

Karaites, Karaite Judaism

What is your opinion of Karaite Judaism?

The *Jewish Study Bible* states the following concerning who the Karaites are:

“[T]he theological movement in Judaism dating from Babylonia in the 8th century C.E. Karaites claimed to be restoring an original form of Judaism from the Second Temple period, and were opposed by the rabbis of their time...Karaite calendars, festivals, dietary restrictions, and other practices differed in various ways from rabbinic norms. The movement reached its height around the 11th century though a small Karaite community is still in existence today.”¹

There is a noticeable trend in the independent Messianic community, especially among those who do not wish to consider the factor of tradition as playing any role in an individual's or a community's application of Scripture, to embrace a Karaite-style of approach to interpreting the Bible. Those who tend to accept Karaite interpretations of the Tanach, do so because the Karaites largely reject the Oral Torah or Oral Law, as largely contained in the Mishnah and Talmud. They see Karaite Judaism as a more “pure” form of the original faith of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and perhaps even believe that Yeshua Himself was a Karaite.² The most notable of the Karaite practices that is detectable within sectors of the independent Messianic community, is the considerable variance seen over the issue of the Biblical calendar, as the Karaites have their own calendar that employs different dates for the appointed times than the mainline Jewish calendar.³

The abbreviated history of Karaite Judaism shows that it was a rather late movement, and developed in opposition to the mainstream Rabbinical Judaism of the Eighth Century C.E. The theology of the Karaites has many parallels to that of the ancient Sadducees. While it can probably be debated or wondered what the position of individual Karaite Jews is regarding angels, demons, an afterlife, or a resurrection—which the ancient Sadducees all denied (Acts 23:8)—what cannot be debated is that a Karaite approach to the Bible has contributed to a considerable problem of **over-simplification** in many parts of the Messianic movement. Such an over-simplification is manifested in failing to do enough adequate study on key theological or spiritual issues.

When a Messianic Believer follows a Karaite approach to the Bible, he or she will often not be too interested in the exegetical process of probing the source text's transmission into English (from either Hebrew *or* Greek), trying to place a Biblical text in some kind of ancient setting,⁴ or consult with either ancient opinions (from relevant secondary or tertiary literature) about a theological idea or with modern technical commentaries. A Karaite hermeneutic has helped many people think that all they need to understand Scripture is their English Bible version, a Strong's Concordance,⁵ a Webster's English dictionary, *and* of course literature from the Karaite movement in Israel.

A Karaite style of approaching the Bible has had some devastating effects when it comes to various Messianics approaching parts of Scripture like the Pauline Epistles, and readers failing to do some worthwhile studies in the Pauline materials because no investigation into ancient setting or context is believed to be that important. Much more disturbing and insidious, though, is how the Karaite movement is the sole originators of the classic anti-missionary work *Faith Strengthened* by Isaac Trotki, which refutes the Messianic claims of Yeshua of

¹ Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2132.

² For some associated discussions, consult the author's articles “You Want to be a Pharisee” and “Matthew 23:2-3: Who Sits in the Seat of Moses?” (appearing in the *Messianic Torah Helper*).

³ Consult the FAQ, “Biblical Calendar.”

⁴ Consult the author's article “The Role of History in Messianic Biblical Interpretation” (appearing in *Confronting Critical Issues*).

⁵ Consult the author's article “Getting Beyond Strong's Concordance” (appearing in *Confronting Critical Issues*).

Nazareth. Messianic persons who embrace a Karaite approach to interpreting the Bible, and are highly influenced by Karaite literature, have been known to eventually deny faith in Yeshua the Messiah.

For the future, as it relates to the influence of the Karaite movement on parts of the Messianic community, teachers and leaders will have to redouble their efforts to stress the need to understand the Scriptures in their ancient context. People being over-simplistic about difficult and disputed passages, will not help them find God's truth.