

Who is a Heretic?

By Yochanan Zaqantov

The English word Heresy began in the late 1300s as a Non-religious term. Heresy is an opinion held in opposition to that of authority or orthodoxy. It is primarily used in a religious context. It may also be used in secular subjects like Science. The term assumes the existence of orthodoxy. Orthodoxy is conforming to established or accepted standards, as in religion, behavior, or attitudes. The question we have to explore today is there established or accepted standards within Karaite Judaism. The first question is by the unlearned is: "Does not all Jews believe the same?" For the most important points, all Jews agree. Let's look at the orthodox of Rabbinic or Talmudic Judaism.

"Orthodox Judaism considers views on the part of Jews which depart from the traditional Jewish principles of faith to be heretical. In addition, the more right-wing groups within Orthodox Judaism hold that all Jews who reject the simple meaning of Maimonides's 13 principles of Jewish faith are heretics. As such, most of Orthodox Judaism considers Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism to be heretical movements, and regards most of Conservative Judaism as heretical. The liberal wing of Modern Orthodoxy is more tolerant of Conservative Judaism, particularly its right wing, as there is some theological and practical overlap between these groups." (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heresy>)

Karaite Judaism is considered by many Rabbinical forms of Judaism as heretical. In fact, the prayers for Rabbanite Jews in general ask for a curse for those who do not follow their principle of faith.

"In his commentary on the Mishnah (tractate Sanhedrin, chapter 10), Maimonides formulates his 13 principles of faith. They summarized what he viewed as the required beliefs of Judaism:

1. The existence of God
2. God's unity
3. God's spirituality and incorporeality
4. God's eternity
5. God alone should be the object of worship
6. Revelation through God's prophets
7. The preeminence of Moses among the prophets
8. God's law [Toratot] given on Mount Sinai
9. The immutability of the Torah as God's Law
10. God's foreknowledge of human actions
11. Reward of good and retribution of evil
12. The coming of the Jewish Messiah
13. The resurrection of the dead

Maimonides compiled the principles from various Talmudic sources."

(<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maimonides>)

I placed on number 8 Toratot (Torahs) because it is assumed by Orthodox Judaism that both written and oral torah were given at the mount. Something that Karaite Jews reject and thus why in the simple reading of the statements nothing seems to be wrong the underlying meaning is what the person would have to agree to. Below is an explanation of principle 8.

Principle VIII. That the Torah is from heaven [God]

And this is that you believe that all of this Torah that was given by Moses our teacher, peace be upon him, that it is all from the mouth of God. Meaning that it was received by him entirely from God. And it is not known how Moses received it except by Moses himself, peace be upon him, that it came to him. That he was like a stenographer that you read to him and he writes all that is told to him: all the events and dates, the stories, and all the commandments. There is no difference between “And the sons of Cham were Kush, and Mitzraim, and his wife was Mehatbe’el” and “Timnah was his concubine” and “I am Hashem your God” and “Hear Israel [Hashem your God, Hashem is one]” for it was all given by God. And it is all Hashem’s perfect Torah; pure, holy, and true. And he who says that these verses or stories, Moses made them up, he is a denier of our sages and prophets worse than all other types of deniers [form of heretic] for he thinks that what is in the Torah is from man’s flawed heart and the questions and statements and the dates and stories are of no value for they are from Moses Rabbeinu, peace be upon him. And this area is that he believes the Torah is not from heaven. And on this our sages of blessed memory said, “he who believes that the Torah is from heaven except this verse that God did not say it but rather Moses himself did [he is a denier of all the Torah].” And this that God spoke this and that, each and every statement in the Torah, is from God and it is full of wisdom (each statement) and benefit to those who understand them. And its depth of knowledge is greater than all of the land and wider than all the seas and a person can only go in the path of David, the anointed of the God of Jacob who prayed and said “Open my eyes so that I may glance upon the wonders of Your Torah” (Psalms 119). And similarly the explanation of the Torah was also received from God and this is what we use today to know the appearance and structure of the sukka and the lulav and the shofar, tzitzis, tefillin and their usage. And all this God said to Moses and Moses told to us. And he is trustworthy in his role as the messenger and the verse that teaches of this fundamental is what is written (Numbers 16) “And Moses said, with this shall you know that Hashem sent me to do all these actions (wonders) for they are not from my heart.” (<http://www.mesora.org/13principles.html>)

All that I have underlined alludes to that which was spoken but not written down. The Oral Torah (Mishnah, Talmud, Gemara, etc...). For we state this is words of men not Moshe or our Elohim. Thus, Karaites for many Orthodox Jews are heretics.

