

What is Karaism?

[World Karaite Movement](#)

Karaite Judaism or Karaism is the original faith of the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament). The word "Karaism" derives from the Hebrew *Karaim* meaning "Followers of Scripture".¹ The Hebrew Scriptures contain the master plan of the Creator of the universe revealed to the Nation of Israel through Moses and the Prophets.² The Creator revealed His will to the Israelite nation in order to serve as a "Light unto the Nations".³ From its very inception Israel's role has been to teach mankind of the divine will, which endows those who live by it with eternal life, as it is written: "it is a tree of life to those who keep it" (Proverbs 3:18).⁴

The two large "monotheistic" religions, Christianity⁵ and Islam⁶, recognize the truth of the Hebrew Scriptures. Yet they compromise the purity of the divine message by adding to God's complete and perfect Word. At the same time, the form of Judaism commonly practiced today is not authentic Judaism but "Talmudism". The Talmudists corrupt the true message of the Hebrew Scriptures by adding the teachings of the Rabbis found in the "Talmud", which they claim were revealed by God.⁷ This despite the fact that there is not a single reference to the

¹ In old Hebrew, Scripture is called *Kara*, hence the name *Karaites* literally means *Scripturalists*. See E. Ben Yehudah, *A Complete Dictionary of Ancient and Modern Hebrew*, Jerusalem 1951, vol. 12 pp.6138-6139 nt. 3.

² The Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) are also known by the Hebrew name *Tanach* or *Tanakh*. *Tanach* is an acronym for the three sections of the Hebrew Scriptures: 1) *Law* [Torah], 2) *Prophets* [Neviim], and 3) *Holy Writings* [Ketuvim]. The *Law* consists of the five books revealed to Moses while the *Prophets* and *Holy Writings* contain the remaining books revealed to the Prophets, Elders, and Priests of ancient Israel (Jeremiah 18:18; Ezekiel 7:26).

³ Isaiah 42:6; 49:6; Genesis 12:3; 28:14.

⁴ See also: "... the mountains of Zion, because there YHWH commanded the blessing of eternal life" (Psalms 133:3). "And many of those that sleep in the dust of the earth shall arise, some to eternal life..." (Daniel 12:2). "And when you see this, your heart shall rejoice, and your bones shall blossom like grass" (Isaiah 66:14).

⁵ Christianity admits to the truth of the Hebrew Scriptures in the followings New Testament passages: "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled." (Matthew 5:17-18). "But this I confess unto thee, that after the way which they call heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the law and in the prophets" (Act 24:14).

⁶ Islam admits to the truth of the Hebrew Scriptures in the followings Koranic passages: "And most certainly We gave Moses the Book and We sent apostles after him one after another" (Koran 2:87). "Surely We revealed the Torah in which was guidance and light; with it the prophets who submitted themselves to God, judging for those who were Jews." (Koran 5:44). "Certainly We made a covenant with the children of Israel and We sent to them apostles" (Koran 5:70). "And certainly We gave the Book to Moses, so be not in doubt concerning the receiving of it, and We made it a guide for the children of Israel." (Koran 32:23).

⁷ The Talmudists' claim of divine revelation for their teachings appears in the following Talmudic passages: "Rabbi Abba said in the name of Samuel: For three year the House of Shammai and the House of Hillel were divided. Each one said the law is according to us. Then a voice came out from heaven and said: 'Both of these are the words of

Talmud in the entire Hebrew Scriptures. The authentic Hebrew religion is that which is taught by the Creator Himself in the Hebrew Scriptures without addition or subtraction, as it is written: "Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall you diminish anything from it, that you may keep the commandments of YHWH your God" (Deuteronomy 4:2).

Karaites regard the current era of human history as the period of the "Great Exile". The Hebrew Scriptures describe this era and foretell that in it the Nation of Israel will forsake the true way of the Creator for man-made religion.⁸ The prophets teach us that this era will end with Israel returning to the Creator under the leadership of the anointed king of the House of David and the entire human race embracing the religion of the Hebrew Scriptures.⁹

In this current era of the Great Exile, prophecy has ceased while the Almighty "hides His face" for the sins of Israel.¹⁰ With no living prophets, the only path to knowledge of the divine is through the Hebrew Scriptures, which contain the complete and perfect instruction of the divine will revealed to the prophets of Israel.¹¹ By living in accordance with the divine instruction, men can be redeemed from sin, as it is written: "When the evildoer turns away from all his sins that he has done and shall keep all My statutes and do justice and righteousness, he shall surely live, he shall not die. All his iniquities that he has done shall no longer be remembered" (Ezekiel 18:21-22). God bestowed us with His perfect instruction out of his immense love for mankind, as it is written: "Do I indeed desire the death of the evildoer, says Lord YHWH, do I not desire for him to return from his ways so that he may live?" (Ezekiel 18:23).

