

"Anan and the Rise of Karaism"

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Anan and the Rise of Karaism
Babylon, about 760

THE appearance in the seventh century of Islam, a world religion, stimulated Jews and Christians to examine their own beliefs more carefully. Moreover, the later development of philosophic thought in the Arab world made men more critical of established religions. In the Jewish world such criticism of Judaism expressed itself in the formation of a number of petty heretical sects, some of which had their roots in the heterodox thought of the preceding seven or eight centuries and now again became active. Practically all of them, whether old or new, had this in common: they were opposed to Talmudism, to the system of law and ritual as developed by the rabbis on the basis of the Bible.

The opposition on the part of some of these anti-nomistic sectaries to the superstitions, to the crude concepts of the deity, to the naive mysticism and demonology of an appreciable number of rabbinic Jews brought a certain amount of freedom of thought and a healthy provocative criticism into Jewish thinking in the Middle Ages.

Anan ben David, a notable Babylonian Jew, rallied many of the dissatisfied elements in Jewry around him about 760, and created a new sect called the Ananites. He attempted to throw overboard rabbinic tradition, law, and ritual, and he called for a return to the Bible, which every individual was to interpret according to his own intellectual powers. Though Anan instituted some changes in calendar, marriage, dietary legislation, liturgy, and the like, he did not reject the basic religious principles of Judaism.

By the ninth century these sectaries, who had by now made inroads into the Rabbanites and had produced some eminent scholars, were called *Karaim*, Karaites, "followers of the Bible," and it is by this name that the last remnants of this group, about twelve thousand, are known today.

It is now almost impossible to determine, with any degree of accuracy, what actually happened in the eighth century when Anan seceded from rabbinical Judaism. The Karaites and their rabbinical opponents, the Rabbanites—like the later Protestants and Catholics

—disliked each other so cordially that it was difficult for either side to write dispassionately.

The first selection below, translated from the Hebrew, is a Rabbanite account of the rise of Anan. Its facts, in general, are accurate. It is thought to be the work of the great Saadia, and may be an extract of his Arabic *Refutation of Anan* written in Egypt in 905 when he was but twenty-three years of age.

The second account, also Rabbanite, comes from the pen of the Spanish Jewish historian, Abraham ibn Daud, who in 1161 finished his Hebrew *Line of Tradition*. It is not improbable that his history was written to show the authenticity of rabbinic tradition, and thus to confute the Karaites who had been making proselytes in Spain.

The third account comes from *Orah Zaddikim* ("The path of the righteous"), a bibliographical work written in Hebrew by Simhah Isaac Luzki, a Karaite scholar. Though this book was written as late as 1757—just about a thousand years after the rise of Anan—nevertheless it follows older Karaite historical traditions. According to this tradition, which is at least as early as the tenth century, the Karaites are the original Jews, and the Rabbanites or Pharisees are but one of a group of heretics who have been perverting the original Jewish religion since the days of Jeroboam I, about 933 B.C.E.! Anan is thus not the founder of a heresy, but the last great Jewish reformer. This entire concept of Jewish history is, of course, false.

The fourth selection is taken from the Hebrew missionary and propagandistic pamphlet, *Tokahat Megullah* ("An open rebuke"), written 960–1000 by the Jerusalem Karaite, Sahl ben Mazliah. The extract given here is an attack on rabbinic tradition and an appeal to the individual to turn directly to the Bible, and, on the basis of his own reasoning, determine the laws which he must observe.

1. *A Rabbanite Account of the Origin of Karaism, 905 (?)*

¶(Anan had a younger brother whose name was Hananiah. Now Anan was greater than his brother in knowledge of the Torah and older in years, but the scholars of that generation were not willing to set him up as exilarch [ruler of the Babylonian Jews] because of the unmitigated unruliness and irreverence which characterized him. The sages, therefore, turned to Hananiah his brother because of his great modesty, shyness, and fear of God, and made him exilarch. Then Anan became incensed, he and every scoundrel that was left of the Sadducean and Boethusian breed [sectaries of the latter days of the Second Temple], and he secretly determined to make a

schism [in Judaism] because he feared the government of that day. These heretics appointed Anan as their exilarch. [Schismatics who created new religions were tolerated; heretics were not.]

This matter was made known to the authorities on a Sunday and it was ordered that he be put into jail until Friday, when he was to be hanged, for he had rebelled against the government [in not accepting Hananiah, the calif's appointee]. There, in the prison, he met a certain Moslem scholar [probably Abu Hanifa, d. 767, a famous divine], who was also imprisoned, and was to be hanged also on that very Friday, for he had rebelled against the religion of Mohammed. The Moslem gave him a piece of advice, and this is what he said to him: "Are there not in the Torah commands which may permit of two interpretations?" Anan answered: "There certainly are." Then he said to him: "Take some point and interpret it differently from those who follow your brother Hananiah; only be sure your partisans agree to it, and don't fail also to give a bribe to the vizier. Perhaps he'll give you permission to speak. Then prostrate yourself and say: 'My lord King, have you appointed my brother over one religion or two?' And when he will answer you: 'Over one religion,' then say to him: 'But I and my brother rule over two different religions!' Then you'll surely be saved, if you'll only make clear to him the religious differences between your faith and the faith of your brother, and if your followers agree with you. Talk like this and when the King [al-Mansur, 754-775] hears these things, he'll keep quiet."

