

Daniel J. Lasker

## Writing an Introduction to Karaism<sup>1</sup>

In Spring 2020, much of the world stopped. The coronavirus (Covid-19) caused a pandemic that resulted in long-term confinements to home. I was a retired professor of Jewish Thought from Ben-Gurion University, so much of my time was already my own. I could research and publish whatever I wanted without the burdens of teaching and administration. Nevertheless, the prohibitions of travel, socializing and seeing family provided me with free time to think about additional projects. For a long time, I had wanted to write an introduction to Karaite Judaism, a topic that I had been researching for over 40 years, and now I had a perfect opportunity to do so.

Karaism is a form of Judaism that does not accept the existence of an Oral Torah given to Moses on Mt. Sinai, and encapsulated in the Talmud, which is the basic premise of Rabbinic Judaism (the Judaism of the majority of the Jews). As a result, Karaites developed their own parallel system of law and practice based primarily, but not exclusively, on the Written Torah, with their own calendar, liturgy, dietary laws, holiday observances, purity prescriptions, and personal status laws. Karaites also engaged in Biblical exegesis, theological speculation, and Hebrew grammatical studies. Although usually part of the greater Jewish polity, they often had their own communities, distinguishable by dress, folklore, special foods, and, in Eastern Europe, a unique Turkic language. Karaites generally identified with the Jewish People and were considered Jews by other Jews and by non-Jews. In the nineteenth century, Russian Karaites began a process of “De-Judaization” in order to escape

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□ Daniel J. Lasker, professor emeritus of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, e-mail: [lasker@bgu.ac.il](mailto:lasker@bgu.ac.il)

1 I will be discussing my book: *Karaism. An Introduction to the Oldest Surviving Alternative Judaism*, London: Littman Library, 2022. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3828/liverpool/9781800855960.001.0001> I would like to thank Dobos Károly Dániel for his kind invitation to submit this article to Targum.

anti-Jewish restrictions. This culminated in the twentieth century with a denial of Jewish identity altogether.

Karaism has long been a subject of Jewish academic research, especially in the past 30 years, with the renewed accessibility of literary collections in the Former Soviet Union. There was, however, no general introduction to Karaism that I considered sufficient in terms of inclusivity and accuracy. When people asked me what they could read to get a better understanding of Karaism, I had nothing I could suggest to them. So, I sat myself down, started conceptualizing the problem, wrote a few sample chapters, asked my wife and a friend for their feedback, and in July 2020, I submitted a first proposal for the book to the Littman Library of Jewish Civilization. The book was accepted in December 2020; I completed the book in 2021, when production began, and, at the beginning of 2022, the book rolled off the presses.



When I sat down for this project, my first question was: what does one include in an introduction to Karaism? Obviously, one begins with history. How did Karaism emerge? Where did Karaite communities flourish? How did their communities interact with the majority Rabbanites (the term for followers of Rabbinic Judaism in the context of Karaism)? Who were their major leaders? In light of Eastern European Karaite denial of Jewish identity in the twentieth century, what happened to them in the Holocaust? And, finally, what about Karaites today: where are they, how many of them are there, and what is their status?

The next important topic was Karaite practice. Since the major boundary markers between Karaites and Rabbanites were how they observed what they considered to be Jewish law, it was important to describe Karaite practices, especially in contrast to Rabbanite ones. A relatively recent important academic collection of articles about Karaism included much material about Karaite origins, historical surveys, Karaite thought and literature, and the academic research of Karaism, but not one chapter was devoted to a description of Karaite Judaism or what Karaites actually did in their religion. After Karaite practice, I felt it was appropriate to discuss Karaite beliefs, especially in terms of how they recorded the principles of Judaism. I would then turn to Karaite intellectual achievements, and, finally, to a description of the latest de-

velopments in the Karaite community and prospects for the future. In this article, I will outline some of the major conclusions of my book in each of these areas.



It seems the most studied aspect of Karaism is its origins, but after that there has been much less interest in the course of Karaite history. The standard Rabbanite explanation for the rise of Karaism, one that is found in the overwhelming majority of histories of Judaism, is based on a revolt of one Anan ben David, who was a candidate in the eighth century for the position of exilarch (political head of the Jewish community) in Babylonia (Iraq). When passed over for this appointment, Anan formed a rival exilarchate that caused him to be imprisoned by the Muslim authorities and to be sentenced to death. To escape this fate, Anan explained to the Muslim Caliph that he was the exilarch of a different religion, one that was closer to Islam than Rabbinic Judaism. After being released, Anan had to come up with a different religion, and he invented Karaism.

