

Biblical Cults 4: The Cult of Karaism **Rabbi Adam J. Bernay**

Readings

Torah: Genesis 4:1-12; Exodus 24:1-12; Deuteronomy 30:11-20, 4:1-2

Haftarah: Joshua 21:43 – 22:6; Isaiah 29:10-16

Apostolic: Matthew 15:1-14; 2 John 1:1-11; Colossians 2:1-12

This is the conclusion of a four-part series called “Biblical Cults.” The idea is that there are certain cultic behaviors that have developed among Believers based on latching on to specific verses in the Bible and taking them out of context. The four “Biblical Cults” I’m looking at over these four weeks are what I call The Cult of Grace, The Cult of Law, The Cult of Tradition, and The Cult of Karaism or The Cult of Anti-Tradition. In the past three weeks, we covered The Cults of Grace, Law, and Tradition, and today we’re going to tackle The Cult of Karaism or The Cult of Anti-Tradition.

First, let’s define what we mean by “cult.” The word itself comes from the Latin *cultus* care, adoration, from *colere* to cultivate. In other words, a cult is a formal religious group with identifiable followers that seeks to cultivate a specific set of beliefs that might be considered not quite kosher.

What is Karaism? Let me quote from an article written by one of its adherents:

Karaites Judaism or Karaism is a Jewish movement characterized by the recognition of the Tanakh alone as its supreme legal authority in Halakha, as well as in theology. It is distinct from Rabbinic Judaism, which considers the Oral law, the legal decisions of the Sanhedrin as codified in the Talmud, and subsequent works to be authoritative interpretations of the Torah.

Karaites maintain that all of the divine commandments handed down to Moses by God were recorded in the written Torah, without additional Oral Law or explanation. As a result, Karaite Jews do not accept as binding the written collections of the Oral tradition in the Mishnah or Talmud. When interpreting the Tanakh, Karaites strive to adhere to the plain or most obvious meaning (“p’shat”) of the text; this is not necessarily the literal meaning, but rather the meaning that would have been naturally understood by the ancient Israelites when the books of the Tanakh were first written. Due to the tremendous changes in Jewish culture and religious practice over the past 4,000 years, the p’shat may not be as easily understood as it once was in Biblical Israel, and must now be derived from textual clues such as language, and context. (In contrast, Rabbinic Judaism relies on oral traditions handed down by rabbis and collected in the Mishnah, Talmud, and other sources, to reveal the original meaning of the Torah.)

Sounds reasonable, right? Sort of sounds like things I have said about Tradition, right? Well, the problem with Karaites – and all those who are Anti-Tradition – is that they reject not just Talmudic interpretations, but they claim to reject all of “man’s interpretations” or “man’s traditions,” in favor of the “p’shat” or “literal” meaning. Well, who is deciding what the p’shat is, if we reject all of man’s interpretations?

I ask that of these people, and they say they just “do what the Bible says.” This is obviously a falsehood, because all of us rely on some man’s interpretation, even of what the p’shat is.

First of all, unless you’re reading the Bible in its original languages, you’re already relying on man’s interpretation, since translations are already an interpretation, since translation is not a one-to-one equation, it’s not an exact science. Words can be translated in more than one way, and the original languages don’t even have punctuation! And even if you’re reading the original languages, you are relying on a man’s interpretation – even if it is your own!

This is what I mean by The Cult of Anti-Tradition. The Cult of Anti-Tradition is made up of people for whom tradition (a way of saying “previous interpretation”) ultimately means nothing... unless it is the particular “non-tradition” they subscribe to. Because yes, most of them do subscribe to a particular tradition, even if they won’t admit to it. They want to say that there cannot have been an “Oral Torah” passed down by God.

Oh, really? Let’s review the story of Cain and Abel:

Genesis 4:1-12

Now the man had relations with his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain, and she said, “I have gotten a manchild with the help of the LORD.” Again, she gave birth to his brother Abel. And Abel was a keeper of flocks, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. So it came about in the course of time that Cain brought an offering to the LORD of the fruit of the ground.

Abel, on his part also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and for his offering; but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard. So Cain became very angry and his countenance fell. Then the LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it.” Cain told Abel his brother.

And it came about when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him. Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is Abel your brother?” And he said, “I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?” He said, “What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to Me from the ground. Now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. When you cultivate the ground, it will no longer yield its strength to you; you will be a vagrant and a wanderer on the earth.”