“13 Principles of Faith

The closest that anyone has ever come to creating a widely-accepted list of Jewish beliefs is Rambam's thirteen principles of faith. These principles, which Rambam thought were the minimum requirements of Jewish belief, are:

1. G-d exists
2. G-d is one and unique
3. G-d is incorporeal
4. G-d is eternal
5. Prayer is to be directed to G-d alone and to no other
6. The words of the prophets are true
7. Moses' prophecies are true, and Moses was the greatest of the prophets
8. The Written Torah (first 5 books of the Bible) and Oral Torah (teachings now contained in the Talmud and other writings) were given to Moses
9. There will be no other Torah
10. G-d knows the thoughts and deeds of men
11. G-d will reward the good and punish the wicked
12. The Messiah will come

13. The dead will be resurrected

As you can see, these are very basic and general principles. Yet as basic as these principles are, the necessity of believing each one of these has been disputed at one time or another, and the liberal movements of Judaism dispute many of these principles.” (<http://www.jewfaq.org/beliefs.htm>)

As I told earlier, number 8 is the one that Karaite not holding the Oral Torah as divine would be seen as heretics. The point is that Maimonides was a man and extracted his 13 rules which became the foundation for much of the writing including the Shulkhan Arukh are the foundations of what make up Talmudic Judaism that we as Karaites do not accept as divine. Below is the quote from Jewish Virtual Library.

“Maimonides's major contribution to Jewish life remains the Mishneh Torah, his code of Jewish law. His intention was to compose a book that would guide Jews on how to behave in all situations just by reading the Torah and his code, without having to expend large amounts of time searching through the Talmud. Needless to say, this provocative rationale did not endear Maimonides to many traditional Jews, who feared that people would rely on his code and no longer study the Talmud. Despite sometimes intense opposition, the Mishneh Torah became a standard guide to Jewish practice: It later served as the model for the Shulkhan Arukh, the sixteenth century code of Jewish law that is still regarded as authoritative by Orthodox Jews.”

(<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/Maimonides.html>)

So we know the position of the Talmudic Orthodox Judaism. What about Karaite Judaism? Is there a summation of our beliefs? The Tuv Ta'am is typically the list of beliefs in the modern age but there were others before.

A Translation of the Karaite Tuv Ta'am

1. Teach me good judgment and knowledge; for I believe in your commandments. (Ps 119,66)
2. Believe in YHWH your God and you will be established; believe in His prophets and you will prosper. (2Chr 20,20)
3. And they believed in YHWH and in Moses His servant. (Ex 14,31)
4. YHWH is our God, our Creator, our Redeemer, our Maker, our Holy One, he is unique in the Universe: Truth!
5. And Moses is His servant, His prophet, His messenger, His desired one, His chosen one, His beloved faithful emissary with signs and wonders: Truth!
6. And His Torah is perfect, sound, pure, right, clear, enlightening to the eyes, gladdening to the heart, soothing to the soul, teaching wisdom to the simple, and it is more pleasant than gold and much finer than gold and sweeter than honey and nectar, and beneficial to those who keep it and those who fulfill it get much reward: Truth!
7. And His Temple is the House of Prayer, the House of Worship, the House of Sacrifice, the House of Pilgrimage-Feasts, the Temple of the King YHWH of Hosts in Jerusalem the Holy City: Truth!
8. And the moon in its renewal, in its visibility, in its appearance to the eye in the evening at the time of its testimony, after being hidden, is a reliable witness in heaven, Sela, a valid sign and an indication for the beginning of months according to the word of God: Truth!