Anan thereupon set out to deceive his own group and said to them: "Last night Elijah appeared to me in a dream and said to me: 'You deserve to die because you have transgressed against that which is written in the Torah.'" [Elijah, says Anan, told him to go back to the laws of the Torah, the Bible.]

Through his sharp sophistry he taught them these things, and in order to save himself from violent death and to win a victory he spent a lot of money bribing his way until the King gave him permission to speak. Then he began saying: "The religion of my brother is dependent, in making the calendar, on astronomical calculation of the months and year, but my religion is dependent on the actual observation of the new moon and the signs of the ripening grain." Now since that king made his calculation, too, through actual observation of the new moon and the signs of the ripening grain, he was pacified and reconciled to Anan. [In making the calendar the Rabbanites employed mathematics; the Karaites, observation of natural phenomena.]

ii. *Abraham ibn Daud's Account of Anan, about 1161*

¶(Anan and Saul his son—may the name of the wicked rot—lived in the days of Yehudai Gaon [of Sura, 760-764]. This Anan was a descendant of the house of David and a scholar originally, but people discovered something wrong in him, and for this reason he was not appointed *gaon* [head of a Jewish academy], and the fates decreed that he should not become exilarch either.

Because of the envy and chagrin in his heart he prepared the way for a great deal of trouble later by misleading and enticing the Jews away from the traditions of the sages which had been handed down by the prophets through reliable witnesses, as we have been showing in this book. Thus he became a "scholar who rebelled against the decisions of the highest authorities" in that he refused to hearken to the judges. [This was a capital crime. Sanhedrin 11:1.] He composed books and raised disciples, and of his own accord devised statutes that are no good, laws by which man cannot live.

iii. *A Karaitic Account of Anan, 1757*

¶(Now this is what happened in the days of Anan the Prince, peace be unto him, a saintly and pious man. He was the greatest and most prominent scholar of all the Jewish sages and a very distinguished student of the written law [Bible] and the oral law—the Mishnah and Talmud—and of the sciences and astronomy, too, and withal a very pious and humble man, perfect and upright, fearing God and turning aside from evil. He was an aristocratic prince, notable in family and position, of the seed of David the king, peace be unto him, a chief and a great man in Israel, acceptable to the majority of his brethren, seeking the welfare of the people of God and speaking peace to all the children of Israel. [This description of Anan's scholarship and virtues is probably exaggerated.]

Anan, of blessed memory, lived in Bagdad and belonged to the party of the *Zaddikim*. [The *Zaddikim* are the "Righteous," but the Rabbanites called them *Zedukim*, Sadducees, "heretics."] Because of his great wisdom and his unusual saintliness and modesty the whole house of Israel, the two groups, the "Righteous" and the Pharisees chose him and appointed him to be prince of God in their midst, president of the court, and exilarch. It was the custom in those days that under the authority of the Arab sovereign then ruling in Bagdad that the Jewish prince, as presiding judge and exilarch, took the place of a king over all the Jewish exiles.

When, with the consent of both the Arab king and the Jewish people, Anan the Prince had been appointed presiding judge and exilarch of all the Jews in the Arab dominions, he clothed himself with a cloak of zeal and was very jealous for the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, and for His perfect and true Torah which had been in the possession of the Pharisees for so many generations and years. [The Rabbanites, however, say Anan was never appointed exilarch by them.] He desired to restore the crown of the Law to its pristine glory and began to preach in public and to argue against the oral law, the Mishnah, to deny it and to repudiate it completely. Now when the whole assembly of the Pharisees saw all this and heard this, these accursed scoundrels gathered themselves together and rose up against him and conspired to murder him. But since they feared the King too much to murder Anan, they went and defamed and slandered him to the monarch, saying that he had rebelled against the law of the land and deserved death. But God, blessed be He, finding Anan's heart perfect before Him, gave him favor and love in the eyes of the King, who had compassion on him and saved him from their hands so that he was left alive.

When Anan the Prince saw that the Pharisees would not hearken to his advice and would not accept his legislation, and were not willing to go back to the truth, he scorned the position of exilarch, loathed the leadership, and besought the King to give him permission to go to the Holy City—may it be rebuilt and reestablished speedily in our days—where he might settle and build a synagogue. God, blessed be He, gave him favor in the eyes of the king, who granted all he asked.