To understand God's perfect instruction we must diligently study the Hebrew Scriptures. In days of old, the words of prophecy were understood clearly and with ease.¹² If something was uncertain it could be clarified by "seeking God" through the prophets.¹³ But today in the era of

the living God." (*Babylonian Talmud*, Erubin 13b). "Rabbi Levy bar Chama said in the name of Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish: What is meant by the verse: 'And I will give you the tablets of stone, the law, and the commandment which I have written to teach them.' (Exodus 24:12). *Tablets* refers to the ten commandments; *law* refers to the Torah; *and the commandment* refers to the Mishnah; *which I have written* refers to the Prophets and the Writings; *to teach them* refers to the Gemara [=Talmud]. This teaches us that all of them were given to Moses at Sinai." (*Babylonian Talmud*, Berachot 5a). "When the Almighty revealed Himself at Sinai in order to give the Torah to Israel, he recited to Moses in due order the Scriptures, the Mishnah, the Talmud and the Aggadah [=Midrash]... Even that which a student asks his Rabbi, did the Almighty tell over to Moses at that time. After he learned it from the mouth of the Almighty he [Moses] said: 'Master of the universe! Let me write it for them.' He [the Almighty] replied: 'I do not wish to give it to them [entirely] in writing... but the Scriptures do I give to them in writing while the Mishnah, the Talmud, and the Aggadah I give to them orally.'" (*Midrash Exodus Rabbah*, Parashah 47).

⁸ Deuteronomy 4:27-28; Isaiah 29:13; 2Chronicles 15:3-7.

⁹ Isaiah 2:1-4; 11:1-9; 66:12-24; Deuteronomy 4:29-30.

¹⁰ Ezekiel 39:22-29; Isaiah 29:9-14.

¹¹ Psalms 19:8; Malachi 3:22.

¹² Deuteronomy 30:10-13; 2Kings 22:8.11.

¹³ Leviticus 24:12; Numbers 27:5; 2Kings 22:13-14; Ezra 2:63.

Exile, with the cessation of prophecy and separated from the culture and language of the prophets by thousands of years, we must work hard to understand the "plain meaning" of the words understood naturally by the ancient Israelites.¹⁴ The "plain meaning" of Scripture¹⁵ is that obvious meaning that would have been understood by the ancient Israelites when they gathered to hear the *Torah* (Books of Moses) read to them in the public reading held every seventh year.¹⁶ Being fluent in Biblical Hebrew, the ancient Israelites simply had to listen to the words of Scripture in order to understand them. Today this same understanding must be derived from Scripture using sound linguistic principles and contextual exegesis.

Karaites maintain that every human being has an obligation to study the Hebrew Scriptures and determine for themselves the correct meaning of the Almighty's commandments based on their own reasoning and understanding.¹⁷ On the Day of Judgment it is the individual who will be called into reckoning for his own actions.¹⁸ The ancient adage of the Karaite sages declares: "Search well in the Scriptures and do not rely on anyone's opinion". In this regard the Karaite sages taught: "He who relies upon any of the teachers of the Exile without personal investigation, it is as if he has engaged in idolatry."

Karaites place no value in the interpretations of the majority or the customs of the forefathers. On the contrary, Scripture teaches us: "Do not go after the majority to do evil" (Exodus 23:2). The prophets also warn us against following in the errant footsteps of the ancestors, as it is written: "be not like your fathers... who acted treacherously against YHWH" (2Chronicles 20:7), and again: "they shall not be as their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation" (Psalms 78:8). The same warning applies to the laws invented out of men's hearts, which the prophets call the "commandment of men learned by rote" (Isaiah 29:13).¹⁹

Karaism is not a "monolithic" faith in which every believer agrees on every detail of understanding of Scripture. Because the burden of interpretation rests on the individual and not a central authority it is inevitable that there will be differences of interpretation and

¹⁴ This is what is meant by: "light for yourselves a lamp; it is time to seek YHWH, until he shall come and teach righteousness" (Hosea 10:12).

¹⁵ Plain Meaning, Hebrew: *Peshat*: (literally: plain, simple).

¹⁶ Deuteronomy 31:10-13. Karaites do not reject interpretation nor do we take the Bible literally since every written work requires interpretation. Instead, we interpret the Bible according to its "plain meaning".

¹⁷ Exodus 23:2; Hosea 10:12; 2Chronicles 15:3-4.

¹⁸ Ezekiel 33:20; Isa 66:12-24; Joel 4:1-17; Malachi 3:19-21; Ecclesiastes 3:17; 11:9; 12:13-14.

¹⁹ In Hebrew: *Mitzvat Anashim Melumadah* (Isa 29:13), literally: "learned commandment of men". Others translate: "taught by the precept of men" (KJV); "taught by the commandment of men" (NKJV); "commandment of men learned by rote" (JPS, RSV); "tradition learned by rote" (NASB); "rules taught by men" (NIV). Part of the punishment of Exile is being confronted with the test of idolatry, as it is written: "And there [in Exile] you shall worship gods, the work of men's hands" (Deuteronomy 4:28). Idolatry consists of making holy that which God has not made holy. This can mean worshipping images of wood or stone, but it can also mean sanctifying the teaching of men or the traditions of the fathers.

understanding. However this diversity is a strength rather than a weakness and prevents Karaites from getting bogged down with a given interpretation despite the obviousness of its error. This diversity requires the individual Karaite to take personal responsibility for interpreting Scripture, basing his understanding on the merits and logic of a given interpretation. When this method is followed the correct interpretation will generally win out. What unites Karaites together is our common fellowship in the Hebrew Scriptures and desire to live by the pure unaltered instruction of the Creator of the universe.

Published by: World Karaite Movement POB, 7816, Jerusalem 91078, ISRAEL

To learn more, please visit: <http://www.karaite-korner.org>