



## Early Karaism (The Need for a New Approach)

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## EARLY KARAISM

(The Need for a New Approach)

THE publication of Dr. Raphael Mahler's bulky volume on the Karaites,<sup>1</sup> with its attempt to interpret early Karaism as a purely socio-economic revolutionary movement, deserves greater attention than has generally been accorded to it so far.<sup>2</sup> However strongly one may disagree with Mahler's main thesis, one cannot deny that the book performs the highly timely task of reviewing anew and in exhaustive detail the entire history of Karaism during its most crucial, and historically speaking, most important period, that of its youth, from its beginnings in the 7th century, down to the critical epoch of Sa'adiah in the first half of the 10th century. That the principal conclusions drawn by Dr. Mahler seem, in the judgment of several students of Karaism (including myself), not to be warranted by the available documentary evidence, is true enough. But the mere challenge offered by the book's novel approach ought to demonstrate more effectively perhaps than anything else could, that a general reexamination of the whole position of Karaism in Jewish history is long overdue, and that a revision of long held and generally accepted notions of the origin of Karaism and of the nature of its rôle in Jewish thought and social structure cannot be long delayed without doing injury to the most precious ideal of history — the attainment of factual truth.

*Habent sua fata studia* — and not just *libelli*. Karaite studies have always been neglected and unpopular stepchildren in the general field of Jewish history, particularly studies in the cradle-period of the sect, where the available documentary sources are so pitifully few, so heart-breakingly fragmentary, and so thoroughly saturated with the acrimonious atmosphere of the milieu in which they were conceived and born. But unfortunately this neglect goes also hand in hand with continued and apathetic allegiance to traditional conceptions of basic

<sup>1</sup> קאראימער, New York, 1947.

<sup>2</sup> My detailed review of Dr. Mahler's book (limited to its purely historical aspect, to be sure) will appear in the next volume of the *Yivo-Bleter*.

events in early Karaite history, devoid of that ceaseless and almost automatic periodical testing of these conceptions against new data and new approaches to old data, which is the very life-blood of living historical research. Such conservatism — if this be the proper term — is particularly easy and tempting when, as in the case of early Karaism, one is forced by the paucity of authentic contemporary source-material to grope much of the time in the darkness of ignorance or the twilight of partial knowledge and to remain on constant guard against the danger of being led astray by preconceived ideas or long accepted theories.

An outstanding example in this case is the basic question of how Karaism came into being in the first place. The generally and long accepted view is that, with due allowance for earlier sectarian rumblings, Karaism was essentially founded by Anan in the second half of the 8th century, and that the immediate occasion for the birth of the schism was Anan's unsuccessful candidacy for the office of Exilarch, which led him to secede from the Rabbanite synagogue and to rally around his person the various dissident elements in the Jewish community in Iraq (Babylonia), where he lived. The principal features of this theory are, of course, those of the traditional story current in Rabbanite literature since approximately the 12th century. I have analyzed this traditional account in considerable detail elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> so that I need repeat here only the result of my analysis, namely that the story involves factual and psychological difficulties of such weight and complexity as to make its historicity, at best, highly suspect. The information, direct and indirect, contained in the encyclopedic *Kilāb al-anwār* of al-Qirqisānī (second quarter of the 10th century) and in other early documents conveys a picture infinitely more complex, and yet that much more credible. It postulates a long and continuous ferment of anti-traditional schisms and defections going back almost to the time of the Arab conquest of Syro-Palestine, Persia, and the frontier provinces to the East and North, in the middle of the 7th century. It indicates that the leadership and the personnel of these pre-Ananite dissident movements were supplied not by urbanized Iraqi Jews, but by self-reliant and adventurous Jewish emigrants (and their descendants) who had left the autonomous metropolitan Jewish com-

<sup>3</sup> "Anan ben David—a Re-Appraisal of the Historical Data," in *Semitic Studies in memory of Immanuel Loew*, Budapest, 1947, pp. 239-248.

