

JEWISH KARAITE MOVEMENT AND ITS IRANIAN ROOT

Karaite sect (Hebrew: קראים) also known as Karaism, is a religious movement within Jewish theology specifically characterized by the recognition of Pentateuch –Five Books of Moses or Torah– or Tanakh meaning Torah, *Nevi'im* “Prophets” and *Ketuvim* “Writings”—hence TANAKH as its supreme authority in Halakha (Jewish religious law) and doctrine. Followers of Karaism are divergent from conventional Rabbinic Judaism, as they do not consider the Oral Torah—as codified in the Talmud and other posterior works—to be authoritative interpretations of the Torah per se. Karaites believe that all the necessary divine commandments in their complete forms revealed to Moses by God were documented in the written Torah without any need for further additional oral law or extra clarification. Subsequently, Karaites do not accept as obligatory to follow the transcribed form of the oral tradition recorded in Mishnah or Gemara. As a result, Karaites rely on the stringent literal rendering of the Torah scripture, without rabbinical interpretation.

The most relevant factor about this Jewish theological sect is its strong connectivity with Iranian territory. One of the crucial reasons for the emergence of Karaism was the huge geographical distance, which existed between Persian Jews and their coreligionists in Babylonia {today’s Baghdad}. To be clear it was relatively restrictive and in contrast to the religious autochthony for the Persian Jews to strictly follow the Babylonian rabbis. Karaite decree of the unrestricted study of the written Torah as the only source of religion was extremely fascinating in its concept, not only to the members of earlier anti-rabbinic sects but also to the more liberal elements within traditional Judaism that were disappointed with the stagnation existed in the methods of the Babylonian academies.

Factors like seeking religious autonomy, cultural integrity and political independence all were vital elements that the Persian Jews most probably adapted from their Iranian co-citizens, who experienced them within different eras by rising of local patriotic dynasties such as Saffarids, Samanids, and Buyid as opposing powers against the Arab Caliphates in Baghdad. This was considered for centuries as the absolutistic center of Islamic religious authority, who defined the religious life structures of their bestowed territories in the Islamicized world including Iran. Yet here are astonishing similarities between Iranian Jewish emancipatory movements from the Babylonian Rabbinic culture on one hand and the Iranian Intermezzo as a period, which witnessed the rise of various native Iranian Muslim dynasties in the Iranian plateau against the Arab dominance on the other hand. This free-mindedness and the attempt for liberating of Iranian societies from the Arab sovereignty inspired likewise the Persian Jews to disobey and revolt against the long-lasting shadow of Babylonian Jewish religious authority, taxation rules and rituals regulated by Jewish clerics and other social restrictions.

Theological and philosophical critical questions within Islamic thought initiated by a group of Moslem philosophers called *Ikhwān Al-Ṣafā* (literally: the brethren of purity) revolutionized the traditional Islamic authority. For the very first time in the Islamic theology questions such as “reincarnation”, “eschatology”, “God’s physicalization or personification”, “divinity or intactness of Holy Scriptures”, “free-will and determinism”, “absolute trust and reliance on an abstract authority” or “ full obedience to man’s destiny” were risen among Moslem thinkers. Now, these ideas as brainstorming strongly influenced the Jewish mindset of intellectual groups, particularly in Mesopotamia and Persia. In this manner, the Karaism adopted various theological doctrines from Irano-Islamic movements.

One of the most prominent scholars among Karaite figures is Daniel ben Mūsā Qumisi Dāmghānī (ca. 9th century A.D.), a native of Dāmaghān and the capital of the Persian province of Qumis, in Tabaristans (present-day Semnān province of Iran). Daniel’s theological viewpoint accentuated that hermeneutic speculations of Torah could not be regarded as a source of knowledge, and in accordance with this principle, he maintain—in opposition to Babylonian rabbis—the credo that the Biblical laws must not be interpreted allegorically, nor explained contrary to the simple text. In his treaties, he vehemently attacks the chief rabbis of religious centers in Baghdad and considers them as disqualified as supreme religious eminences.¹ One of the most interesting and simultaneously provocative opinions towards Torah’s interpretation is his idea about the very famous phrase concerning prohibition contained in Exodus 23:19 or 34:26, which reads: “Thou shalt not seethe a kid in his mother’s milk” (Hebrew: אִמּוֹ בְּחֵלֶב, קֵדִי תִבְשֵׁל-לֶאֱלֶּה). According to Daniel, this phrase must not be interpreted allegorically, but literally. Then if it would have been the case—so Daniel further—the Lord did not conceal such an important legal sentence and vital to the Jews’ everyday life so remotely and metaphorically that the followers would need a theologian intuitionist to interpret it for the folk but Lord would have named it by word. Furthermore, Daniel

emphasized that drinking wine in ceremonies and Sabbath eves should be forbidden, and also burning of lights must be discontinued, not only on Friday evenings but also on the evenings of all festivities.²

