

## Karaite Judaism

### Brief History

Karaite Judaism truly began with the national revelation at Har Sinai. Those who followed YHVH's laws were at first called "Righteous."<sup>1</sup>

*A bribe you are not to take, for a bribe blinds the open-eyed, and twists the words of the righteous* [צדקיים]. (Shemot 23:8)<sup>2</sup>

It was really only in the ninth-century CE that the followers of YHVH's law began being called Yahadut Qara'it. At first, everyone who followed Torah were of one mind and one sect – that of the Yahadut Qara'it. Throughout Jewish history a variety of sects – such as the Sadducees, Boethusians, Ananites, and Pharisees – came into existence. It was in this atmosphere that the followers of Torah became known as the Yahadut Qara'it.<sup>1</sup>

At the end of the Biblical period – in the first century BCE – two opposing sects came into being in Yisrael. The Sadducees (also known as the Zadokites) followed only the Torah as sacred text. Josephus explains that the Sadducees "take away fate, and say there is no such thing, and that the events of human affairs are not at its disposal; but they suppose that all our actions are in our own power, so that we are ourselves the causes of what is good, and receive what is evil from our own folly."<sup>3</sup> The Pharisees taught of an "Oral Torah" that was added to the Written Torah. This sect taught "that some actions, but not all, are the work of fate, and some of them are in our own power, and that they are liable to fate, but are not caused by fate."<sup>3</sup> Two additional sects arose during the Second Temple Period – the Essenes and the Boethusians. The Essenes was a sect of Judaism that added several books to the Torah. They taught "that fate governs all things, and that nothing befalls men but what is according to its determination."<sup>3</sup> The Boethusians were a sect like the Sadducees who only follow the Written Torah and rejected any additions to the mitzvot given to Moshe ha-navi.<sup>1</sup>

In the early Middle-Ages the Pharisees continued to thrive and began calling themselves "Rabbis." In the seventh-century the Muslims completely swept the Middle-East. They had no real interest in imposing Islam on the Jews and gave them a degree of autonomy under a system of Rosh Galut, also known by the Greek name Exilarch. With the establishment of the Rosh Galut, the Rabbinate became a political power throughout the Middle-East. They began to force upon all Jews within the Empire the Rabbinic laws contained within the Talmud Bavli. There was fierce resistance to the Rabbinate by those who had never heard of the Talmud Bavli. One resistance leader, Abu Isa al-Isfahani, led an army of Jews against the Muslim government. However all attempts to cast off the Rabbinic rulers failed.<sup>1</sup>

In the eighth-century, Anan ben-David organized various non-Talmudic Jewish groups and lobbied the Caliphate to establish a second Rosh Galut for those Jews who refused to follow the man-made laws of the Talmud Bavli. The Muslims granted Anan and his followers the freedom to practice Judaism as their ancestors had practiced it. Anan was not a Karaite but he did reject

the Talmud. His followers became known as Ananites and this group continued to exist until the tenth-century. Another group of Jews who continued to practice Judaism only according to the Tanakh became known as B'nei Miqra (Followers of Scripture). Their name was shorted to Kara'im (Scripturalists) which became Karaites in the English language. This name is derived from the Hebrew word for the Tanakh – Miqra and its root Kara. The name Kara'im means “Scripturalists” and distinguished these Jews from the Rabbis who call themselves Rabanyin (Followers of the Rabbis) or Talmudiyin (Followers of the Talmud).<sup>1</sup>

### Karaite Judaism Defined

Karaites (B'nei Miqra – “Followers of the Scriptures”) are the modern-day progenitors of an ancient sect of Jews who reject an oral law and the rabbinic traditions and laws. The Karaites practice the ancient form of Judaism that is spoken about in the Tanakh. The Karaites follow the authentic Jewish religion that was taught to us by YHVH Himself through the Tanakh without any additions or subtractions.

*You are not to add to the word that I am commanding you, and you are not to subtract from it, in keeping the commandments of YHVH your God that I am commanding you. (Devarim 4:2)*<sup>2</sup>

In the current era of the galut (exile) we have no prophecy for YHVH is hiding His “face” from us due to the sins of Yisrael. Only through living in accordance to the mitzvot given to us through the Tanakh are we redeemed from sin.

*As for the wicked man, if he repents from all his sins that he committed, and he observes all My decrees and practices justice and righteousness, he shall surely live, he shall not die. (Yechezkiel 18:21)*<sup>4</sup>

Karaites teach that everyone has the obligation to study Tanakh and to determine for themselves the correct meaning of the mitzvot based upon their own understanding and reasoning.