munity in Iraq and had made new homes for themselves in distant provinces like Khurāsān, Jibāl, and Armenia, where they were out of reach of both the metropolitan Jewish officialdom and of Babylonian scholarship which, while highly diversified, yet perforce remained generally orthodox and conformist. It would seem logical to assume that these Jewish frontiersmen had left their Babylonian homeland not because they wanted to but because they felt compelled to do so, and that in their new homes they preserved the memory of the compelling motives which had moved them to emigrate, partly no doubt the vestiges of ancient opposition to, and deviation from, rabbinic law and custom, and partly the social and economic pressures exerted upon them (wrongfully, as they thought) by the Exilarchic and Gaonic authorities and by the property-owning upper class of landlords and merchants. But particularly one must not lose sight of the fact that these Jewish frontiersmen were sprinkled like minute drops in the ocean of the overwhelmingly Persian population which was raging with resentment against the arrogance and oppression of its Arab conquerors (whom it despised as uncouth semi-savages) and was seething with plots and conspiracies for revolt. To suppose that these Jewish settlers were uninfluenced by their Gentile neighbors and had failed to draw a parallel between the Persian attitude toward their Arab masters and their own feeling toward the Babylonian Rabbanites is, it seems to me, highly unrealistic. They could, and did, remain untouched by the theological aspect of the controversy between Persian Shi'ism and Ummayyad orthodoxy,<sup>4</sup> for the original basis of this disagreement, the claim of the 'Alids to the caliphate and to religious supremacy as vicars of the Prophet, had no meaning for Jews. But the practical side of the behavior of their Persian neighbors — their insistence that they were entitled to religious, political, and economic self-government, finds such a close parallel in early Karaite thought and action, that to explain it as a pure coincidence simply makes no sense.

<sup>4</sup> The Persian influence upon the Jewish schismatics of the early period has already been investigated by Israel Friedlaender in his capital articles in *JQR*, I–III (1910–12). Some of his conclusions, however, are far from correct (for example, his rejection of the date given by al-Qirqisānī for Abū 'Īsā-Iṣfahānī. It is risky to question al-Qirqisānī's data! The date given by him is, in my judgment, quite correct, and the Arab official who made short work of Abū 'Īsā's revolt was presumably the redoubtable al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf, or some subordinate officer under his command).

There were undoubtedly some other factors involved as well, especially the after-effects of the tremendous let-down experienced by the Jews in the Near East at that time. The astounding spectacle of a mob of half-starved Bedouin bursting out of their native desert and becoming within a few decennia the masters of a world empire — surely a portentous sign of God's work — could not but have aroused expectations of an impending radical change also in the status of Jewry, from that of a dispersed and oppressed minority to that of a revived nation restored to its ancient land and its long-lost freedom. Yet events soon proved that the only change was that of one cruel master for another, just as arrogant, just as rapacious, and just as uninterested in the redemption of Zion. Hence the perfervid and impatient nationalism of the early schismatics, culminating in the ill-fated attempt of Abū 'Īsā al-Iṣfahānī to redeem Israel by force of arms, *à la* the Shi'ite *mahdī*, whom his Persian neighbors so confidently expected to arrive in their midst and lead them to independence and freedom.

All this had crystallized itself long before Anan, and the inescapable logical conclusion is that Karaism was really founded not by Anan, but by these early uncouth pioneers, living in the atmosphere of a frontier region<sup>5</sup> and profoundly influenced by the political, social, and economic aspirations and grievances of their Persian fellow-citizens.<sup>6</sup> It was they who had planted the seed of Karaism and who had nursed the young slender tree. What Anan, the cultured and learned Iraqi aristocrat, did was to polish this primitive teaching and provide it with a systematic literary foundation in the shape of his *Book of Precepts* — the first complete and scholarly manual of non-Rabbanite anti-traditional theology. It lent him a hazy sort of prestige among the Karaites, but little else. For the overwhelming majority of the dissenters refused to join his meagre following, and those of them

<sup>5</sup> Much of the region to the East and North of Iraq and Fārs is mountainous, and these early schismatics have consequently acquired the mountaineer's characteristic tendency to insist on being left alone to do things in his own way. Already al-Qirqisānī has noticed that the schismatics of Jibāl ("the Mountain Country", the ancient Media) were prone to invent queer laws and customs (*Kitāb al-anwār*, ed. Nemoy, I, p. 57).

