

Great Controversies



**Medieval Period
700's - 1400's**

**The Karaites and
Rabbinic Jews –
The Family Feud
that Split our People**

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Great Controversies in Jewish History

The Karaites and Rabbinic Jews

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A. The Karaites

"Search the Scripture well and do not rely on anyone's opinion"

(opening line on the homepage of www.karaites.org)

- a. An 8th Century Jewish heretical sect, professing in its religious observances and opinions to follow the Chumash to the exclusion of "corrupting" and "non-divine" rabbinical traditions and laws.
- b. Originated with literal translations, but eventually adopted many other interpretations, in some ways far more stringent, in some ways far more lenient

B. The Political Background

- a. Jews arrive in Babylonia prior to the destruction of the First Temple (586 BCE) and maintain a community beyond the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE) until about 1000 CE.
- b. Following the brutal crushing of the Bar Kochva revolt (140 CE), Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi writes down the Mishna in Israel (about 200 CE). Jerusalem Talmud is sealed about 350 CE, and Babylonian Talmud (outside of the Roman Empire) in about 550 CE.
 - i. It was edited by the Savoraim until about 600 CE.
 - ii. Implemented and taught by Babylonian Goanim - heads of the Yeshivas of Sura and Pumbedisa
- c. Jews were very autonomous in Babylonia under Persian rule. Exilarch (Reish Galusa) shared power with Goanim
 - i. Exilarch granted temporal powers, collected taxes, established a court, could even execute. Descended from House of David and was assumed to be King if the Jews were to return.
 - ii. Not always a scholar, sometimes barely religious, and very complicated relationship with the Gaonim. Ideally split spiritual and temporal duties.

C. The Dispute

- a. During the 7th Century the Muslims conquered Babylonia.
- b. In 760 Shlomo, Exilarch, died without any sons. Younger nephew was appointed over older Anan ben David
 - i. The infamous Jail story

D. Ananites

- a. Adopted old Sadducee thread of rejection of the Rabbis and the Oral law
- b. Anan was very ascetic. Aveili tzion - everyday was Tisha B'av. No meat or wine following the Destruction (you could mix it with milk, if you could have eaten it), no lights, no hot food, and couldn't leave your house on Shabbos, no Chanukah or Purim, no doctors. Would have and should have just died out

E. Factors why it spread in the 9th and 10th centuries

- a. Muslim religion grew enormously in very short time in 7th century
 - i. within 200 years threatened all of Christianity and half the world
 - ii. very fragmented into sects
- b. People didn't like the Rabbis and Gaonim
 - i. Power is difficult and sophisticated

- ii. G-d pays the price for inappropriate Jews
- c. Rabbinic policy towards schism: ignore it
- F. Later leaders modified it, called themselves Karaites and adopted interpretations, often using methods of Talmud.
 - a. Talmud was *an* opinion but not *THE* opinion. This movement spread until nearly 40% of the Jewish world identified as Karaites
- G. 3 parts to the Oral Law, Karaite challenges
 - a. Rambam lists 3 parts to Oral law:
 - i. Traditions (tefillin, shchitta, mezzuzahs, esrog, Shabbos, eye for an eye...etc)
 - ii. Exegesis
 - iii. Rabbinic decrees and fences (Chanukah, Purim, *muktzah*)

Everyone must interpret the precepts according to his intelligence and comprehension. Do not accept blindly the opinions of others. He who confines himself to performing the rites without understanding them is scarcely differs from a donkey that pulls a load. Yehudah Haddassi, the great Karaite author (Byzantine, 13th century) maintained one is not obligated to follow a precept if one does not understand it.

A basic viewpoint is that the individual alone is responsible for himself before his G-d. Social conformism is thus withdrawn from the individual. There is no intermediary between himself and G-d. Every individual has priestly characteristics. "You are to be to me a nation of Priests (Exodus 19:6)"

Quoted from "Karaism: It's Doctrines and History" by Simon Szyszman

- b. Why would g-d give an oral law if He knew it couldn't be maintained? If it was meant to be oral how dare you write it down? Why is there no mention in the Torah to this Oral Law? Why is the Mishna written in the name of Rabbi so and so, and not G-d said to Moshe? Why is there so much dispute?
- H. Two types of response: Rav Saadia Goan and The Rambam
 - a. Rav Saadia Goan (892-942) went on the offensive, wrote numerous books, articles, spoke all over the Jewish world against them
 - b. Rambam arrived in Egypt; nearly 70% Karaite in an integrated community
 - i. Cairo Geniza has found 7 wedding contracts between Karaites and Rabbinic Jews.
 - 1. Rabbinic husband's promise not to bring certain parts of the animal that Karaite law forbade, not to engage in relations on the Shabbos or holidays, not to demand their wives to light Shabbos candles, to observe each others holidays.
 - 2. Rambam ended all of this by declaring Karaite *gitten* invalid and therefore suspected all Karaites of being mamzerim.
 - ii. He declared they could not count for a minyan of 10 nor a *zimmun* of 3, for they did not believe in the Rabbinic sources requiring them
 - iii. Yet, on a personal level, he never went on the offensive against them. He never excommunicated them. He instead demanded they be treated with respect and dignity, to act "justly, peacefully, truthfully, and humbly with them." We can perform a bris on their children on Shabbos, comfort their mourners and bury and their dead, but one may not visit them on the day they celebrate our holidays. He became their Rav, and one family at a time taught them and converted them. By his death the Karaite community was almost non-existent.