The Karaites tell a different story. Their concern is not how Karaism emerged, since they see their form of Judaism as the original one given to Moses on Mt. Sinai, but rather how did Rabbanism come into being. Throughout the centuries, Karaite answers to this question varied, but since the fifteenth century they have generally seen the founding of Rabbinic Judaism as a result of a slaughter of the true (i. e. Karaite) scholars in the first century BCE by King Alexander Yannai. These true scholars were replaced by Simon ben Shettah, who was the inventor of Rabbinic Judaism. He was able to impose his will on the Jewish people because he was the brother of the queen. From then on, Karaites were a small minority and Anan simply revived or reinvigorated the authentic, original Jewish teachings.



Karaite synagogue, Ramla Karaites World Center  
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Neither explanation of Karaite origins is satisfactory. Anan founded a group called Ananites who eventually coalesced with the Karaites, who then retroactively adopted Anan as one of their leaders; thus, Anan was not the founder of Karaism. Even though later Karaites revered Anan, they rejected quite a number of his legal teachings. Anan may very likely have been of the exilarchic family, but there is no indication that he was a rejected candidate for the position of exilarch. The Karaite assumption of continuity from Mt. Sinai is hard to corroborate, as is the story of Shimon ben Shettah's invention of a new (Rabbinic) religion. Although we have non-Rabbinic Jewish religious groups during the Second Temple period (most notably Sadducees and the Dead Sea Scroll covenanters), and despite some similarities between those groups and the medieval Karaites, there is no evidence of Karaite continuity from the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE) to the emergence of the movement of people who called themselves Karaites (*benei mikra*) in the ninth century.

In my book, I discuss the various theories of Karaite origins and try to give a balanced picture of the different possibilities. I think there were non-Rabbinic Jewish groups which survived the destruction of the Second Temple and continued to observe the Torah according to

their understandings of it. These groups, who were geographically far from the Talmudic centers in Iraq, most likely resisted the attempts by the Iraqi Rabbinic leaders (the *geonim*) to impose unified Talmudic practice on all Jewish communities. There are reports of a number of non-Rabbinic Jewish movements in the early Middle Ages, and they may have joined together into a Karaite coalition. Although Anan was an Iraqi and steeped in the culture of the *yeshivas*, most early leaders of Karaism were Persian (Iranian), including Benjamin al-Nahawendi (mid-ninth century) and Daniel al-Qumisi (late-ninth century). Karaism became very strong in the Land of Israel in the tenth century, also perhaps in opposition to the Iraqi *yeshivas*. Second Temple influence may be a result of a reported discovery of scrolls near the Dead Sea around the year 800, which were brought to Jerusalem and studied there. I come to no definite conclusions as to Karaite origins and doubt that it will ever be possible to solve this conundrum of Jewish history.



The history of Karaism is usually divided according to its major centers; the Land of Israel in the tenth and eleventh centuries; Byzantium (today's Turkey), in the eleventh to sixteenth centuries; Eastern Europe, including the Crimea, Lithuania, and parts of what is now Ukraine from the sixteenth to twentieth centuries; and modern-day Israel, where the community is made up predominantly of immigrants after the establishment of the State.

The first significant era of Karaite history, in the Land of Israel, is usually known as the Karaite "Golden Age." Karaism at the time was developing its own unique understandings of the Torah, and one Karaite complained that no two Karaites agreed about anything and the situation got worse each day. By the time of the Crusader conquest and diminution of the Jewish community in 1099, Karaite practice, exegesis, theology and Hebrew grammar were more or less set and Karaism could survive in exile from the Holy Land. One of the reasons for the large Karaite community in the Land of Israel was its adherence to the theology of the "Mourners of Zion." The Mourners, probably most of whom were Karaites if not all of them, believed that certain ascetic practices and continual praying for the messianic redemption would hasten that redemption. Even after the Golden Age, Jerusalem played a special role in Karaism.