Daniel Qumisi was not the only Jewish Persian thinker with revolutionary ideas. Benjamin Nahāwandī is another prominent scholar of Karaite Judaism, who is said to be one of the most important Karaite theologians of the early Middle Ages. As his name indicates, he was from the region Nahāwand in the present-day province of Hamadān. Apparently, Benjamin was extremely active in writing theological works but none of them survived our time. Thus his legacy, for the most part, is known merely in quotations cited by subsequent Karaite writers. Nevertheless, we know that he composed several works in Judeo-Arabic. According to Benjamin God created first the Glory known as Kabod, then the Throne, and afterward the Arch Angel. This Angel created the universe, in which he is the representative of God. In Benjamin's view God Himself never came in contact with men, nor did He speak to Moses respectively Israel on Mount Sinai. Subsequently, all laws and the communications to the prophets preceded by the Angel, to whom are referable all the anthropological expressions concerning God found in the Bible, a doctrine which is obviously very convergent with that of Islamic theology into an extent that it could be its direct adaptation. Benjamin further believes that wherever the term malakim (מלאכים i.e. angels) is mentioned in the Torah, the description does not refer to living, speaking creatures who act as messengers, but to forces of nature, as fire, fog, winds, etc., by means of which God performs His works³ Again, here we see the similarities between the Iranian-Islamic idea of jabra'īl or malak (i.e. angels) as an acting or a performing intellect rather than a celestial being with corporal characteristics.⁴

The above-mentioned elements indicate astonishing similarities to theological and philosophical perceptions, which mostly nourished and flourished by Iranian thinkers such as Avicenna (980-1037) and further reflected among Jewish Sephardic philosophers like –Moses Maimonides (1135-1234).⁵

Scholarly studies of Karaite scriptures and literary legacy are still in their beginning. However, there are precious researches accomplished by scholars such as Haggai Ben-Shammai Professor Emeritus of Arabic Language and Literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Bibliography and Notes:

[1] Daniel finally immigrated to Jerusalem and remained there up to the end of his life. He apparently established the order of the Mourners of Zion (Heb. Avelei Tziyon אבלי ציון). He is said to have built the oldest Karaite Synagogue, which was located in Jerusalem. As a sympathizer of a proto-Zionist ideology, he encouraged his followers to return to Israel and in his Epistle to the Diaspora, he called those who opposed to obeying this idea as “fools who provoke the God's wrath”.

[2] Cf. The principal source regarding Daniel and his opinions in *Ḳirḳisani*, sec. i., ch. i.-ii. xviii. (ed. Harkavy, p. 280, lines 8-19; 285, 19-20; 316, 14-29.)

[3] See: Geiger, “Gesammelte Schriften,” iii. 283.

[4] Cf. “Rabbinic and Medieval Judaism in Non-Hebrew Languages. Dan Wyman Books. Retrieved 20 October 2017

[5] The Persian and in general Oriental Karaites were drastically declining during the Byzantine era, particularly after Moses Maimonides migrated to Egypt. Although Maimonides was thoroughly tolerant toward the Karaites, allowing them, for example, the Rabbis to circumcise Karaite children on Saturday according to the rabbinic ritual, he yet endeavored to keep Karaite influences away from his congregation and to abolish the Karaite customs. Maimonides' theological impact on the Oriental Karaites was so incredibly immense that his credo is often quoted as a completely recognized authority in the Karaite religious-legal works of that time. The authority and reputation which Maimonides enjoyed among the Jews and Mohammedans had a depressing and disintegrating influence on Oriental Karaism; the few Oriental writers of that period were frequently obliged to borrow from the Byzantine authors the same material, which the latter had previously borrowed from the earlier Oriental Karaites. Henceforth Karaism, of course, could no longer gain ground by new acquisitions; on the contrary, various Karaite communities in Persia, Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Babylonia and northern Africa gradually disappeared, partly by being converted to Islam but mostly through being annexed by Rabbinism. Cf. Karaites and Karaism by Kaufmann Kohler, Abraham de Harkavy in *Jewish Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 20 October 2017.