A MODERN EGYPTIAN MANUAL OF
THE KARAITE FAITH

By Leon Nemoy, Dropsie University

That Karaite studies are a neglected field is no news to anyone who comes in contact with it even en passant. But even so, the older period, approximately through the 18th century, is relatively well studied, compared with the latest period, from about 1850 down to our own day. Abraham Harkavy and Samuel Poznanski,1 both of whom had wide personal contacts with their Karaite contemporaries, have long gone to their eternal rest. The native Russian Karaite theologians and historians, who published a few second-rate tendentious works in Russian about the turn of the 20th century, are also gone. The recent history of the Karaite settlements in Istanbul, Cairo, and Hit is a veritable tabula rasa. The first two settlements, once seething with Karaite literary activity, are now in a precarious position in every respect, scholarship, numbers, and economic circumstances, and are, if present trends continue (and the likelihood of radical change is quite slim), in grave danger of disappearing eventually. Any information about them that can be set down on paper now would thus be literally saved from almost certain and complete extinction. The present short account

1 Poznanski’s pioneering (but unfortunately unfinished) essay on the history of Karaite printing (ZfHB, 21, 23/1918, 1920) remains to this day the only work on that aspect of Karaite literary history. Equally important bibliographically is his Die karaeische Literatur der letzten dreissig Jahre (ibid., 13, 14/1909-10).

2 On the Euphrates, in Iraq. The very old Karaite settlement in this town has recently passed out of existence. Cf. Itzhak Ben-Zvi, The Exiled and the Redeemed (Philadelphia, 1961), p. 136. The whole chapter on the Karaites in this book (pp. 129-137) is unfortunately disfigured by the translator’s misspellings of personal and geographical names.
of a recently published Arabic Karaite manual should therefore be not without some usefulness to the future historian of modern Egyptian Karaism, if such a one ever comes forward.

The manual is entitled in Arabic al-Murshid al-āmin ("The trustworthy guide") and in Hebrew Mūreh šedeq, and was compiled by the ḥākhām Joseph ben Abraham Yomtob and the gabbāy David ben Isaac Elisha. It was published in Cairo in 1948, is written entirely in Arabic, save for the copious Hebrew quotations, and comprises 128 large octavo pages. The actual compiler appears to have been Elisha, who alone signs the preface, and to the memory of whose deceased parents the work is dedicated. His motive, he tells us, was "the neglect on the part of the (Karaite) people of my time to hold fast to the fringes (ahdāb) of the Torah, and my fear that it might be completely forgotten by the future generations," a fear that is, as stated above, not without some justification. Most of his material was taken from "the works of our Sages and jurists," of which he says he had used many, particularly the Sēfer ha-miswōt of Samuel ben Moses Rōf (Rūfīh) and the commentary on the Scriptural lessons (Sharḥ fuṣūl al-Tawrāh) of Samuel Sinnī.3

3 Both Yomtob and Elisha (arabica Līsha) are in this case surnames.
4 The actual number of pages is 132, four pages numbered alif-jīm following p. 76. My copy of the book bears the impression of the trilingual (Hebrew, French, and Arabic) stamp of the "Communauté Israélite Caraïme" of Cairo (Miṣr, Miṣrayim).
5 That is, al-Murshid, the last Karaite code of law written in Arabic, by Samuel ben Moses al-Maghribī, completed in 1434 in Cairo. Poznanski, The Karaite Literary Opponents of Saadiah Gaon, pp. 81-82.
6 That is, al-Mugaddimāt, prefaces to the lessons of the whole year, by Samuel ben Moses Ibn al-Sinnī (or al-Sanī), an older contemporary of Samuel al-Maghribī, known also as a liturgical poet. Poznanski, p. 81, note 2; mentioned also by the chronicler Ibn al-Hīṭī (L. Nemoy, Karaite Anthology, pp. 235, 378). If we are to understand that Elisha regarded these two works as the foremost items among the source-material available to him, his acquaintance with the Arabic Karaite classics must have been severely limited. Indeed even his own Arabic style is far from fluent.
Let us now examine the contents of this manual in some detail.

