

July 1996

Frank W. Nelte

THE JEWISH SECT KNOWN AS 'KARAITES'

It might be helpful to understand that there is a small sect of Judaism, whose followers are known as "Karaites". Here is some information about them from the Encyclopedia Judaica. The article about the Karaites is in Volume 10, starting on page 778. The copyright date is 1972. I will be using the CD ROM version of the Encyclopedia Judaica as the source for the following quotations.

"The accepted meaning of the name of the sect—Kara'im, Ba'alei ha-Mikra ("people of the Scriptures")—is assumed to imply the main characteristic of the sect, the recognition of the Scriptures as the sole and direct source of religious law, to the exclusion of the Oral Law."

COMMENT: This sect of Jews reject the Talmud and all its teachings. They claim that the Scriptures (i.e. the Old Testament) is the sole source of religious law. So there are Jews who do NOT accept the oral law.

Continuing with the quotation:

"Since a religion based on revelation cannot tolerate the complete exclusion of tradition, either in principle or in practice, the Karaite demand for a return to Scripture should be taken as a theoretical watchword, directed not against all tradition, but specifically against the rabbinical tradition."

COMMENT: Even though they disagree with the Talmud, the Karaites are basically just another Jewish sect, and they are in agreement with most Jewish traditions. The relationship of the Karaites to rabbinical Judaism can be compared to the relationship of most of the Protestant churches to the Catholic Church.

While their law forbids them from being counted in a census, the Encyclopedia Judaica estimated that there were over 7000 Karaites in Israel in 1970.

Regarding their observance of the Feasts and Holy Days, Judaica states:

"In determining the date of the holy days, Karaites deviate from Rabbanite usage in the following manner: THE NEW YEAR FESTIVAL MAY BEGIN ON ANY DAY OF THE WEEK (contrary to the Rabbanite rule, which provides for the postponement of the day of the New Year in three specific cases); as a result the Karaite Day of Atonement does not always coincide with the Rabbanite; Passover and Sukkot (Feast of Tabernacles) are observed for seven days only; the Feast of Weeks (Shavuot) falls on the 50th day following the Saturday of the Passover week (in accordance with the literal interpretation of Lev. 23:11, which the Talmud interprets in a different manner) , and is therefore always on a Sunday."

COMMENTS: So the Karaites do not accept any postponements as valid. They also understand that the Days of Unleavened Bread and the Feast of Tabernacles are both only 7 days long. And they always observe Pentecost on a Sunday. This does not mean that their observances are therefore necessarily correct. But it does illustrate that there are Jews who can examine some of the Scriptures without being

blinded by the pharisaical traditions embedded in mainstream Judaism.

Here is another quotation to illustrate that, while the Karaites may have gotten some things right, they have also introduced errors of their own.

"As a matter of fact, THE KARAITES ALSO DEVELOPED A TRADITION OF THEIR OWN, described by them as sevel ha-yerushah ("yoke of inheritance"), consisting of doctrines and usages which, although NOT FOUND IN THE BIBLE, were accepted as binding by the entire community (the kibbuz or edah, corresponding to the Muslim term ijma, "consensus"). A LARGE NUMBER OF THESE HAD COME DOWN from the Jews who had returned FROM THE BABYLONIAN EXILE (those designated as the "good figs," Jeremiah 24:5)."

COMMENT: The unbiblical traditions of the Karaites aren't necessarily better than the traditions of mainstream Judaism.

Regarding the origin of this sect Judaica states:

"The Karaites themselves, however, trace their origin to the first split among the Jewish people, at the time of Jeroboam; the true law had subsequently been preserved by the Sadducees, whose leader, Zadok, had discovered a portion of the truth, while THE DISCOVERY OF THE WHOLE TRUTH WAS THE ACHIEVEMENT OF THE EXILARCH ANAN."

COMMENTS: The man "Anan" is the key leader to whom the Karaites lead back all their teachings.

The following lengthy quotation gives some more insight into this sect of the Karaites.

"The absorption by Anan's movement of many elements of an older, extra-talmudic tradition was pointed out particularly by A. Geiger and R. Mahler. ANAN ALSO TOOK OVER SEVERAL DOCTRINES FROM ISLAM AND ISLAMIC SECTS; among these there may have been the doctrine of metempsychosis (transmigration of souls), in defense of which Anan is said to have composed a special work. Anan cannot, however, be described as a true "reformer" of Judaism; far from easing the "yoke" of traditional law, he made it more difficult to bear: he did not recognize the minimum quantities (shi'urim) of forbidden foods fixed by the rabbis; he INTRODUCED MORE COMPLICATED REGULATIONS FOR THE CIRCUMCISION CEREMONY; HE ADDED TO THE NUMBER OF FAST DAYS; he interpreted the prohibition of work on the Sabbath in stricter terms; etc. He was particularly severe with regard to the laws on marriage between relatives, RITUAL CLEANLINESS, AND RELATIONS WITH NON-JEWS. In his interpretation of Scripture, he made extensive use of the 13 hermeneutic canons of R. Ishmael b. Elisha, adding to them the principle of analogy (hekkesh, Ar. qiyas; the latter, perhaps, UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF ABU-HANIFAH, THE FOUNDER OF THE HANAFITE SCHOOL OF MUSLIM JURISPRUDENCE)."