9. And the Abib which is found in the Land of Israel in its time, in its manner, in its nature, is a valid sign and an indication for the beginning of years for pilgrimages, feasts, and holidays, according to the word of the God of Hosts: Truth!
10. And His prophets and His messengers and His emissaries and His seers which prophesy and which are sent in truth and righteousness: Truth!
11. And His holidays: Truth!
12. And Holy Convocations: Truth!
13. And [insert formula for appropriate Holiday, see below]: Truth!
 (the Feast of Unleavened Bread for Seven Days
 the Seventh (Day) of Assembly [last day of Hag HaMatzot]
 the Feast of Weeks and Day of First Fruits
 the Day of Shouting on the First of the Seventh Month
 the Feast of Booths for seven days
 the Eighth (Day) of Assembly [last day of Sukkot])
14. And His commandments and His statutes and His testimonies and His judgments and all His words: Truth!
15. And YHWH is a true God; He is the living God and King of the Universe;
16. At His wrath the earth trembles; and the nations cannot stand up to His fury. (Jer 10,10)
17. And do not entirely remove the true word from my mouth, for I hope for your judgments. (Ps 119,43)
18. And it will be that YHWH will be King over all the Earth and on that day YHWH will be one and His name will be one. (Zech 14,9)
19. YHWH lives forever; Your God, Oh Zion, from generation to generation, Praise Yah! (Ps 146, 10)
20. Your kingdom is an eternal kingdom; and your rule is in every generation. (Ps 145,13)
21. For the kingdom belongs to YHWH; and he rules the nations. (Ps 22,29 [28])
22. YHWH is King, YHWH has [always] been king,
23. YHWH will be king forever and ever. (Ex 15,18)
24. Blessed be YHWH forever: Amen and Amen. (Ps 89,53 [52])

[Translated from the Hebrew by Nehemia Gordon based on Karaite Siddur, Volume 2, Vienna 1854, p.110 (Hebrew); reprinted in Karaite Siddur, Volume 2, Ramleh 1977, pp.208-209 (Hebrew)]

You can see from these that even Karaites have some form of statement of what they believe. This was from 1854. There was an earlier form of this by Eliyahu Basyatchi in the Karaite Anthology page 250.

“II. The Ten Principles of Faith

1. All physical creation, i.e., the planets and all that is upon them, has been created.
2. It has been created by a Creator who did not create himself, but is eternal.
3. The Creator has no likeness and is unique in all respects.
4. He sent the prophet Moses.
5. He sent, along with Moses, His Law, which is perfect.
6. It is the duty of all believers to know the language of the Law and its interpretation (Hebrew).
7. God inspired also other true prophets after Moses.
8. God will resurrect all mankind on the Day of Judgment.
9. God requites each person according to his ways and the fruits of his deeds.

10. God has not forsaken the people of the Dispersion; rather are they suffering the Lord's just punishment, and they must hope every day for his salvation at the hands of the Messiah, the descendants of King David."

Here we see an alternate set of statements that were given much earlier. What do Karaites believe is the established or accepted standards, as in religion, behavior, or attitudes? All Karaites accept and believe that which is written by Moshe and handed on to Kohenim and the Levi'im.

Devarim/Deuteronomy 31:7-13

7 Then Moshe called Yehoshua and said to him, before the eyes of all Israel: Be strong, be courageous, for you yourself will enter with this people the land about which YHWH swore to your fathers, to give them; you yourself will allot-it-as-inheritance to them. 8 And YHWH, he is the one who goes before you, he will be with you; he will not fail you, he will not abandon you; you are not to be overawed, you are not to be shattered! 9 Now Moshe wrote down this Instruction (Torah) and gave it to the priests, the Sons of Levi, those carrying the coffer of the Covenant of YHWH, and to all the elders of Israel. 10 And Moshe commanded them, saying: At the end of seven years, at the appointed-time of the Year of Release, on the pilgrimage-festival of Sukkot, 11 when all Israel comes to be seen at the presence of YHWH your God, at the place that he chooses, you are to proclaim this Instruction in front of all Israel, in their ears. 12 Assemble the people, the men, the women, and the little-ones, and your sojourner that is in your gates, in order that they may hearken, in order that they may learn and have-awe-for YHWH your God, to carefully observe all the words of this Instruction; 13 and (that) their children, who do not know, may hearken and learn to have-awe-for YHWH your God, all the days that you remain-alive on the soil that you are crossing over the Jordan to possess.

Thus, we see that Moshe wrote it down. We see that it was handed on the Kohenim and Levi'im. Later we see that Yehoshua spoke all that Moshe wrote down.