A. The Creed (‘aqā‘id; so also IM 7), consisting of six articles:

1. The divinity (al-ulūhiyah; IM al-rabūbiyah) of the one and only God; 2. The prophetic inspiration (risālah; IM rusulīyah) of Moses; 3. The prophetic inspiration of the subsequent Hebrew prophets; 4. The divine inspiration of the Torah; 5. The sanctity of the qiblah (that is, of Jerusalem, the Holy City, and of its Temple); 6. The resurrection of the dead and the Day of Judgment.

The author’s detailed commentary on these articles is in part identical, word for word, with IM’s text, and it seems reasonable to assume that Elisha either consulted it directly, or used an earlier common source, or utilized a later Creed based on IM. The first alternative is presumably the most probable.

The division of the Creed into six articles would seem to represent an Egyptian tradition, which has remained untouched by Elijah Bashyatchi’s (15th century) reformulation of the Creed into ten articles. 8 The most puzzling characteristic of this six-articled Creed is the complete absence of the doctrine of the Messiah, which forms the tenth article of Bashyatchi’s Creed. 9

7 IM = the Karaite Creed as set forth by Israel ben Samuel ha-Ma'arābī (al-Maghribi), judge (dāyyān) in Cairo in the first half of the 14th century (ed. E. Mainz, PAAJR, 22/1953, 55-63). He was considered an eminent authority in theology and law.
9 Ibid., 85a. Mainz conjectures that the reason was political. With the fall of the Fatimid dynasty and the return of Egypt to Sunni rule, the Shiite doctrine of the future advent of the “rightly guided (saviour)” (mahdī) came under suspicion as savoring of political subversion. To the Sunni authorities Jewish messianism and Shiite mahdism would have seemed barely distinguishable from each other, and the Karaites, who were rather more anxious than their Rabbanite cousins to keep on the right side of the Muslim powers-that-be,
B. The Ten Commandments, with an extensive commentary setting forth the duties subsumed under each commandment, viz.:

The First Commandment subsumes the duty of
a. Prayer (salāt), "obligatory upon every male above the age of ten, and equally upon females";\(^{10}\) required twice daily, morning and evening, by Scriptural fiat, and a third time, at midday, by consensus (ijmāʾ) of the Sages, which is "now classified as equally obligatory (fī hukm al-wājib)."\(^{11}\) To these should be added formal benedictions (berākōt)\(^{12}\) appropriate for various occasions.

b. Ablution (wudūʾ) must precede prayer and entrance into synagogue or other holy place, and must be applied to hands, feet, and face.\(^{13}\)

c. Prayer shawl and fringes.\(^{14}\)

d. Direction in prayer (qiblah) originally faced west, therefore deliberately ceased to discuss messianism in their literary productions, even though the Messiah is dealt with in earlier Karaites literature. This argument does not sound too convincing to me. Occasional direct, though cautious, digs at Islam (such as the epithet pāṣūl, a pun on rasūl, the usual epithet of the Arab Prophet) occur throughout the Karaites literature of that period, which was not systematically censored, as far as we can tell, by the state. And by the same token the state should have looked askance also at the Christian doctrine of the second coming of Christ. I must confess, however, that I cannot think of any other more convincing explanation.

Aaron ben Elijah (Gan 'Eden, Eupatoria, 1866, 70a) and Bashyatchi (104a) make prayer obligatory upon adults, male and female, only; minors should be made to pray merely as a matter of training for adulthood.

The morning and evening prayers, corresponding to the two daily sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem, were of course universally recognized by all Karaites. Some pietists added also midnight, making four daily prayers, including the midday prayer; others added also the three night watches, making seven daily prayers. Cf. Aaron, 60a-b; Bashyatchi, 102b-103a. Aaron regards all five additional prayers as supererogatory (nedābāh, Arabic nāfilah).

Aaron, 80a; Bashyatchi, 106b-107a.

Aaron (70a) and Bashyatchi (104a) require the washing of hands and feet only.

Aaron, 80a-81a; Bashyatchi, 106a-b.
towards the Garden of Eden, the gate whereof, as it appears from Gen. 3:24, faced eastward. After Solomon’s Temple was built, the qiblah was turned in its direction, “and to-day those of us who are situated west of Jerusalem face eastward ...while those who are situated east of Jerusalem face westward. Accordingly we in Egypt face eastward.”