<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately we know much too little also about the latter, because Muslim historiography has been colored by later tendencies current under official Abbasid tutelage. Hence the available information about both Umyyad secularism and early Persian separatism is very meager and not always reliable.

who learned to write minced no words in criticizing his views and decisions, sometimes in terms scarcely less sarcastic than those used by them in referring to Rabbanites.<sup>7</sup> Not even as late as the middle of the 10th century, as al-Qirqisānī so abundantly testifies, was there any such thing as a Karaite sect with anything resembling a hierarchy headed by Anan. Instead there was a mass of quarreling schismatics, to each of whom Anan was just another sectarian who made some statements that were all right, and a many others that were, as he thought, woefully wrong. To describe Anan as the founder of Karaism, even in the most general terms, is therefore not only an uncritical oversimplification, but a matter of direct reversal of solidly documented facts.

The same considerations apply to the other crucial problem in early Karaite history — the campaign of the Gaon Sa'adiah against Karaism and its causes and consequences. The generally accepted theory is that by the first quarter of the 10th century Karaite missionary propaganda had achieved such a spectacular success in recruiting converts from Rabbanite ranks that it became a deadly danger to the very survival of Rabbanism, and that Sa'adiah's vigorous counter-offensive stepped into the breach just in time to reverse this dangerous trend and to beat back the onslaught of the schism for good and ever. It is amazing that no student of Karaism had as yet thought of pausing for a moment to ask himself just what concrete evidence do we actually possess in support of this tempting tale of last-minute rescue. The answer is — *none*. There is no documentary evidence in contemporary Rabbanite literature showing signs of serious alarm at a tidal wave of conversions from Rabbanism to Karaism. Neither is there any note of triumph and of impending victory over Rabbanism in contemporary Karaite documents. Quite the reverse — the latter are permeated throughout by a spirit of profound pessimism and are full of pitiful laments at the paucity and helplessness of the Karaite faithful in the face of Rabbanite political and economic superiority. We do not hear of populous Karaite communities led by powerful leaders — on the contrary, we catch glimpses of only small Karaite colonies composed of a few ascetic and unwordly individuals barely able to keep body and soul together. Karaite missionary propaganda there was — another significant parallel with the Shi'ite net of subversive propaganda during the Umayyad period — and we have an excellent literary specimen of

<sup>7</sup> The classic example is, of course, the famous epithet ראש הכסילים, hurled at Anan by Daniel al-Qūmisī (*Kitāb al-anwār*, I, p. 5).

it in the Epistle of Sahl ben Maṣṣliāḥ, but its practical achievements in attracting Rabbanite converts were insignificant, and the most telling proof of this is the remarkable, and as far as I know, hitherto unnoticed fact that with the exception of Anan not a single early Karaite scholar, out of the multitude known to us by name, is stated to have been a converted Rabbanite. It is, it seems to me, a gratuitous injustice towards the pre-Sa'adian Geonim and Exilarchs to assume that for a century and a half, if not for much longer, they criminally neglected their sworn duty and stood inactive in the face of the allegedly mounting Karaite peril, and it is a strain on one's credulity to ask one to believe that powerful Karaite aggression should have been stopped dead within an inch of complete victory by the effect of Sa'adiah's polemical writings.<sup>8</sup> Compared with the great Gaon's masterly philosophical, liturgical and philological works, his anti-Karaite polemics pure and simple are, at best, second-rate performances,<sup>9</sup> upon whose weak points<sup>10</sup> the contemporary Karaite apologists were not slow to pounce with telling effect. These polemical tracts by themselves could not have defeated a Karaite march to victory, nor did they, because there is not a shred of documentary evidence that such a march had ever actually taken place. It is true that Sa'adiah seems to have been the first Gaon to write extensively against Karaism,<sup>11</sup> and