Yehoshua/Joshua 8: 30-35

30 At that time Joshua built an altar to YHWH, the Elohey of Israel, on Mount Ebal, 31 as Moses, the servant of YHWH, had commanded the Israelites—as is written in the Book of the Teaching of Moses—an altar of unhewn stone upon which no iron had been wielded. They offered on it burnt offerings to YHWH, and brought sacrifices of well-being. 32 And there, on the stones, he inscribed a copy of the Teaching that Moses had written for the Israelites. 33 All Israel—sojourner and citizen alike—with their elders, officials, and magistrates, stood on either side of the Ark, facing the Levitical priests who carried the Ark of YHWH's Covenant. Half of them faced Mount Gerizim and half of them faced Mount Ebal, as Moses the servant of YHWH had commanded them of old, in order to bless the people of Israel. 34 After that, he read all the words of the Teaching, the blessing and the curse, just as is written in the Book of the Teaching. 35 There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded that Joshua failed to read in the presence of the entire assembly of Israel, including the women and children and the sojourners who accompanied them.

Thus, Karaites hold that which is written as the corpus of the accepted and established standards which is orthodoxy for Karaite Jews. There is the Prophets which give us understanding of that which is written as we are told that the true prophet we are to listen to.

Bamidbar/Numbers 12:5-8

5 And YHWH descended in a column of cloud and stood at the entrance to the Tent; he called out: Aharon and Miryam! and the two of them went out. 6 He said: Pray hear my words: If there should be among-you-a-prophet of YHWH, in a vision to him I make-myself-known, in a dream I speak with him. 7 Not so my servant Moshe: in all my house, trusted is he; 8 mouth to mouth I speak with him, in-plain-sight, not in riddles, and the form of YHWH (is what) he beholds. So why were you not too awestruck to speak against my servant, against Moshe?

A prophet of one other than Moshe will be communicated in vision or dream.

Devarim/Deuteronomy 18:15

15 A prophet from your midst, from your brothers, like myself will YHWH your God raise up for you, to him you are to hearken,

Moshe says there will be a prophet after him.

Devarim/Deuteronomy 18:18-19

18 a prophet I will raise up for them from among their brothers, like you; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will speak to them whatever I command him. 19 And it shall be: (any) man who does not hearken to my words which he speaks in my name, I myself will require (a reckoning) from him.

The prophets later stated in various forms "The word of YHWH came to me" and states what was spoken to them. Therefore, we include all the prophets in the corpus of that which is written. The writings are the wise words which were written by David, Solomon, and others. These continue to build upon that which was written.

So what constitutes a heretic in Karaism? It would be one who does not hold to the written word of Elohim and was given to Moshe and all the Prophets. This would be the cause to say one is a heretic.

Torah states it this way:

Devarim/Deuteronomy 29:15-20, 23-27

15 Indeed, you yourselves know how we were settled in the land of Egypt, and how we crossed amid the nations that you crossed; 16 you saw their detestable-things and their idol-clods, of wood and stone, of silver and of gold, that were with them- 17 (beware) lest there be among you a man or a woman, a clan or a tribe whose heart faces away today from YHWH our God by going to serve the gods of those nations, lest there be among you a root bearing-fruit of wormwood and poison-herb; 18 for it shall be when he hears the words of this oath and blesses himself in his heart, saying: I will have shalom, though in the stubbornness of my heart I will walk- with the result of "sweeping away the watered and the parched (alike)," 19 (that) YHWH will not consent to grant-him-pardon, rather, then the anger of YHWH will smoke, along with his jealousy, against that man, and there will crouch upon him all the oath-curse that is written in this document, and YHWH will blot-out his name from under the heavens. 20 YHWH will separate him for ill from all the tribes of Israel, according to all the oath-curses of the covenant that are written in this document of instruction.

23 Then shall say all the nations: For what (reason) did YHWH do thus to this land, (for) what was this great flaming anger? 24 And they shall say (in reply): Because they abandoned the covenant of YHWH the God of their fathers that he cut with them when he took them out of the land of Egypt: 25 they went and served other gods and prostrated-themselves to them, gods they had not known and that he had not apportioned to them. 26 So the anger of YHWH flared up against that land, to bring upon it all the curse that is written in this document. 27 So YHWH uprooted them from their soil in anger, wrath, and great fury, and he cast them into another land, as (is) this day.

Thus, to me the heretic is one who denies the written word of Elohim as given to Moshe and the Prophets is the word of Elohim. Additionally, if they contend that Moshe did not write it then they are also heretics. The acceptance of traditions which are not divinely inspired do not arise the same level of acceptance thus are like the words of the Sages which one may accept or not.