The Second Commandment is followed by the threat (Exod. 20:5) to visit the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, which seemingly ascribes injustice (zulm) to God. It must therefore be interpreted allegorically, to the effect that “just as the stem (ašl) is affected by the disease which strikes the branch (far’), so that it is as if that disease had struck the stem itself, so conversely is it permissible to say that God punishes the branch by the affliction which He brings upon the stem.”

The third Commandment covers not only oaths but also vows, of which there are two varieties, those of limited and those of unlimited duration.

The Fourth Commandment implies that sorrow and weeping are forbidden on the Sabbath, unless it coincides with the Day of Atonement.

15 Aaron (69b-70a) and Bashyatchi (103a) state that at the Temple in Jerusalem worshipers faced west, in contrast to idolaters who faced east to worship the rising sun and stars. For the Arabic term qiblah Aaron uses the Hebrew haqbalāh, while Bashyatchi prefers the paraphrastic pe’at ha-hishtaḥwiyāh; Elisha suggests derek ha-bayit (= jihat al-bayt?).

16 Meaning, I suppose, that although God will punish only the transgressor of the commandment, and not his innocent children, nevertheless the latter, in their affection for their sire, will naturally be bound to grieve for him, and the thought of their certain grief should therefore deter him from transgression in the first place. On the problem of the seeming conflict between Exod. 20:5 and Ezek. 18:20 see the Rabbinic material assembled by M. Kasher, Tōrāh shelēmāh, XVI, 43-45.

17 Aaron, 173a; Afendopolo’s supplement to Bashyatchi’s unfinished work stops with the law of oaths.

18 Aaron, 36a; Bashyatchi, 45b-46a.
circumcision 19 or to cope with an emergency (illness, conflagration, collapse of building), 20 but not to bury the dead—burial may be postponed, since it is not a religious duty (miṣwaḥ) but a human necessity (wājib insānī) 21 Kindling and burning of fire are absolutely forbidden on the Sabbath. 22 Specially named Sabbaths: Sabbath of Mercy (raḥamīm) or of Repentance (teshūbāh), preceding the Day of Atonement; Sabbath of the Great Hallel, preceding Passover; Sabbath Be-shallāḥ and Sabbath Jethro, on which the respective Scriptural lessons (Exod. 13:17-17:16, and 18:1-20:26) are read; Sabbath of Consolation (nahmū), following the fast of the Tenth of Ab.

The Fifth Commandment covers not only the honoring of one's parents, grandparents, etc. (even when they are sinners), but also of one's unrelated elders. Conversely, parents owe a series of duties to their offspring (circumcision, maintenance, religious and practical education, etc.). 23

The Sixth Commandment does not prohibit homicide in self-defense or in war, but does forbid suicide. 24

19 Karaite scholars differed on this point; Aaron, 33a-b; Bashyatchi, 41b-42a.
20 Aaron, 33b-34a; Bashyatchi, 53a-b (Nemoy, Karaite Anthology, pp. 267-270).
21 Bashyatchi (171b) designates the burial of the dead as "an obligation based on rational judgment" (ḥōb mi-šafīṭat ha-šēkēl) and "a rational duty" (miṣwaḥ šiklit), which was not enjoined in Scripture because it was observed as a customary matter long before the revelation of the Torah, and thus required no legislative confirmation.
22 Aaron, 28a ff.; Bashyatchi, 50a ff. Cf. particularly Bashyatchi's vigorous and outspoken argument pro domo sua (52b-53a, chapter 20) in favor of the permissibility of burning lights on the night of the Sabbath, though not of the use of fire for lighting and cooking during the ensuing Sabbath day.
23 Bashyatchi, 100a-101b.
24 Aaron, 176b ff. Elisha avoids this ominous term by using a verbose circumlocution: "A man is not permitted to pass judgment upon his own soul by causing his life to depart by his own decision" (an yataḥakhham fi rūḥih bi-an yushiq nafṣahu bi-nafṣihi). The reason given is that "the soul is a bailment (aḥānah) placed by God in a man's hand, to be reclaimed at a time that only He may choose."
The Seventh Commandment applies to all non-marriageable females.25

The Eighth Commandment prohibits also fraud and trespass.26

The Ninth Commandment prohibits also backbiting, slander, and sowing of discord.27

The Tenth Commandment prohibits covetousness in thought as well as in deed.