*[I said,] ‘Sow for yourselves righteousness and you will reap according to kindness; till for yourselves a tilling and [set] a time to seek YHVH until He comes and teaches you righteousness.’ (Hoshea 10:12)*<sup>4</sup>

*The ancient adage of the Karaite sages declares: “Search well in the Scriptures and do not rely on anyone’s opinion”. In this regard the Karaite sages taught: “He who relies upon any of the teachers of the Exile without personal investigation, it is as if he has engaged in idolatry.”*<sup>1</sup>

Karaites place no real value in the interpretations of the majority opinion or of our forefathers’ customs, for we are taught:

*You are not to go after many (people) to do evil. And you are not to testify in a quarrel so as to turn aside toward many – (and thus) turn away. (Shemot 23:2)*<sup>2</sup>

The nevi'im (prophets) warned B'nei Yisrael against following our forefathers' errant steps.

*Do not be like your fathers and brothers who betrayed YHVH, the God of their forefathers, so that he made them into a desolation, as you see. (Divrei Hayamim Beit 30:7)<sup>4</sup>*

This same warning from the nevi'im applies to laws that are invented by men.

*The Lord said: Inasmuch as this people has drawn close, with its mouth and with its lips it has honored Me, yet it has distanced its heart from Me – their fear of Me is like rote learning of human commands... (Yeshyahu 29:13)<sup>4</sup>*

*Karaism is not a “monolithic” faith in which every believer agrees on every detail of understanding of Scripture. Because the burden of interpretation rests on the individual and not a central authority it is inevitable that there will be differences of interpretation and understanding. However this diversity is a strength rather than a weakness and prevents Karaites from getting bogged down with a given interpretation despite the obviousness of its error. This diversity requires the individual Karaite to take personal responsibility for interpreting Scripture, basing his understanding on the merits and logic of a given interpretation. When this method is followed the correct interpretation will generally win out. What unites Karaites together is our common fellowship in the Hebrew Scriptures and desire to live by the pure unaltered instruction of the Creator of the universe.<sup>1</sup>*

#### Karaite Quick Facts

##### ***What is Karaite Judaism?***

Karaite Judaism is the original form of Judaism as it is shown throughout the Tanakh from the time of the Revelation beginning at Har Sinai. Karaites (in Hebrew – B'nei Miqra) means “Followers of the Miqra (Scriptures)” and are a sect of Judaism that believes only in the authority of the Tanakh.

##### ***Do the Karaites accept the Tanakh?***

Yes. The Karaites accept the entirety of the Tanakh.

##### ***Do the Karaites take the Tanakh literally?***

No. Karaites believe that every text needs some type of interpretation which includes the Tanakh. However, Karaites believe that the interpretation of the Tanakh must be based upon the peshat (plain) meaning of the text as it would have been understood by the Yisraelites when it was given. It is up to each individual to learn Tanakh and ultimately decide on their own what is the correct interpretation. Of course, this interpretation must be based upon proof-texts from the Tanakh, the peshat meaning of the text, and the Hebrew grammar of the text.

##### ***Do the Karaites accept the Mishnah/Talmud?***

No. The Karaites do not accept the idea of an “Oral Law” or the teachings as set down in the Mishnah/Talmud.

##### ***Do the Karaites accept the New Testament?***

No. The Karaites do not accept the New Testament as scripture.

***Do the Karaites accept Jesus as the Messiah?***

No. The Karaites do not accept Jesus as the Messiah, a prophet, a part of a trinity, or God-incarnate.

***How do the Karaites determine the beginning of the new year?***

The Karaites follow the dictates of the Tanakh and determine the New Year at the time of the ripening of the Aviv (barley) in Eretz Yisrael.

***Do the Karaites wear tzitzit (fringes)?***

Yes. The Karaites follow the mandate of the Tanakh to wear tzitzit on our four-cornered garments.

***Do the Karaites wear tefillin or put a mezuzah on their doors?***

No. The Karaites do not take the passages (Exodus 13:9, 16; Deuteronomy 6:8-9 and 11:18) literally and therefore do not wear tefillin or place mezuzot upon our doors.

***Do the Karaites accept matrilineal or patrilineal descent?***

The Karaites accept patrilineal descent as shown in the Tanakh.

***Do the Karaites eat milk and meat together?***

Yes. There is only a prohibition of not boiling a kid in its mother's milk but there is no prohibition in the Tanakh against mixing milk and meat.

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<sup>1</sup>Nehemiah Gordon. "History of Karaism" *karaite-korner.org*. World Karaite Movement, 3 April 2011, accessed 15 April 2012. [ <http://karaite-korner.org/history.shtml>]

<sup>2</sup>Everett Fox. *The Five Books of Moses*. New York: Schocken Books, 1997.

<sup>3</sup>William Whiston, trans. *The Works of Flavius Josephus*. (1737) 13:5:9. [ <http://www.sacred-texts.com/jud/josephus/ant-13.htm>]

<sup>4</sup>Nosson Scherman, ed. *The Stone Edition Tanach*. New York: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 2007.