → Rabbanites, the exponents of Rabbinic Judaism, and which rejects the institution of Jewish Oral Law as codified in the Mishna and Talmud, had its origins and greatest intellectual accomplishments in the Islamic world. It emerged in Iran, Iraq, and the Land of Israel in the late eighth and ninth centuries, and it had a Golden Age in tenth- and eleventh-century Jerusalem. During this period Karaite theology, exegesis, and linguistic studies were influenced by Arabic literature and Islamic thought, as was the Rabbanite oeuvre. Both Karaites and Rabbanites wrote their major philosophical, exegetical, and linguistic works in Judeo-Arabic, and used Hebrew mainly for poetry, liturgy, and some legal documents and responsa. After the Crusader conquest of Jerusalem, the most important Karaite communities were found in non-Islamic environments (Byzantium, Crimea, and Lithuania) and the link to Islam was weakened, but other communities remained in the Islamic world (most notably Egypt) or came under Islamic domination (the Ottoman Empire). The East European Karaites, who distanced themselves from the Jewish people in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for reasons of social and political

convenience, have almost disappeared. Today, the strongest Karaite community is found in the State of Israel and is made up primarily of immigrants from Egypt and their descendants.

1. Medieval Period: Origins and Influences

The traditional Rabbanite explanation of Karaite origins is encapsulated in the story of → 'Anan ben David (fl. ca. 767), a disgruntled candidate for the post of → exilarch (political head of the Jewish community in Iraq). Having been passed over by the geonim (see → Gaon and Gaonate) in favor of his younger brother because of suspicions concerning his orthodoxy, Anan justified those suspicions by propagating a rival form of Jewish practice based on his own interpretations of the Bible rather than on rabbinic tradition. This explanation, which was first recorded in the twelfth century by a Karaite who wished to dispute it, is highly suspect, and it is now clear that Anan's followers, the Ananites, had only a tenuous connection to the later Karaites. The Ananites eventually disappeared, having been incorporated into the much larger Karaism, which then accepted Anan as a central Karaite personality, perhaps because of his noble lineage as a member of the exilarchic family. Even if Anan was not the actual founder of Karaism, many historians consider his form of Judaism, most notably his rejection of the Oral Law and scripturalist approach to the Bible, as reflected in his *Sefer Mišvot* (Book of Commandments), to be a medieval phenomenon that was influenced by sectarian trends in the Islamic world but also reflects long-standing internal Jewish disputes.

Early Karaites had no one accepted explanation of their origins. Their historiographical reflections usually revolved around explaining how religious divergence had entered into Judaism altogether. Some Karaites, such as Jacob al- → Qirqisānī, claimed that deviant religious practices first arose in the time of the biblical King Jeroboam, the founder of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Later Karaites argued that the Rabbanite concept of an Oral Torah (Heb. *tora she-be'al peh*) whose laws took precedence over the Written Torah (*tora she-*

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bikhtav) had its origins in the Second Temple period, until which time most Jews were united in a more literal understanding of the Bible. The Karaites saw themselves as steadfast loyal- ists to the original meaning of the biblical com- mandments, defending Judaism against what they perceived as the Rabbanite perversion of the holy text. Anan was not considered an innovator but a conservator of the true Judaism.

Although the Karaite traditions concerning the movement's emergence, many of which were first presented only many centuries after the emergence of Karaism, have little historical value in themselves, they cannot be completely dismissed out of hand in light of discoveries in the Judean Desert and in the → Cairo Geniza. A number of scholars have remarked upon the points of convergence between Second Temple literature, especially the Dead Sea Scrolls, and medieval Karaism, but the nature and signifi- cance of the relationship are still matters of dis- pute. The discovery of the sectarian Damascus Document, or Zadokite Fragment, both at Qumran and in the Geniza may have some connection to Karaism.

Other historians of Karaite origins point to the fact that many of the first Karaites came from communities which were at a geographi- cal distance from the rabbinic academies in Iraq, indicating, perhaps, that Karaism, as it eventually emerged, was a product of loyalty to alternative, long-standing, local practices, which had been challenged by the geonim, who were intent on instilling legal uniformity among the Jews of the Islamic world. Hence, there was no conscious rebellion against rab- binic authority but a slow coalescing of anti- rabbinic forces. Whatever its origins, by the end of the tenth century Karaism had fully emerged, having overcome internal diver- gences and presenting a recognizable alterna- tive Jewish religious ideology and legal system.

