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The Role of Karaites in Jewish History

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Abstract

The main subject of this research is the place of the Karaites in the Jewish society. Karaites do not believe in Talmud and put particular emphasis on reading Torah. Therefore, they were excluded from the main Jewish society. It seems that the oppression of this sect and a group called 'Jewish apostates' had been distorted in the Jewish record. This study aims to project this relatively unknown fact. The study implements historical research method by investigating the current academic literature as well as historical documents.

Keywords: The Karaites, Apostate, Judaism, Jewish rabbis, Jewish proselytes.

Introduction

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The danger of the Karaites in the Western Jewish history is the subject of this article and hiding it causes the distortion of the West history; and forcing its opposite to be stuck in the mind of western world's people has led to negative attitudes toward the divine religions and we will discuss it. Considering the fact that in history, Islamic historians have not sufficiently addressed this issue, it has seemed necessary to discuss this subject in details and clarify the mendacity and falsification of these peoples' history.

Literature and Discussion

Karaism is one of the Jewish sects. The Karaites do not believe in Talmud (including Mishnah and Gemara) and put particular emphasis on reading Torah (to read a record of Talmud and its place in Halakhah tradition of Judaism, refer to *Essential Talmud* written by Adin Steinsaltz, translated by Baqer Talebi Darabi, Qom, Center for Religions Study and Research, 2005). It seems that the term 'Karaite' was first used by Benjamin Nahawandi, the Karaite scholar. According to Eliyaho ben Ibrahim, the Karaite scholar in the twelfth century, Jewish rabbis used this word. The word Karaite (Hebrew) or Qaraite (Arabic) refers to reading Torah and its origin is Qara (reading). There are different opinions about the reasons for this sect. Some people think that this group is the follower of the Sadducees whose some ideas were similar to Karaites' beliefs. Also there are some records of rejecting the legislation of compiled texts of Jewish oral tradition. In most of their resources, Anan ben David is known as the founder of Karaite movement. Alyasha ben Ibrahim Qaraemi described the life of Anan and said that he, who was a scholar and freethinker, was killed by Jewish rabbis. They did not appoint him the leader of Jewish after his father (exilarch/resh galuta) and chose his brother, Ananias, who was well-known for his piety. It seems that the reason for not appointing him the position of resh galuta was this fact that he did not accept Talmud (the oral tradition). He was prisoned for a while and was accompanied by Abu Hanifa. Jewish resources say that Anan learned syllogism from Abu Hanifa. After he was released from the prison, he went to Jerusalem and founded a synagogue and promoted his ideas. Among Anan's works, a book called Hamitsoot, can be mentioned whose some parts are existing. The old Jewish resources do not give enough information about Anan. Rabbi Omran, who wrote the book Siddur (Prayer book of Jewish) in 246 (lunar year), cited Nazar Vonay Gaon who was the head of Sura academy between 239-244 (lunar year) and said that Anan changed the ceremonies and feasts of the Jewish and did not believe in Mishnah and Talmud and consequently he and his followers were apostates. After Anan ben David, a Karaite scholar called Abu Yusuf Jacob Qirqisni (alive in 326 (lunar year)) wrote about Anan in his famous book 'Kitab al-Anwar w-al-Maraqib. He introduced Anan as a noble man and a descendant of David and said the Jewish rabbis intended to kill him. Elish ben Ibrahim, a Karaite scholar in the sixth century (lunar year) referred to Anan in details, too. Ibrahim ben David refers to Anan in details in his chronicle written in 557 (lunar year). Karaite scholars often disagree about the popular

traditions of Jewish. Ishmael Akbari, Benjamin al-Mushe Nahawandi, Musa Zafarani (Abu Omran Tbilisi), Daniel Qomsi, and Malik Ramli are among the most famous Karaite scholars of the third and fourth centuries. The most important scientific centers of Karaites was first Iran and later, from the fourth century to the Crusader attack, Jerusalem. Among the most well-known Karaite scholars living in Jerusalem were Japheth ben Ali (Abu Ali Hasan ben Ali Basari, alive in 395), who was the exegete of the Holy Book, and his son, Abu Saeed ben Japheth (1).