<sup>8</sup> All this is assumed by Malter, *Sa'adiah Gaon*, Philadelphia, 1921, p. 261 ff. No less unjust, it seems to me, is Malter's hypothesis that the pre-Sa'adian Geonim and scholars could not combat Karaism because they knew nothing of Hebrew philology, philosophy, and biblical exegesis. Really now, did they lock themselves up in air-tight rooms to keep themselves untainted by the influence of Arab scholarship, the very air of which they were breathing?

<sup>9</sup> Another important point to remember is that Sa'adiah's anti-Karaite polemics were addressed to the academic intelligentsia, and not to the Rabbanite man in the street who stood in greater danger of being subverted by Karaite missionaries. The general Rabbanite public could hardly have been able to understand such an abstruse composition, for example, as Sa'adiah's *אשר פסלי*. Consider by way of contrast the Epistle of Sahl ben Maṣṣliāḥ which was undoubtedly aimed at the average Rabbanite citizen. The few technical paragraphs in the Epistle are, in my judgment, later interpolations, though they may have been written and inserted by Sahl himself, after his work had become, in modern parlance, a "best seller."

<sup>10</sup> E.g., Sa'adiah's unrealistic insistence on the antiquity of mathematical calendation, etc.

<sup>11</sup> This naturally raises anew the question of what made Sa'adiah turn his wrath in full force upon Karaism. If the hypothesis of a dan-

that he became the *bête noire* of the early Karaite polemicists, but whatever their reason was for electing Sa'adiah to be their chief Rabbanite enemy, it was not because he had snatched victory away from them at the moment when it was practically in their grasp.<sup>12</sup>

gerously successful Karaite proselytism is to be regarded as bankrupt, it cannot of course be used to explain the Gaon's campaign against the schism. Malter (*op. cit.*, p. 58 ff., 260 ff.) thought that a personal conflict might have been involved, and that some influential Egyptian Karaites, angered by the publication of his *Kitāb al-radd 'alā 'Anān*, may have had a hand in forcing the young Sa'adiah to leave Egypt in a rather hurried manner, never to return. This, of course, is pure guessing, since there is no factual evidence behind it, nor does it, in my judgment, square with Sa'adiah's intellectual integrity — he was, it seems to me, above turning personal animosities pure and simple into theological controversies. A more logical explanation would involve the consideration of Sa'adiah's personal character. He was a man of extraordinarily keen intellect, profound piety and sincerity, and unshakeable conviction of the righteousness of his cause. He was also human enough to be impatient and intolerant toward those who disagreed with him, even when they were Rabbanites in good standing (like Ben Meir), and not Karaite schismatics. If he had had to leave Egypt because his sharp tongue and pugnacious disposition had angered some influential persons, it is more likely that these persons were leaders of the Rabbanite community with whom he would have been in daily proximity, rather than Karaite notables with whom he would have had only infrequent and casual contact, and who would certainly have expected no sweet compliments from this young Rabbanite scholar. Hence, it would seem reasonable to assume that he did not need the rather sordid excuse of a personal grudge against a few Karaite individuals. The mere existence of the schism was reason enough for him to do his utmost to expose its wickedness before his fellow-Rabbanites and to exhort them to have nothing to do with the schismatics.