"The principle established by Anan, as transmitted by Japheth b. Ali: "Search thoroughly in the Torah and do not rely on my opinion" was designed to uphold the Holy Scriptures as the sole source of the law; in practice, IT CONTRIBUTED A GREAT DEAL TO THE DISINTEGRATION OF THE NEW MOVEMENT AFTER THE DEATH OF ITS ALLEGED FOUNDER. INNUMERABLE GROUPS AND PARTIES WERE FORMED WITHIN THE KARAITE SECT, and soon, as related by Kirkisani, it became impossible to find two Karaites who held the same opinions on all religious issues. Anan's adherents, in the stricter sense, called themselves

Ananites and remained few in number. ANAN'S DESCENDANTS, who like Anan before them were given the honorific title of nasi ("prince") by their contemporaries, LIVED FOR THE MOST PART IN EGYPT. The names of his son, Saul b. Anan and his grandson, Josiah b. Saul b. Anan, are known from THE PRAYER FOR THE DEAD IN THE KARAITE SABBATH and festival liturgy; neither seems to have had any role in the further development of the sect. Saul is also mentioned in Sefer ha-Kabbalah, by Abraham ibn Daud, and Josiah in Eshkol ha-Kofer, by Judah Hadassi, and in Gan Eden, by Aaron b. Elijah the Younger of Nicomedia."

"As the Karaite movement did not recognize any single leader, it was not long before many sects arose in its midst, in opposition to the Ananites. Thus, in the first half of the ninth century, the Ukbarite sect, whose founder was Ishmael of 'Ukbara, came into being in Ukbara, near Baghdad, at the time of the caliph al-Mutaim (833–842). LIKE AL-KIRKISANI, ISHMAEL WAS VIOLENTLY OPPOSED TO ANAN, "OFTEN DENOUNCING HIM AS A FOOL AND AN ASS." Nothing of Ishmael's writing has been preserved and the little known about him and his school derives almost exclusively from the reports of Al-Kirkisani, at whose time (second half of the tenth century) the sect was probably no longer in existence. In his teaching, Ishmael rejects, inter alia, the masoretic variants (keri and ketiv, the reading of certain words in the Bible in a manner that differs from their spelling)."

"The same town, Ukbara, was also the place of origin of another sect, founded in the second half of the ninth century by Mishawayh al-Ukbari; characteristic of this sect is the principle that in all disputed matters (such as the day of the New Year Festival and the determination of the new moon), the Rabbanite practice was to be followed ("all coins are counterfeit, so one might as well use the one at hand," i.e., observe the holidays with the "whole," the Rabbanites). Among Mishawayh's innovations is HIS OPINION THAT THE DAY, IN THE RELIGIOUS SENSE, BEGINS IN THE MORNING AND COMES TO AN END THE FOLLOWING NIGHT (WHEREAS ACCORDING TO THE RABBANITES, AND OTHER KARAITE SECTS, THE DAY COMMENCES ON THE PRECEDING EVENING). Another Karaite sect was founded by a contemporary of Mishawayh, Musa (Moses) al-Zafarani, a resident of Tiflis; also known as Abu 'Imran al-Tiflisi, he was probably a native of Zafaran, a district of Baghdad. The report by Al-Kirkisani (perhaps the earliest mention of Jewish settlement in the Caucasus) states that al-Tiflisi was a disciple of Ishmael of Ukbara, and the author of a treatise sanctioning the consumption of meat (whereas MANY SECTS, INCLUDING THE EARLIEST KARAITE AUTHORITIES, REGARDED THE EATING OF MEAT AS PROHIBITED AS LONG AS ZION WAS IN RUINS AND ISRAEL IN EXILE)."

"Musa was also mentioned by the Karaite authors Japheth b. Ali (tenth century) and Judah Hadassi, and by Saadia Gaon; the latter, in his commentary on the Pentateuch, cites the opinion held by Al-Tiflisi and his supporters that THE NEW MONTH ALWAYS COMMENCES AT THE MOMENT WHEN THE NEW MOON FIRST MAKES ITS APPEARANCE, SO THAT THE DAY OF THE NEW MOON IS ALREADY A PART OF THE NEW MONTH (commentary to Gen. 1:14–18)."

"Another sect, closely related to that of Al-Tiflisi and its contemporary, was created at Ramleh in Erez Israel by Malik al-Ramli. According to Al-Kirkisani, Malik made an oath on the Temple site in Jerusalem that chickens had been sacrificed at the Temple altar; by this oath, Malik sought to strengthen HIS VIEW—as reported by the Karaite author Jacob b. Reuben in his commentary on Leviticus— THAT THE TORIM MENTIONED IN LEVITICUS 1:14, WHICH WERE USED AS TEMPLE SACRIFICES, WERE CHICKENS, thereby contradicting ANAN AND HIS SUCCESSORS, who translated the term dukhifat ("the hoopoe") in Leviticus 11:19, as hen, and accordingly CLASSIFIED THE CHICKEN AS AN IMPURE, PROHIBITED BIRD."

COMMENTS: Without going into specific details, the Karaites have had their own schisms and divisions and doctrinal differences. They are nothing other than a part of overall Judaism. And while they reject some of the wrong practices of mainstream Judaism, they are by no means on the right track themselves.

Frank W. Nelte