In the tenth century, there were a large number of Karaite intellectuals in the Land of Israel. Salmon ben Yeruhim was an anti-Rabbanite polemicist and Biblical commentator. Sahl ben Mazliah was a missionary/propagandist, trying to spread Karaism, as well as a Biblical exegete and a legalist. Joseph ibn Nuh was a grammarian and Biblical commentator, and Yefet ben Eli, at the end of the century, was the first Jew to write running commentaries on the whole Bible. A leading Rabbanite exegete in twelfth-century Spain, Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra, often quoted Yefet's opinions. During the tenth century as well, Jerusalem Karaites set up a "House of Learning" that attracted Karaites from foreign countries. In the eleventh century, Yefet's son Levi, Joseph al-Basir, and Yeshua ben Judah wrote important Karaite theological works, along with codifying Karaite law and exegesis. Abu al-Faraj Harun was known as "the Jerusalem grammarian," whose fame spread as far as Spain.

One of the visitors to the Karaite House of Learning was Tobias ben Moses from Constantinople. After studying in Jerusalem, Tobias went back to his home community and brought with him the Karaite literary classics from the Golden Age. Most of these books were written in Judaeo-Arabic (a Jewish language consisting of Arabic with Hebrew terms and written in Hebrew letters, sort of like Judaeo-German, or Yiddish, a number of centuries later). Since Jews in Byzantium could not read Arabic, Tobias took it upon himself, with a few colleagues, to translate into Hebrew the literature he brought back with him. He also found ways to observe Karaite law even when some aspects of their practice were related to the Land of Israel (such as calculating the calendar). In this manner, he set the stage for a diasporic Karaism that stood the test of time.

As Byzantine Karaism became removed from the Golden Age both geographically and temporally, the boundaries between Karaism and Rabbanism tended to become blurred. Karaites had Rabbanite teachers and were greatly influenced by Rabbanite literature from the Western Mediterranean. Although the twelfth-century legalist and theologian Judah Hadassi was still firmly in the Golden Age tradition, later Karaite sages such as Aaron ben Joseph (Biblical commentator and liturgist, end of thirteenth century), Aaron ben Elijah (philosopher, Biblical commentator, and legalist, fourteenth century), and Elijah Bashyatchi (ultimate Karaite legal authority, fifteenth century) give evidence of incorporating Rabbanite outlooks in their writings. A good example of the change in Karaism is the reform introduced by the Bashyatchi family that allowed

Karaites to have lamps in their houses on the Sabbath (lit before the Sabbath without a blessing). Prior to this, Karaite homes had been left dark on the Sabbath. Despite the Karaite rapprochement with Rabbanites, the two groups remained separate.

The next center was in Eastern Europe. The first Karaites arrived in the Crimea, mostly from Byzantium, by the thirteenth century and in Lithuania, from Byzantium and Central Asia, by the end of the fourteenth century. At first, they were dependent upon the Constantinople community. Late fifteenth-century Lithuanian Karaites, for instance, wrote to the Byzantine authorities to ask whether the permission to use fire for illumination over the Sabbath applied as well to its use for warming. The answer was negative; the Constantinople authorities, never having experienced a Lithuanian winter, answered no; after all, how cold could it get without heating for one day? Eventually, Eastern European Karaites developed their own local leadership and produced an impressive array of intellectuals who continued to develop the various Karaite pursuits, such as law and biblical exegesis. These Karaite communities spoke a Turkic language, and, thus, were the first group of Karaites not to speak the same language as their Rabbanite neighbors (Yiddish). An important early intellectual was the sixteenth-century Isaac of Troki, who wrote an anti-Christian polemical work, *Faith Strengthened*, which became a best seller even among Rabbanites.



*The entrance gate to the former Karaite synagogues in the old town of Eupatoria, Crimean Peninsula*  
[Wikimedia Commons](#)

As noted, Karaites started to separate themselves from other Jews in the nineteenth century, in order to avoid discriminatory Russian czarist legislation. A major figure was Abraham Firkovich, who also argued for Karaite antiquity in the Crimea, partially by forging parts of manuscripts and tombstones in the Karaite cemetery. He traveled to the Middle East to acquire ancient manuscripts, and his collection of manuscripts is now in St. Petersburg and is an important resource for Karaite (and Rabbanite) research. When racial anti-Semitism became widespread in the twentieth century, the Karaite leader Seraya Shapshal invented a new narrative of Karaite history, claiming no Jewish connection altogether. As a result, many Karaites survived the Holocaust, but their denial of Jewish identity, coupled with Soviet anti-religious policies after World War II, almost led to the disappearance of Eastern European Karaism. Today, some of those Karaites are looking for a way to return to Judaism, but their numbers are very small.