The department of Arab language and literature is an active section of Hebrew university which studies the field of Islamology. Some of active scholars of this department are Albert Arazi, an expert in Arab literature of Abbasid Caliphate; Haggai Ben-Shammai, a famous researcher in the field of Arab-Hebrew literature and Karaite; Yashua Bloo; Simon Hopkins; Aryeh Levin; Manahem Milson; Shamu'el Moreh; and Ms. Sarah Stroumsa whose various researches in the field of Islamic Kalam has been published. Abraham Firkovich, one of the contemporary Karaite writers, collected a major amount of Karaite heritage during his trip to Sham and Palestine and took it to Russia with him. The information obtained from this collection which was available to the researchers before the dissolution of the Soviet Union is limited to the records concerning the collection published by one of the Russian researchers. Having these backgrounds, Shammai addressed the intellectual life of the Jewish in the Middle Ages by some articles and works such as: *Jewish Thought in Iraq in the Tenth Century AD*, *The History of Jerusalem: in Early Muslim period* (collection of articles), *Some Points of the Works Remained from the Karaite in the Manuscripts of the British Museum Library*, and *Points About Some Mu'tazila Works Remained From the Karaite Tradition* (2). The interaction between Jewish Kalam and Islamic Kalam and Christian Kalam has interested Ms. Sarah Stroumsa. She revised Dawud Ibn Marwan al-Muqammis's twenty chapters as the subject of her thesis and its text has been published by Leiden publisher. Apostasy in Judaism is not a new phenomenon. We know significant examples of Jewish apostates in both Islamic and Christian world. In early Islam, some Jewish people really converted to Islam. It happened in the Christian world, too. This is something completely different from 'secret Judaism'. Jewish resources differentiate them from each other. The Jewish calls a person apostate if he/she has really turned his/her back on their ancestors' traditions and break up their relationship with the Jewish society. In contrast, 'secret Judaism' and its European equal called 'the Marrano' is the one who has hidden oneself in the Christian (or Islamic society) for different reasons. The Jewish encyclopedia describes the phenomenon of apostasy in a separate article under the same title and mentions the phenomenon of apparent and prudential conversion to Islam or Christianity in two detailed articles called 'secret Jewish' and 'the Marranos'. While investigating the phenomenon of 'religious conversion' in the Muslim society, it is absolutely necessary to differentiate between two groups of people converted to the new religion (those who converted to Islam recently). The famous examples are the

Muslim Marranos in the world of Islam and the Ottoman Donmeh who were undoubtedly the secret Jewish (3). In Iberian Peninsula, the wave of apostasy, that is the real conversion to Christianity of the Jewish, started in the first half of the fourteenth century and by Abner Barqashi (1270-1340). Abner was a Jewish physician living in the city of Burgos, the capital of Kassel State, occupied by the Christians. In the thirteenth century (AD), Burgos had the most Jewish people in the northern Kaseel. 120 to 150 thousand Jewish households lived there.