Islamic Elements in Karaism

Just as there is no scholarly consensus con- cerning the origins of Karaism, there is also disagreement as to the extent of Islamic influ- ence on the emergent new form of Judaism. Karaites developed their legal system by means

of a close reading of the biblical text, by apply- ing logical analogy through the personal effort of the exegete/legist, and by consulting the practices of the community. These aspects— text (Arabic: *na ṣṣ*), analogy (Ar. *qiyās*), per- sonal effort (Ar. *ijtihād*), and consensus (Ar. *ijmā'*)—are common features of Islamic legal systems. Yet, they also have roots in pre-Islamic Judaism and are employed in Rabbinic Judaism (in a manner dissimilar to that of Karaism). In addition, certain Karaite practices, including aspects of synagogue prayer (removal of shoes, full prostration, sitting on the floor) and calen- drical procedures (declaring the new moon on the basis of actual astronomical observation) also have both ancient Jewish and Islamic par- allels. It is, hence, difficult to determine the extent to which Karaite authorities took their cues from Islamic models and how much was derived from internal Jewish considerations.

Even if Karaite law is less reflective of Islam than of older Jewish practices which had been abandoned by Rabbanites, it is undeniable that the Islamic milieu had a decisive impact on Karaite cultural achievements (as it did on those of the Rabbanites). Although Anan wrote in the scholarly Aramaic of the Babylonian academies, and early Karaites such as → Benja- min al-Nahāwandī and → Daniel al-Qūmisī wrote mainly in Hebrew, Arabic soon became the dominant language among Karaites, and most of the classical works written during the Golden Age were composed in → Judeo-Arabic. Arabic became so deeply entrenched among Karaites that they even produced transcrip- tions of the Hebrew Bible into Arabic script, although the motivation behind these tran- scriptions did not lie in a lack of knowledge of Hebrew, in whose study they excelled as lead- ing Hebrew grammarians, but rather in their mistrust of the rabbinic reading traditions of the Bible. Furthermore, Karaites closely stud- ied Islamic texts, most notably theological and philosophical ones, and without the Karaite transcriptions of these treatises, a number of Islamic literary works would not have survived.

Karaite Cultural Accomplishments

Much like their Rabbanite rivals, Karaite intellectuals pursued a number of different

cultural avenues: law, exegesis, linguistics, theology, polemics, and the like. Some have theorized that the Karaites were pioneers in a number of these fields, setting the tone for later Rabbanite responses or imitations, while others have denied the validity of this "pan-Karaite theory" of Jewish culture and understand Rabbanite and Karaite achievements in the Islamic period as complementary. Whatever the case, it is clear that both Karaites and Rabbanites followed Islamic models in their tenth- and eleventh-century intellectual pursuits.

The greatest Karaite legalist of the classical period was Jacob al-Qirḡisānī, author of *Kitāb al-Anwār wal-Marāqib* (The Book of Lights and Watchtowers). This massive *summa*, written in Arabic in approximately 927 in Iraq, offers a full guide to Karaite practice, acknowledging the legal anarchy which was characteristic of the group until then. Qirḡisānī's legal pronouncements reflect the needs of his diaspora community. In contrast, his Karaite contemporaries who lived in the Land of Israel in the Golden Age were mostly Mourners of Zion (*avale ṣiyyon*), a group that adopted ascetic practices and rituals which they hoped would lead to the messianic redemption. Legal codes were written by → Levi ben Japheth and → Yūsuf al-Baṣīr in the early eleventh century in Palestine. In the mid-eleventh century, al-Baṣīr's student, → Jeshua ben Judah, introduced some much-needed reforms, especially in the laws of incest, the Karaite interpretations of which had made finding suitable marital partners in a small community very difficult.

The premier Karaite exegete was → Japheth ben Eli, whose commentaries on the entire Bible influenced not only later Karaite interpretations but also the Rabbanite exegete Abraham → ibn Ezra, who often cites Japheth's opinions. Like a number of other Karaites, Japheth presented contemporary prognostic interpretations of biblical prophecies, understanding many biblical passages in light of the experiences of his own Karaite community. Byzantine Karaites compiled Hebrew anthologies based on Japheth's commentaries, but the long-term impact of his works was vitiated by his use of Arabic and the lack of clear Hebrew translations. Other exegetes included → Daniel

al-Qūmisī, Joseph → ibn Nūḥ, and → Salmon ben Jeroham. The latter, along with his mid-tenth-century contemporary → Sahl ben Maṣliāḥ, were preeminent Karaite missionaries and polemicists.