<sup>12</sup> The question of course remains, why the Karaites felt so deeply hurt by Sa'adiah's attack and why they resented it so emphatically. I do not *know* the answer, but I can offer what seems to me to be a reasonable *guess*. Throughout early Karaite thought there runs a profound conviction that their teaching represented true Biblical Judaism, of which Rabbanism was but a corrupted version. Coupled with this conviction there was a fervent hope that truth — as the Karaites saw it — would prevail in the end, and that the Rabbanites would eventually realize their error and return to the Karaite fold. In fact, such a hope was an essential pre-requisite for Karaite missionary propaganda, since unlike the early Christians the Karaites did not seek converts among the Gentiles. Hence it was vital for them to remain on a friendly footing with their Rabbanite cousins, so that the latter might continue to consider them brethren in Israel — erring brethren, to be



Karaite propaganda failed because, for reasons as yet only dimly visible to us, its program failed to appeal to the Jewish population as a whole. It failed probably because the schism's platform (to borrow a modern political term) was grossly unrealistic—its impatient nationalism futile in the face of Muslim hegemony over the Near East and Muslim hostility to Jewish messianism, its ascetism ironic in the face of the bitter need of the mass of the Jewish population for economic relief, and its call for a return to pure biblical law impractical in the midst of political, social, and economic conditions which did not exist in the days of Isaiah or Ezra. The Karaite effort to supplant a Rabbanism based on the uninterrupted chain of Jewish thought for nearly a thousand years would thus undoubtedly have failed even if Sa'adiah had never appeared on the scene, and the renaissance of Rabbanite scholarship in the fields of philosophy, philology, exegesis, and jurisprudence would have been brought about anyway by the irresistible influence of the Muslim scholarly environment, even without the impetus supplied by Karaite competition.<sup>13</sup> And as for the social and economic grievances which played a considerable role in the schismatic movement, they too were eventually taken care of, in some measure

sure, from the Rabbanite point of view, but brethren nevertheless. That the Karaites succeeded in maintaining such an amicable relationship is indicated by the fact that no pre-Sa'adian Rabbanites scholar bothered to write polemics against them. When Sa'adiah came upon the scene with his rapid-fire attack upon them, the Karaites were horrified not only by the suddenness of it and by their (no doubt, sincere) belief that they had done nothing to provoke it. What cut them to the quick was that Sa'adiah had literally read them out of the fold of Jewry and had declared them to be not just minor deviators to be mildly reprimanded for their error, but complete apostates who had "taken a walk straight out of Judaism" (*khawārij kānū bil-umam* — al-Qirḡisānī's *ipsissima verba* — *Kiṭāb al-anwār*, I, p. 3) and were to be roundly condemned and scrupulously shunned. Sa'adiah's verdict, backed by his prestige as Gaon, thus meant an end to all Karaite hopes of ultimate victory, and they naturally felt extremely bitter toward the man who was the cause of it. And yet, one must not lose sight of the fact that foul curses, like those of the fanatic Salmon ben Jeroham, were not the rule among the Gaon's contemporaries — al-Qirḡisānī's courteous and reasonable refutation of Sa'adiah's views is evidence enough of that.

<sup>13</sup> This is not meant to belittle the Karaite contribution, especially during the golden age of Karaite literary production (9th–11th century), to the common treasury of Jewish literature. It was very great and very valuable indeed.

at least, by the decay of Exilarchic and Gaonic authority and by the general economic decline which marked the deterioration of the Abbasid caliphate and the misrule of Turkish and Mongol conquerors.

We are still groping in the dark, but the general position of the place of Karaism in Jewish history is, it seems to me, shaping itself up distinctly enough along some such lines as I have attempted to trace in the preceding paragraphs. If that is so, then the traditional conception of the cause and of the early course of Karaite history is no longer tenable. We must recognize that Karaism was the result of an exceedingly complex combination of causes, religious, social, and economic, not the least of which was the influence of the social and economic conflicts within contemporary Muslim society: that it was a gradual movement of long duration and wide territorial extent; and that both its inception and its failure to prevail over Rabbanism were due to basic social factors (in the widest sense of this term) over which no single person — neither Anan nor Sa'adiah — had any decisive control. Once this is recognized, it will be possible at last to place the study of Karaism upon a solid historical footing, free of the ideological overtones which have obscured it heretofore.

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