Abner started to suspect the Judaism principles when he was young. He debated with the Jewish hakhams who wanted him to return his 'faith', and he finally converted to Christianity at the age of 50. After that, he started serious arguments against the Judaism, trained some students, wrote some treatises in Hebrew language and distributed them among the Jewish. Abner is known as one of the first Jewish apostates who compiled and systematized his new opinions and the reasons for his apostasy and represented them to others. Abner, like Anan ben David — the founder of the Karaite sect — opposed seriously to the oligarchy and isolationist policy of the Jewish and changing the Jewish societies to closed islands in the host societies. The Jewish encyclopedia writes that Abner requested enthusiastically the end of the Jewish autonomy and termination of their organizations. He said: as long as the Jewish people have that kind of structure and follow a group of hakhams and leaders, they are ignoble and cruel beings who rule as kings and Jesus will not come again. This opposition started again by Spinoza in the seventeenth century and led to Haskalah movement in the nineteenth century (4). Another danger which threatened seriously the plutocracy oligarchy domination of Spain was the Karaites. From the fourth century (lunar year)/tenth century AD, a group of thinkers and literati who wrote in Arabic language appeared in the Karaites and this sect became a strong power among the Jewish and opposed the Judaism of hakhaim seriously. Then, the main centers of Karaites were in Iran, Mosopotamia, Palestine, Egypt, and northern Africa. From this time, the Jewish hakhams started to write treatises against Anan and the Karaite sect. It is interesting to know that the treatises of both Jewish hakhams and the Karaites are in Arabic language. Another important point is that some of the great Karaite thinkers lived in Iran such as Benjamin Nahawandi and Nasim ben Noha (the eleventh century AD). At the time of the European Crusades oligarchy attack to Palestine (the second half of the eleventh century AD), the center of the Karaite in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Crusades knights. A group of these knights under the rule of a commander called Godfrey Boiloni collected the religious leaders and the followers of the Karaites sect in their synagogue and burned them alive. This is a weird event and we do not know who simulated it and why. We know that no similar event happened to the Jewish hakhams living in Palestine. It was a hard attack for the Karaites and as a result there were just 217 Karaites who lived in Palestine in the first half of the seventeenth century AD and they were not present in this city in the eighteenth century. From the time of that event mentioned above until the fifteenth century AD, Egypt became

the main safe place for the Karaites. From the fourteenth century to the sixteenth century, some groups of the Karaites lived in Asia Minor. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the main center of the Karaites moved to Crime and Lithuania. In the late of the eighteenth century, this land was attached to the Tsardom Russia. First, the Russian rulers did not differentiate between the Karaites and hakhaim Jewish and treated both in the same way. From the time of Catherine II, their difference was discovered. The Karaites attracted the attention and some special rights were privileged to them. At the time of Nicholas I, the Karaite leaders went to the Tsardom officials and announced that, in contrast to hakhaim Jewish, they are craftsmen, honest, and politically loyal naturalized citizenships. The Russian politicians interested in this difference, and the Karaites were granted the full citizenship rights by the Russian in 1863 (5). Since then, the Karaites became real Russian citizens. In 1932, the number of the Russian Karaites was reported 10000 who mainly lived in Crime. At the same time, about 2000 Karaites lived out of Russia: Poland, Istanbul, Palestine, Cairo, and Iraq. In January 1939, the Germany government announced that the Karaites were not Jewish. As a result, they did not suffer from the attack of Germany and had good relationships with the German officials during the Second World War. The number of the Karaites was recorded 7 thousand in 1970 who mainly lived in Ramla. The movement of the Karaites started in the Iberian Peninsula in the late of the eleventh century. Some Karaite leaders, such as Abu al-Faraj and Saeed ben Al-taras went there and started to proselytize. Their base was in Al-Andalus but they found some followers in Christian Kaseel, too. The conversion of Kaseel lower Jewish people to the Karaite was significant and meant a serious and dangerous phenomenon because the Kaseel Jewish oligarchy persuaded the Christian leader to suppress and fire them. After the death of Al-taras, his wife known as Moaaleme followed what her husband had done. The danger of the Karaite for the Jewish Plutocracy oligarchy was so serious that Judah Halei, the great Jewish thinker, wrote his book Khazri to debate theoretically with them. Ibrahim ben David Qortabee, another Jewish thinker, wrote his famous book Qebaleh Trip in defense of the history of the hakhaim Jewish against the Karaites. Ben Maimon, the greatest Jewish philosopher, debated seriously with the Karaites while living in Egypt. Opposing to the Karaites was not limited just to theoretical arguments. According to two examples, we know that Yusef Ferizoel (the first half of the eleventh century) and Todoros Abu Lafi (the first half of the thirteenth century), the Jewish leaders of Spain, treated the Karaites cruelly and suppressively. The force of Ferizoel, the minister of Alphonso VI, against the Karaites was so serious that Ibrahim ben David, in spite of his opposition to the Karaites, recalled it as cruel and severe treatment of Ferizoel and pointed that he fired all of them from Kaseel. Ibn David criticized Ferizoel because of his cruelty. Todoros Abu Lafi also opposed to the Karaites and treated them cruelly and suppressively. Founding inquisition by the Jewish proselytes and at the time of dominance of the Jewish-Marrano oligarchy in the court of the Christian rulers of Spain and Portugal could be a suitable weapon to suppress the Jewish apostates and the Karaites as well. Founding the