There had been an Egyptian Karaite community almost from the beginning of Karaism until the founding of the State of Israel. The status of all Egyptian Jews was undermined in the second half of the twentieth century in the wake of the wars between Egypt and Israel. As a result of these wars, most Jews, Karaites and Rabbanites, left Egypt, many coming to Israel but others to the United States or Europe. The Egyptian Jewish community was further damaged by the Israeli intelligence failure, in which Israel conscripted some Egyptian Jews to plant bombs in U.S. facilities to cause antagonism between the U.S. and Egypt. As a result of this activity, two Egyptian Jews were publicly hanged, one of whom, Moses Marzuk, was a Karaite. The present-day Karaite community in Israel is made up overwhelmingly of Egyptian Karaites and numbers around 40,000 people, depending on how one determines who is a Karaite. There are perhaps a few thousand Egyptian Karaites in the Bay Area of California; the worldwide population of Karaites is probably under 50,000.



*Moussa al-Dar'i Karaite synagogue in Cairo*  
*Wikimedia Commons*



Karaite religious practice is similar in many ways to Rabbanite practice but sufficiently different to be a cause of the schism between the two groups. The Karaite calendar has the same structure as the Rabbanite one, with the same months and leap years with an added second Adar month, but the differences in calculating the two calendars mean that there is often a discrepancy of a day or two between them. Karaites observe holidays, whether in Israel or not, for only the one Biblically-ordained day. This includes Rosh HaShana, which they generally call the Biblical Yom Teruah (which they take to mean the day of calling out loudly to God). In contrast, all Rabbanites observe Rosh HaShana for two days, and those outside of Israel, observe most other holidays for two days as well. Unlike the Rabbanite Rosh HaShana, which does not occur on certain days of the week, the Karaite Yom Teruah can fall on any day, and it is not marked by blowing a shofar (the ram's horn). Karaites do not take the palm branch, citron, willow and myrtle on Tabernacles

(Sukkot); and they do not observe the post-biblical Hanukkah. Shavuot (Pentecost) is always on Sunday. There is a discrepancy between fast days of the two traditions as well.

Karaites and Rabbanites refrain from eating the same forbidden animal and fish species, but the two groups have slightly different laws concerning slaughtering permitted animals. The most significant difference in dietary laws is the lack of a Karaite prohibition of mixing milk and meat together. Karaites refrain from milk and meat of the same species (e.g., beef and cow milk), but do not have separate dishes or wait between meat and milk. These dietary differences effectively prohibit table fellowship between Karaites and Rabbanites.

Karaite synagogues look very much like mosques since worshippers do not sit on chairs – they either stand, sit on the floor, or prostrate themselves. Men wear head coverings and prayer shawls, but not *tefillin* (phylacteries). The liturgy is totally different from Rabbanite liturgy and consists mostly of Biblical passages read responsively between individuals (nowadays including women) and the rest of the congregation. The cycle of Torah readings is very similar to that of Rabbanites (at least since fifteenth-century Byzantium).

On the Sabbath, Karaites can use artificial illumination (candles or electricity) that was prepared on Friday before sunset (unlike the original practice of sitting in the dark which goes back at least to Anan) but cannot heat food or houses. Sexual relations are forbidden on the Sabbath.

Karaites practice the purity laws as outlined in the Bible, even if the prescribed methods of purification, like the ashes of the red heifer after contact with the dead, or the bringing of a sacrifice, are no longer possible. Menstrual purity laws are understood differently than in Rabbinic Judaism, and purification afterwards requires washing with water but not a ritual bath. Men and women in a state of impurity are not allowed into the synagogue.

Differing marriage, divorce, and incest laws theoretically do not allow marriage between Karaites and Rabbanites, and both groups discourage such marriages. Yet, ways have always been found, on both sides, to accommodate such “intermarriages.” We can see this from marriage contracts from the Middle Ages, which were found in the Cairo Geniza, and from present day practice. Karaites are recognized by Jews in the State of Israel, but, because there is no civil marriage in Israel, a mixed Karaite-Rabbanite couple can find it difficult to arrange a wedding.

