

As It Is Written: A Brief Case for Karaism by Shawn Lichaa, Nehemia Gordon and Meir Rekhavi Quotes

Karaism is the original form of Judaism commanded by God to the Jewish people in the Torah. Karaites accept the Tanakh (Jewish Bible) as the word of God and as the sole religious authority. At the same time, Karaites deny human additions to the Torah such as the Rabbinic Oral Law because Deuteronomy 4:2 states, “You shall not add to the word which I have commanded you, neither shall you diminish from it...” Karaite Judaism also rejects the Rabbinical principle that the Rabbis are the sole authorities for interpreting the Bible. Karaites believe that every Jew has the obligation to study the Torah and decide for him/herself the correct interpretation of God’s commandments, since in the end it is the individual, not the central authority, who is responsible for his own actions. This principle was expressed best in the Karaite Motto: “Search in the Scriptures well and do not rely on anyone’s opinion.” Karaites do not reject all interpretation and do not take the Bible literally, since everything requires interpretation. Instead, Karaites hold every interpretation up to the same objective scrutiny regardless of its source... The Karaite Motto does not say to reject the opinion of the

learned. It simply warns against relying solely on an opinion without verifying its merits in light of the Tanakh.¹

It is a common Rabbinic claim that the Torah is but a skeleton — the framework of the Jewish faith. Being the skeleton, they further claim, it needs blood and flesh to make it vibrant and living. The Rabbis have found this vibrancy in the form of their “Oral Law.” A careful investigation, however, demonstrates that the Rabbinic Oral Law is not the blood and flesh that the Torah is missing, but rather the by-product of a failure to search the Scriptures for their true meaning. In the absence of such a search, the Oral Law often comes to erroneous conclusions about the Biblical text. It is a great tragedy most Jews are told that the Torah is an incomplete document and must be supplemented with this Oral accompaniment. This is contrary to the clear teaching in the Tanakh itself that “The Torah of YHWH is perfect” (Psalms 19:8 [7]). As a result, those students who are genuinely interested in reaching the true meaning of a passage become psychologically dependent on an “Oral Law.” They feel the answers are not contained within the Tanakh itself and therefore do not undertake the necessary steps to find them within the Tanakh. The need for an Oral Law to interpret the commandments thus becomes self-reinforcing, never allowing one to search the Bible itself for the

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answers. Be assured, however, that most of the meaning of the commandments and principles can be determined from an honest and thorough investigation of the text. That which cannot be determined is the result of our inability to recover the plain meaning of the text, which would have been available to the average Israelite receiving the Torah.²

The Tanakh reports that the written Torah was both lost and forgotten for some 50 years and only rediscovered by the Temple priests (2 Kings 22:8; 2 Chronicles 34:15). It is inconceivable that an oral Law could have been remembered when even the written Law was forgotten - especially since the Oral Law is dependent on the Written Law to derive its full meaning.³

The Rabbis claim that the Oral Law was given on Mount Sinai as the official interpretation of the Torah. Yet if one actually looks at the Mishnah and Talmud they are full of the opinions of Rabbis who disagree with each other on almost every issue. The Rabbis explain that whenever there are such disagreements, "both opinions are the words of the living God." While it is possible for two learned individuals to reach differing binding conclusions, reason dictates that at least one of them is wrong. Karaites maintain that it is

² 12-13.

³ 16.

unreasonable to believe that God would consistently contradict Himself.⁴

“After that, *he read all the words of the Torah*, the Blessing and the Curse, according to all that is written in the Book of the Torah. There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded which Joshua failed to read in the presence of the entire assembly of Israel, including the women and children and the strangers who accompanied them.” (Joshua 8:34-35) This last verse could stand alone in summing up the entire Karaite argument. It explicitly states that Joshua read every single word that Moses commanded. To “read” something implies it is written down. In this case, the verse indicates that he read the text “*according to all that is written*” Had Moses given the Israelites a second “Oral” Torah, Joshua would not have been able to “read” all the words that Moses had commanded. Furthermore, the first passage quoted above (Deuteronomy 30:9-10) states that the only thing we need to do for God to rejoice over us is to follow the written commandments. This negates the importance of an alleged “Oral Law” since God would not give us a supposedly binding “Oral Law,” without requiring that we observe its commandments. Collectively these verses show that the Israelites received one Torah from God; all of the words of the

⁴ Ibid.

Law were written so that they may be read aloud and followed by the nation of Israel to gain favor with the Almighty.⁵

To attempt to prove the existence of the Oral Law the students of the Talmud often quote Deuteronomy 12:21, which states, "...then you shall kill of your herd and your flock, which YHWH has given you, as I have commanded you..." The Rabbis claim that the phrase "as I have commanded you" refers to the parts of the Oral Law which explain the proper methods of slaughtering an animal. Indeed there are many requirements laid down in the Talmud as to the "proper" way of killing an animal; however, these are the customs of those writing the Talmud rather than the laws of God. The most misleading aspect of the claim that this passage refers to an alleged Oral Law is that it ignores the context of the passage. Not more than 5 verses earlier we see that the Torah itself dictates how we are to slaughter animals: "Only you shall not eat the blood; you shall pour it upon the earth like water" (Deuteronomy 12:16). From this, we learn that to properly slaughter an animal we must do it in a manner that pours its blood on the ground - as opposed to letting it harden in the veins of the slaughtered animal (e.g. by strangulation). This reading is confirmed by the lines directly succeeding the verse in question: "Only be sure that you eat not the blood: for the blood is the life; and you may not eat the life with the

⁵ 18.

meat..." (Deuteronomy 12:23). In fact, this verse states that the only requirement of slaughter is that we do not eat the blood.⁶

Do Karaites believe that everything contained in the 'Talmud is wrong? No: To argue that every interpretation contained in the Talmud is wrong would be the same as arguing that a view is wrong simply because it is possessed by Karaites. This is not a fair means of debate, nor is it conducive to finding the truth behind some of the more pertinent issues in the Tanakh. When evaluating an interpretation, one must evaluate the interpretation rather than the person who holds the interpretation. In this case, it is fair to say that we should look at the message and not the messenger. On the other hand, to read the Talmud with the preconceived notion that it is the final word on the issues at hand is unacceptable - especially since the Talmud often reaches conclusions devoid of biblical support or even directly in contradiction to the Torah.⁷

Since Karaites do not have Rabbis what title is given to those possessing knowledge of the Tanakh? In Karaite tradition, such people are called Hakham (wise man) or Hakhama (wise woman). The title of Hakham, unlike that of Rabbi or Priest, does not denote a clerical position, but rather indicates that one has reached a certain level of understanding in regards to the Tanakh. To be a

⁶ 20.

⁷ 29.

Hakham, one needs an in-depth knowledge of linguistics, the intricacies of Biblical Hebrew, and must possess knowledge of the valid means for Biblical analysis. Interestingly enough, while Orthodox Rabbanites do not permit females to become Rabbis, a female may become a Hakhama. In fact in the 11th century, the *leader* of the prominent and powerful Karaite community of Spain was a woman whom the Karaites referred to as *al-M.u'alema* which means, "The Teacher."⁸

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