Then Anan the Prince rose up, left his home, forsook his inheritance and all the wealth which he had acquired in Babylon, and took with him his sons, disciples, associates, and all his friends and acquaintances, and they all went to Jerusalem, the Holy City, and settled there. [The Rabbanites have no record that Anan settled in Jerusalem.] There he built a synagogue, a temple of God, a temple in miniature—which is still standing there today in the possession of our brethren the Karaites (may their Rock and their Redeemer guard them)—where they might weep and pray in the evening, morning, and afternoon, and in the three nightly watches, and make confession of our sins and iniquities and the iniquities of our fathers. [These were Karaitic “mourners for Zion.”] Thus they fulfill that which is written in the Bible [Isaiah 62:6-7]: “I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem. They shall never hold their peace day nor night: ‘Ye that are the Lord’s remembrancers, take ye no rest

and give Him no rest, till He establish and till He make Jerusalem a praise in the earth.' ”

Now when Anan, the saintly Prince, saw that the Pharasaic group was growing and increasing and that the sect of the “Righteous” was continually diminishing and losing ground, he feared lest in the future the true Torah be forgotten completely, and lest in the course of time the assembly of the “Righteous” go over to the Pharisees—God forbid. Therefore he decreed that his disciples and all his friends and acquaintances, the assembly of the “Righteous,” should separate, divide, and cut themselves off from the Pharasaic group completely, by a most complete division and separation and an absolute secession. He forbade us to eat their food because they do not guard themselves against the many kinds of ritual uncleanness, and because they eat carcasses and animal fats that are forbidden in the Torah. Similarly he forbade us to marry with them because they have broken down the barriers against incest which are forbidden us under penalty of divine punishment—[Hosea 5:7] “They have dealt treacherously against the Lord, for they have begotten strange children”—and because they have other errors and crazy ideas. [He considered as incestuous marriages between relatives of the husband and relatives of the wife.]

iv. *A Karaitic Attack on Rabbinical Tradition, 960-1000*

¶ Know, my Jewish brethren, that every one is responsible for himself, and God will not hearken to the words of him who tries to justify himself, saying: “Well, my teachers taught me to do this,” any more than he listened to the excuse of Adam who said [Genesis 3:12-13]: “The woman whom Thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat.” Nor will God accept the excuse of the man who says: “The sages fooled me,” any more than he tolerated the excuse of Eve when she said: “The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat.”

And just as He gave to each his due, and exercised His judgment on each one of them, so will He do to any one who argues in that manner, as it is written [Zechariah 10:3]: “Mine anger is kindled against the shepherds, and I will punish the he-goats.” The “shepherds” are the leaders, and the “he-goats” are those who are led. Realize, therefore, that he who attempts to justify himself, saying: “I walked in the ways of my fathers,” will find that this excuse will not help him at all. Did not our God, blessed be He, answer [Zechariah 1:4]: “Be ye not as your fathers”? And did He not

further say [Psalm 78:8]: "They shall not be as their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation."

This is to tell us that we are not bound to follow in the ways of our fathers in every respect, but we must reflect on their ways and compare their actions and their laws to the words of the Torah. If we see that the teachings of our fathers are exactly like the words of the Bible, then we must accept them and pay attention to them. We must follow them and dare not change them. But if the teachings of our fathers are different from the Bible, we must cast them out, and must ourselves seek and investigate and think about the commands of the Torah. [This is the basic principle of Karaism.] That which is written in the Torah of Moses—peace be unto him—about the commandments and other things does not require any sign or witness to show us whether or not it is true; but that which our fathers have told us requires proof and a responsible witness so that one may determine if it is true or not, and only that law which is proved to us will we perform, for thus it is written [Hosea 10:12]: "Sow to yourselves according to righteousness, reap according to mercy." [Biblical law is to be followed literally; the validity of rabbinic law requires constant substantiation. Yet the Karaites, too, soon found it impossible to follow the Bible literally.]

And you, O House of Israel, have mercy on yourselves, and have compassion on your children. Behold the sun [of Karaism] is rising and the light is shining! Choose the good way in which is found the living waters and walk therein. Do not walk in a dry and weary land [of rabbinic law] where there is no water!

Do not say, how shall we do this? How can we follow the commandments if the Karaites themselves disagree? Which one of them shall we follow [in the interpretation of the law]? [The answer is that] the Karaites do not say that they are leaders. They have made no arbitrary innovations to lead the people as they might like, but they investigate and examine the Torah of Moses and the books of the prophets—of blessed memory—and even look into the works of the sages of old.

Therefore they [the Karaites] merely say to their Jewish brothers: "Learn, investigate, search, and inquire and do that which has been demonstrated to you through valid proof and which agrees with your reason." Do not say: "How is this possible?"; for this is what our Rock desires and wishes of us, and it is incumbent upon us to perform that commandment which becomes valid only through our understanding by proof and testimony, and not by arbitrary will. [It is one's duty to think for himself.]

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