inquisition tribunal was followed by some plots and contrivances. Among them, the book by Spina, the original-Jewish priest can be mentioned which was published in 1460 AD. He said that the trenches of faith were exposed to invasion and collapse and warned the Pope of this danger. In contrast, some well-known priests including Alphonso Kartajna (1384-1456) declared their opposition to inquisition in their treatises such as 'defending the unity of Christianity' but were not successful. Alphonso Kartajna was the son of a Jewish living in Burgos called Pablo Santa Maria (1350-1435) who converted to Christianity in 1390. In Jewish resources, he is among those who are called apostate and not Marrano. Santa Maria was familiar broadly with the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic texts. He got the attention of Pope Benedict XIII, became his friend, and progressed rapidly in the church (6). From 1403, he was the bishop of the city Kartajna; and from 1415 until the death of the Pope, he was the bishop of the city Burgos. Pope Sixtus IV, who ordered the foundation of inquisition, was not an anti-Semite either, but in contrast to what the Jewish encyclopedia writes, he was the Pope of the Renaissance and representative of the age when the spirit of the Renaissance had won in Rome. At that time, contrary to common belief, the relationship between the Pope and the church and the Jewish had been recorded very friendly to the extent that the Pope had close personal relationships with the Jewish. He hired the Jewish in the library of Vatican and even as his personal physicians; and when he got seriously sick, the Jewish doctors changed his blood.

Conclusion

Karaism is one of the Jewish sects. The Karaites do not believe in Talmud (including Mishnah and Gemara) and put particular emphasis on reading Torah (to read a record of Talmud and its place in Halakhah tradition of Judaism, refer to Essential Talmud written by Adin Steinsaltz, translated by Baqer Talebi Darabi, Qom, Center for Religions Study and Research, 2005). It seems that the term 'Karaite' was first used by Benjamin Nahawandi, the Karaite scholar. According to Eliyaho ben Ibrahim, the Karaite scholar in the twelfth century, Jewish rabbis used this word. The word Karaite (Hebrew) or Qaraite (Arabic) refers to reading Torah and its origin is Qara (reading). There are different opinions about the reasons for this sect. Some people think that this group is the follower of the Sadducees whose some ideas were similar to Karaites' beliefs. The Karaite scholars often disagree about the common Jewish tradition and this disagreement became a danger in the Jewish society over time.

Footnotes

1. Oligarchy (2014). - Jewish - Inquisition Myth, p. 254.
2. Shahbazi, Abdollah (2010). *The Jewish and Persian Plutocracy; Colonialism of Britain and Iran*. Second Edition. The Institution of Islamic Studies and Research. p. 358.
3. Will Durant (2011). *Story of Civilization*. Translated by Fereydoon Badree et al, Tehran: The Organization of Publications and Training Islamic Revolution, V. 6, p. 260.
4. 15th Khordad Magazine, issue 13, p 312.
5. 15th Khordad Magazine, issue 13, p313.
6. 7 Heavens Magazine, issue 32, p 172.
7. Adin Steinsaltz (2014). *The Talmud*. Translated by Bagher Troebi Darabi, Qom. The Center of Religions Studies and Research. p 298.
8. Adin Steinsaltz (2015). *The Talmud*. Translated by Bagher Troebi Darabi, Qom. The Center of Religions Studies and Research.
9. Oligarchy (2011). *Jewish - Inquisition Myth*.
10. Shahbazi, Abdollah (2010). *The Jewish and Persian Plutocracy: Colonialism of Britain and Iran*. Second Edition. The Institution of Islamic Studies and Research.
11. Will Durant (2015). *Story of Civilization*. Translated by Fereydoon Badree et al. Tehran: The Organization of Publications and Training Islamic Revolution.

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