

Book Review: An Introduction to Karaite Judaism: History, Theology, Practice, and Custom

An Introduction to Karaite Judaism: History, Theology, Practice, and Custom

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*An Introduction to Karaite Judaism* is the al-Qirqisani Center's attempt to bring to light the history, theology, practices, and customs of worldwide Karaite Judaism. The book begins with a brief introduction as to the motivations behind writing this particular book. Karaite Judaism maintains that only the Tanakh is the valid text for determining theological issues and the commands given by God. However, Karaites also maintain that there is need for interpretation of the text and *An Introduction to Karaite Judaism* offers some of the interpretations of the Tanakh that have been handed down over the years in the Karaite community.

*An Introduction to Karaite Judaism* begins with a brief history of the roots of Karaite Judaism. The story begins with the revelation at Mount Sinai to Moses and the Children of Israel. This is the basis of the Karaite beliefs. The strong belief in a binding covenant between God and the Children of Israel along with the Land that was given to the Children of Israel (as promised to Abraham) form the solid foundation upon which Karaite Judaism is based. The book goes on to discuss the name "Karaite" and how this name became attached to the Jews who do not believe in an "Oral Law." While the term "Karaite" – meaning Followers of the Scripture – is a new name, the Karaites maintain that they are the descendents (physical or spiritual) of the Jews who received the covenant at Mount Sinai but never added an "Oral Law" to that covenant. For the most part, the separation of the Karaite Jews from the Rabbinate Jews began in full-force after the destruction of the Second Temple. There have always been pockets of Karaite/non-Rabbinical Jews throughout the world but after the destruction of the Temple they found themselves with an influx of Rabbinical Jews into their areas. For the most part the Karaites and Rabbinate lived peacefully side-by-side for many years. However, with outside pressures – mostly from Muslim invaders – the differences became more enhanced and would eventually lead to great conflict. Much of this conflict surrounded the idea of halakhah. Karaites only use the Tanakh as their covenantal source for determining halakhah but the Rabbinate use an "Oral Law." Different beliefs, practices, and interpretations were developed by Karaite Judaism as is explained in *An Introduction to Karaite Judaism*.

Karaite Judaism teaches that all Jews are to be righteous and holy just as they were commanded by God. To this end, works of kindness, charity, and justice are prominently taught and maintained by the Karaites. Karaites also consistently follow the mitzvot of tzitzit (fringes) – for males and females – as well as avoiding the forbidden mixtures of seeds, animals, and cloth. Avodah Zarah (foreign worship) is also strictly forbidden. Karaites teach – and practice – honoring the elders as well as honoring oaths. *An Introduction to Karaite Judaism* also touches

upon the idea of the usage of the name (יהוה) by Karaites. The name of God is spoken by many within the Karaite community but it is also an accepted practice to say HaShem, God, or Lord as a substitute for speaking the name. The concepts of tahorah (clean) and tum'ah (unclean) as spelled out in the Tanakh are also maintained within the Karaite Jewish community. This includes such things as “kashrut” (kosher), niddah (period), and contact with the dead. All the commands given in the Tanakh regarding clean/unclean are followed by the members of the Karaite Jewish community. The family unit is also highly regarded in Karaite Judaism. There is a great emphasis on honoring one's parents and educating the children and bringing them up with the knowledge of Tanakh.

If one would step into a Karaite Beit Kneset (synagogue) one could easily mistake it for a masjid (mosque). There are no chairs and for the purposes of modesty, men and women are separated (the women are usually behind the men or in a balcony if there is not enough room on the main floor). The two main personnel in a beit kneset are the hakham – learned leader – and the hazzan – prayer leader. The beit kneset is considered holy space and as such it must remain ritually pure. There is a reverence associated with this area and idle talk and talking about business, etc. is discouraged. Prayers take place twice daily and on Shabbat and Yomim Tovim (holidays). The style of prayer is also taken from the Tanakh and involves standing, sitting, and prostrating. The siddur that is used takes the prayers from various places in the Tanakh and are read in a responsive technique between the congregants and the hazzan. Shabbat is maintained in a very strict fashion according to the commands of the Tanakh and the interpretation upon these commands. Work (as defined according to clues in the Tanakh) of any kind is strictly forbidden.

Karaite Judaism does not use the same calendar as the Rabbinate but instead maintains the calendar as it is spelled out in the Tanakh. The months begin when there is a sighting of the new moon. This is done today by people in Israel announcing the sighting of the new moon. The yearly calendar begins in the month of the aviv – as commanded in the Torah. This is in contrast to the Rabbinate who begin the year in the fall with “Rosh Hashannah.” A search for the aviv barley in Israel is conducted early in the spring to determine when the new year has begun. If the aviv barley has been found the new year will begin on the next new moon and Chag Hamatzot (Passover) will begin on the fifteenth day of the first month. The holidays are set according to the new moons and the month of the aviv. There are many differences between the holidays as practiced by the Karaites and the Rabbinate. The differences are too many to succinctly write about in this review. However, here is a list of the holidays as named (according to the Tanakh names) and celebrated by the Karaite Jews.

- ❖ Chag HaMatzot (Passover)
- ❖ Omer
- ❖ Chag HaShavuot (Shavuot)
- ❖ Yom HaTeru'ah (Rosh Hashannah)
- ❖ Ten Days of Repentance
- ❖ Yom HaKippurim (Yom Kippur)

- ❖ Chag HaSukkot (Sukkot)
- ❖ Purim

In addition, secular holidays such as Yom HaAzmaut, Yom HaZikaron, and Yom Yerushalayim are also observed by Karaite Jews.

The various life events of a person are also given special prominence in Karaite Judaism. Brit Milah (circumcision) is performed on every male child eight days after his birth. Traditions have been maintained surrounding this day in order to enhance the celebration. In addition, Karaites also have traditions and practices regarding the naming of girls as a parallel celebration to the brit milah. Adoption is permitted within Karaite Judaism but there are many hurdles (such as Jewishness) that need to be overcome. In instances where an adopted child is not born to a Jewish father he or she will be converted in infancy (or as soon as possible after the adoption) but is permitted to maintain or reject the conversion upon reaching bar/bat mitzvah age.

Conversion of adults is also discussed in *An Introduction to Karaite Judaism* – the traditions and practices of which are different than those of Rabbinical Judaism. Marriage is a joyous occasion in Karaite Judaism. There are traditions and practices that are unique to Karaites but they also share some common traditions with Rabbinical Judaism – such as a ketubah (marriage contract) and the three stages/parts of marriage. Intermarriage is strictly forbidden – not just between a Jew and non-Jew but also between a Karaite Jew and a Rabbinical Jew. If the non-Jewish partner (or non-Karaite Jewish partner) wishes to completely embrace Karaite Judaism and convert then the marriage may be permitted. Divorce is looked upon unfavorably and is strictly limited to the reasons for divorce as maintained in the Tanakh. According to Karaite Judaism, either the husband or the wife can initiate a divorce proceeding. The petitioner will go to the beit din (Jewish court) and present his/her case. If a divorce is granted then the husband must give his wife a get (divorce document) and the marriage will be dissolved. The death and mourning rituals of the Karaites are very similar to those of the Rabbinites. These rituals are maintained with a sense of holiness – as are all the rituals in one's life.

*An Introduction to Karaite Judaism* is a good read for anyone interested in the basics of Karaite Judaism. The basic, short facts offered throughout the book offer an overview of the Karaite Jewish community and its differing theologies and practices. This book is a good recommendation for those wishing to better understand the world of Karaite Judaism.