Karaites of the Golden Age were especially interested in Hebrew grammar, and their most prominent grammarian was the early eleventh-century Abū 'l-Faraj Hārūn and his *Kitāb al-Mushtamil* (Comprehensive Treatise). Other prominent Karaite linguists were → David ben Abraham al-Fāsi, who wrote a comprehensive Hebrew lexicon in the second half of the tenth century, and 'Alī ben Suleiman, the eleventh-century grammarian and exegete who wrote a commentary on Genesis.

The leading Karaite philosopher of the Golden Age was → Yūsuf al-Baṣīr (Joseph ha-Ro'eh; euphemistically "the seer," referring to his blindness) in the early eleventh century, a legalist and theologian. Al-Baṣīr's thought was situated firmly in the Islamic school of Kalām, greatly influenced by the Baṣrian Mu'tazilite, Abū 'l-'Abd al-Jabbār (ca. 935–1025). His major philosophical work was *Kitāb al-Muḥṭawī* (General Treatise; Heb. *Sefer Ne'imot*, The Book of Delights), a shortened form of which was entitled *Kitāb al-Manṣūrī* (The Book for Manṣūr), also known as *Kitāb al-Tamyīz* (Book of Discernment; Heb. *Sefer Maḥkimat Peti*, Making Wise the Simple, cf. Psalm 19:8). Following kalamic methodology, al-Baṣīr demonstrates the existence of God by means of proofs that the world was created. This God, whose unity is absolute, is fully just and His actions are all wise. Al-Baṣīr's thought played a central role in Karaite theology, and even when Byzantine Karaites later replaced → Kalām with a Karaite form of Maimonidean Aristotelianism, certain aspects of al-Baṣīr's intellectual legacy remained.

When the centers of Karaite life moved away from the Islamic realm, Karaism progressively fell under the influence of Rabbanite Judaism, and a number of changes were introduced into its practices and beliefs. The Land of Israel and Mourning for Zion became less central for Karaism; the Karaite literary language now was Hebrew. Nevertheless, the original Islamic influences on Karaism remained significant.

Distinct Karaite Practices

When Karaism emerged in the early Middle Ages, Jewish communities were generally not permitted to exercise civil or criminal law, so these areas of jurisprudence received little attention from Karaite legalists. Thus, the distinctions between Karaism and Rabbanism are most notable in matters of ritual, which were under Jewish jurisdiction. In the classical period, differences between the two alternative forms of Judaism can be seen in matters of the calendar, dietary laws, liturgy, laws of purity and personal status.

Calendar. Since the Karaite calendar was set by actual astronomical observation and not by calculation, it usually ran a day or two behind the Rabbanite calendar (and in leap years the two systems could be a month apart). The Karaite calendar also did not have "postponements" (*dehiyyot*) which prevented some holidays falling on certain days of the week; thus, holidays would often not be on the same days in the two calendars. In addition, the Karaite calendar places Shavuot invariably on a Sunday (understanding the counting of the Omer from the "morrow of the Sabbath" as beginning on a Saturday night). Since Karaites observed only one day of the biblical holidays, even in the Diaspora, and their Torah lectionary cycle was from Nisan to Nisan, they did not observe Simḥat Torah. Rosh ha-Shana, known by its biblical name, Yom Teru'a, was only one day, in Israel and in the Diaspora, and the shofar was not sounded. The Karaites did not take the four species on Sukkot, nor did they observe the postbiblical Hanukka. Their fast-days in mourning of the destruction of the Temple were held on different days than the Rabbanite ones. On the Sabbath, Karaites sat in dark homes, prohibited from lighting lamps on the eve of the Sabbath; they also desisted from engaging in sexual intercourse. Karaite Sabbath prohibitions led to their being accused of making the Sabbath a day of gloom instead one of joy.

Dietary Laws. Anan ben David ruled that the prohibition of seething a kid in its mother's milk referred to the first fruits and not to actual meat and milk, but even the later Karaites, who rejected Anan's interpretation, did not take the

verse to mean a blanket prohibition of ingesting or cooking all meat (including fowl) with all milk. The prohibition was either taken literally or was expanded to meat and milk of the same species but not of disparate species. In the absence of clear identification of the forbidden birds mentioned in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, some Karaites prohibited any bird which was not used as a sacrifice (pigeons and doves), whereas others were more permissive. Karaites also prohibited ingesting the fat tail of animals. In the communities of the Mourners of Zion, regulations concerning meat were not very relevant, since the Mourners neither ate meat nor drank wine.