This brief summary of the differences between Rabbanite Judaism and Karaite Judaism is based on traditional observance. At a time when secularization is widespread, it is clear that today not all Karaites follow their legal traditions, just as there are many secular Rabbanite Jews who violate Rabbinic Jewish norms.



Karaites were among the first Jews to write lists of the principle beliefs of Judaism. There are no beliefs in these lists that are not acceptable to Rabbanite Jews. One Karaite principle that does not exist on Rabbinic lists is the obligation to know Hebrew, so that one can understand the Bible correctly. That is certainly not objectionable to Rabbanites, even if this obligation was never made into a principle of Judaism. Conversely, Karaites could agree with most beliefs which are regarded as principles of Rabbinic Judaism. For instance, in Maimonides' list of thirteen principles, Karaites could agree with twelve and a half – only the divinity of the Oral Torah (second half of the eighth principle) would be a problem. Thus, the differences between Karaites and Rabbanites are behavioral and not theological.



Karaites engaged in the same intellectual pursuits as did Rabbanites. Both groups wrote Biblical commentaries, often differing in their understanding of the text, not only in legal portions but also in narrative ones. As part of their Biblical exegesis, Karaites were very sensitive to stylistic and linguistic issues in the text. They proposed that each Biblical book had an editor who was responsible for the final form of the book as we have it now. This editorial activity was used to explain seeming inconsistencies in the text. Some later Rabbanite commentators adopted this view as well.

Karaite philosophical theology was shaped in its first few centuries in the context of its Muslim environment. Just as Rav Saadia Gaon, head of the Rabbanite academy in Baghdad and Karaism's major nemesis, was attracted to Muslim systematic theology known as Kalam, so, too, did the Karaites adopt this mode of thought. Eventually Rabbanites were attracted to Aristotelian philosophy, the greatest representative of which was Maimonides (1138-1204). Although Karaites were slower to make this transition, eventually they did. In the eighteenth century, some

Karaites were attracted to mysticism, something they had previously eschewed because of their rationalism.

Early Karaite grammarians studied the Hebrew language in order better to understand the Bible. What characterized the approach of Golden Age Karaites to Hebrew grammar was their understanding of the verb. These Karaites propounded that the basic root unit of the Hebrew verb consisted of one, two, or three letters in contrast to the now accepted theory of Hebrew grammar, that almost all verbal roots consist of three letters. Karaite grammarians also composed Biblical dictionaries to aid the reader in understanding the text. Karaite familiarity with Hebrew can be seen as well in their poetry, which was used in both exegetical and liturgical settings. The most important Karaite poet was the twelfth-century Moses Der'i, who composed religious and secular poetry, mostly on the model of Rabbanite Hebrew poetry from Iberia.



Although Karaites were always a minority among the Jewish People, there were places and times where they were perceived as a major challenge to Rabbinic Judaism, both demographically and ideologically. Rabbanite Jews reacted to Karaism in various ways, including defining their own beliefs as sharply as possible and defending Rabbinic tradition. Over the years, the Karaite challenge diminished as their communities became smaller and Rabbanites rarely had contact with living Karaites (instead of knowing about their views from literature that was often biased). Karaites became more interested in their own continuity rather than in challenging people whom they considered to be their “Rabbanite brothers.”

Still, Karaism persisted, even if in a much-attenuated fashion. Today's Karaites are very aware of the challenges that face them, that now include minority Jewish status in a Jewish state, assimilation to the majority religious outlook, and secularization. To meet some of these challenges, they have increased educational activities, including the publication of Karaite literature and expanding educational frameworks, such as afternoon classes and summer camps. Perhaps most significantly, they are open to new recruits, both disaffected Rabbanite Jews as well as non-Jews who convert to Judaism under Karaite auspices. These converts seem to be mostly former Christians who believe in the divinity of the Hebrew Bible, but no longer accept Jesus. Their geographical isola-

tion makes conversion to Rabbinic Judaism difficult (much of Karaite educational and conversionary endeavors are carried on through the internet). In Israel, the older generation of Egyptian-born leaders is giving way to younger, Israeli-born ones. Despite the demographical problems, after 1,200 years of Karaite existence it would be too soon to count them out. They continue to play their role as a dissenting part of the Jewish People.



I know that this very short summary of my introduction to Karaism only touches the surface of what Karaism is. More information can be found in my book. I hope that reading the book will encourage people to investigate Karaism further and get a broader and deeper appreciation of this longest surviving alternative Judaism.