How could Cain and Abel have known to bring sacrifices to God, unless an Oral Torah had been passed down to them? How could Cain be expected to give offerings rightly, unless an Oral Torah had been passed down to him? Yes, even though we know the issue was his attitude and not what he brought, even that must’ve been commanded him at some time. And since we have no record of a written Torah at this time...

Continuing with the concept of Oral Torah in the Scriptures, we read in:

Exodus 24:1-12

Then He said to Moses, “Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu and seventy of the elders of Israel, and you shall worship at a distance. Moses alone, however, shall come near to the LORD, but they shall not come near, nor shall the people come up with him.” Then Moses came and recounted to the people all the words of the LORD and all the ordinances.

And all the people answered with one voice and said, “All the words which the LORD has spoken we will do!” Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. Then he arose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain with twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel. He sent young men of the sons of Israel, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as peace offerings to the LORD.

Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and the other half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!” So Moses took the blood and sprinkled it on the people, and said, “Behold the blood of the covenant, which the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.”

Then Moses went up with Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and they saw the God of Israel; and under His feet there appeared to be a pavement of sapphire, as clear as the sky itself. Yet He did not stretch out His hand against the nobles of the sons of Israel; and they saw God, and they ate and drank. Now the LORD said to Moses, “Come up to Me on the mountain and remain there, and I will give you the stone tablets with the law and the commandment which I have written for their instruction.”

Adherents to The Cult of Anti-Tradition say that this shows conclusively that the Torah was given in writing, and no Oral Torah could exist, because “Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD.” It’s true, Moses did write down all the words of the LORD. But you will note that he SAID them FIRST. And the commitment of the people wasn’t “All that the LORD has written, we will do,” but rather “All that the LORD has SAID, we will do.”

Importantly, no matter whether we have written Torah or not, we are commanded to have oral Torah, each one of us. We read in Deuteronomy 30:14, “But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it.” We must have oral Torah, in order that we may observe the written Torah.

Do not think that by this, I am proclaiming the authority of the Talmud as the definitive, must-abide-by, interpretation of Scripture. Obviously, to do so would fly in the face of Yeshua’s castigation of the Pharisees in:

Matthew 15:1-6

Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Yeshua from Jerusalem and said, “Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.” And He answered and said to them, “Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, ‘HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER,’ and, ‘HE WHO SPEAKS EVIL OF FATHER OR MOTHER IS TO BE PUT TO DEATH.’ But you say, ‘Whoever says to his father or mother, “Whatever I have that would help you has been given to God,” he is not to honor his father or his mother.’ And by this you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition.

But to refuse to consider Oral Torah because there is “only one Torah” is to forget that Torah is not Law, it is Instruction. Yes, God expects each generation and each person to re-engage with Torah themselves. The Karaites are absolutely correct in that statement. But it helps to know how previous generations have dealt with these commandments, and certain traditions... why bother with trying to reinvent the wheel? For example, the commandment for the tzitziyot in Numbers 15. All it says is the make fringes with a cord of blue on the four corners of your garments. It doesn't say how. And yes, you could make it anyway you want to... but why be the Lone Ranger? It is arrogance to reject the traditions because you have the “freedom” to do so. Remember what Paul said in Romans 3:1-2, “Then what advantage has the Jew? ... Great in every respect. First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God.”

The Karaites are a dangerous group. In denying the traditions in order to supposedly uphold the pure word of Scripture, they make an arrogant perspective sound like a healthy view of God's Word. They put themselves outside of any continuity with the People of God, and ultimately this leads to an abandonment of community with the People of God. Not it can lead to an abandonment, it DOES lead to an abandonment.

How do I know this? Well, despite the fact that it calls itself Karaite Judaism today, historically the adherents to Karaism have denied their Jewishness whenever it became inconvenient or dangerous to be Jews. This happened many times, most recently during the Holocaust. Also, many Messianics today self-identify as Karaites, despite the fact that the Karaite sect rejects Yeshua as Messiah. Their leadership cultivates relationships with Messianics and Messianic groups, but they would dearly love to see us reject Yeshua and come over to their way of thinking completely.

The Cult of Anti-Tradition is not an organized religious group. It is people who ignore what God's People have done in the practice of Torah, in favor of new, more enlightened means. Oh, they will claim that it's okay to consult the tradition, but whenever you mention it the Karaites pitch a fit. Talmud is a forbidden book to them. Even if they don't actually say that, people with this attitude are adherents to The Cult of Anti-Tradition, which ultimately is a rejection of the Jews as the receptors of the Oracles of God.