Liturgy. Karaite synagogues were characterized by carpets on the floors on which the worshipers, their shoes removed, sat or prostrated themselves in the direction of Jerusalem; no chairs were present. The recited prayers, taken mostly from the Book of Psalms, were quite different from Rabbanite prayers, which were more often than not postbiblical in origin. A prayer shawl was worn, but phylacteries (*tefillin*) were unknown, since the relevant biblical verses that were understood by the rabbis as mandating them were interpreted differently by the Karaites. Similarly, the Karaites did not put *mezuzot* on the doorposts of their houses.

Laws of Purity. The rabbis generally ruled that the extensive biblical system of purity and impurity was no longer applicable in the absence of the Temple. Thus, there was no longer a prohibition of contact with certain creatures (insects, impure animals, and the like). Karaites, however, maintained these prohibitions, mandating cleansing after such contact (by simply washing, not immersion in a *miqve*). Menstrual prohibitions were restricted to the biblically mandated total of seven days, with no additional days of waiting; postpartum women had to wait forty days (for a boy) or eighty (for a girl) before becoming pure. During their periods of impurity, women were forbidden to enter the synagogue. When the time period was over, purity was achieved by washing, not immersion.

Personal Status. Karaites were much stricter than Rabbanites in their laws of incestual relations. Employing analogy, they extended the

biblical laws beyond the strict letter of the law, forbidding, for instance, uncle-niece marriage as an extension of the biblical prohibition of aunt-nephew relations (the Rabbanites approved, and even recommended, uncle-niece marriage). As noted, in the eleventh century, some of the prohibitions were modified in order to make it easier for Karaites to find marriage partners.

Karaite marriage laws were similar to Rabbanite ones, and the rabbis recognized Karaite marriages as valid. Since, however, divorce laws were different, Karaite divorces were not accepted as valid by Rabbanites. Hence, a Karaite woman who remarried after a divorce would still be considered a married woman by the Rabbanites; her children from the remarriage would be *mamzerim* (a status of illegitimacy which results in a prohibition of marriage with most other Jews). Karaites rejected the literal application of levirate marriage by a brother-in-law in light of the Levitical prohibition of relations with one's sister-in-law. Despite these significant divergences in matters of personal status, quite a number of marriage contracts (*ketubbot*) preserved in the Cairo Geniza indicate that members of the two groups did marry with one other. The marriage contracts often served as a prenuptial agreement outlining the ritual compromises each side would make in order to promote domestic harmony.

Karaite-Rabbanite Relations

Although the literary records of the Karaite-Rabbanite debate give the impression of an almost complete break between these competing forms of Judaism, other evidence, such as letters and marriage contracts, indicates that the two groups normally had cordial if not close relationships. Rather than seeing Karaism as a sectarian, heretical form of Judaism (the ostensible Rabbanite position), it might be more useful to see each group on the model of the Islamic *madhāhib* (legal communities). The Islamic authorities considered both groups to be part of the larger Jewish community, and the two groups often cooperated with each other when confronted by the Muslim majority. It took several centuries before the boundaries between Karaites and Rabbanites were fully established, and even then Karaites and

Rabbanites in the Islamic realm were never characterized by complete schism. The sixteenth-century Egyptian Rabbi David ben Abu Ibn Zimra's permission for Rabbanites to marry with Karaites stands in stark contrast with his Polish contemporary Rabbi Moses Isserles's prohibition of such intermarriages. In modern times, the Karaites in Islamic countries (unlike Karaites in Eastern Europe) never denied or rejected their attachment to the Jewish people. Among the Karaites (see → Karaism) of modern Egypt there were many supporters of Zionism, and one of them, Moshe Marzuk, was executed by the Egyptians as an Israeli agent in 1955. After 1956 most of the Egyptian Karaites emigrated to the State of Israel, while others found their way to the United States (mostly the Bay area of San Francisco) or to Europe. There are perhaps thirty or forty thousand Karaites in the world today.

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2. The Karaites of Modern Egypt

There are very few scholarly studies of the history and culture of the Karaite community in early-modern and modern Egypt. This is perhaps due to the small size of the community and the fact that its intellectual and cultural output, while not insignificant, does not rival the accomplishments of the medieval period. Moreover, studies of Karaism have traditionally focused on issues of biblical interpretation, liturgy, and religious law and practice. There were some developments in these areas among the Karaites of modern Egypt. However, the efforts to reform and modernize communal institutions, to make a transition from the status of a protected, but subordinate, non-Muslim religious community in late Ottoman Egypt to citizenship in the Egyptian nation-state and participation in its economic, social, and cultural life, and the ultimate failure of the Karaites, as of the → Rabbanite Jews, to become full-fledged citizens are more salient. These processes are also of broader interest as they are comparable to the trajectory of other minority communities in Egypt and in the territories of the former Ottoman Empire in the