C. Survey of the several books of the Torah,28 the Prior and Latter Prophets, and the Writings, of the Temple in Jerusalem, and of the Karaite synagogue.29

D. Description of the Karaite Calendar 30 is limited to the Biblical data, a list of the months, a definition of regular and leap years, and conversion tables for Hebrew, Muslim, and Christian dates.

E. The Holy Days 31 are: Passover (Fish),32 14th-21st Nisan; Feast of Weeks (Asâbiʿ, Pentecost), the fiftieth day after the Passover Sabbath, thus always a Sunday, and the only holy day fixed on a particular day of the week, with the Book of Ruth read as part of the divine service; Day of Trumpeting (New Year's Day), 1st Tishri; Ten Days of Mercy (from New Year's through Atonement), 1st-10th Tishri; Day of Atonement, 10th Tishri (followed by a short essay on repentance); Feast of Booths, 14th-21st of Tishri (followed by a short essay on the construction of the festal

25 Aaron, 128b ff.; Bashyatchi, 144a ff.
26 Aaron, 184a ff.
27 Aaron, 193b ff.; Bashyatchi, 99b-100a (Nemoy, Karaite Anthology, pp. 256-260).
28 The five books of the Pentateuch are titled in Arabic as follows: Takwin, Khurūj, Lāwīyīn, Aʾdād, Tathniyah.
29 Specific mention is made here of the Holy Ark in the synagogue (ārôn, translated as khizānah; perhaps the full Arabic name for it, at least in Egyptian Karaite synagogues, was khizānat al-ASFâr).
30 Aaron, 3a ff.; Bashyatchi, 1a ff.
31 Aaron, 37b ff.; Bashyatchi, 54a ff.
32 In a footnote Elisha reminds us that while this is the common Arabic spelling, the word should properly be spelled with a sin, not a sâd.
booth); Eighth Day of Assembly, 22nd Tishri (followed by an essay on the three obligatory pilgrimages to Jerusalem); New Moon Days, 1st of each month; Purim, not a canonical (fanāt) but a commemorative (tīḥkārī) festival, with the Book of Esther read as part of the service; Sabbatical year and Jubilee year.33

F. The Commemorative Fasts34 are: 10th Tebet (commencement of the siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar); 9th Tammuz (fall of the city to Nebuchadnezzar); 10th Ab (burning of the city by Nebuzaradan); 24th Tishri (slaying of Gedaliah son of Ahikam). The Book of Lamentations is read as part of the service.

G. Circumcision, obligatory also for an hermaphrodite; due on the eighth day from birth, even if it is a Sabbath, a holy day, or a fast day, and even if it coincides with a funeral in the family. It may be postponed if the newborn child is ill, but in that case it must be finally performed neither on a Sabbath nor on a holy day. It may be performed by a woman.35

H. Ritual Slaughtering (sheḥīṭāh)36 involves the cutting, complete or at least for the most part, of the windpipe (ḥulqūm), the esophagus (marī'), and the two external jugular

33 Aaron, 66b ff.; Bashyatchi (Afendopolo’s supplement), 175 ff.
35 Aaron, 160b ff.; Bashyatchi, 167b ff. As usual, there was disagreement among Karaite scholars in these matters. The famous view of the Ananites that circumcision performed by a non-Ananite is invalid and necessitates a repetition of the surgery, was rejected by the later Karaites in favor of the prevailing Rabbanite view that even a Gentile’s surgery, if performed in full accordance with the pertinent regulations, is valid, and no repetition of it by a Jewish surgeon is necessary (or indeed possible, once the foreskin has been completely excised). The same rule applies, in both Karaite and Rabbanite law, to a Gentile proselyte who was properly circumcised (or was congenitally circumcised) before his conversion to Judaism. Cf. I. Jakobovits, Jewish Medical Ethics, pp. 192 ff.
36 Aaron, 81b ff.; Bashyatchi, 108a ff.
veins (warīd), with a special knife in perfect condition, wielded by a qualified slaughterer. The victim must be of a permitted animal species and in good health. Blood, fat, and the sinew of the thigh vein are forbidden. Slaughtering, is invalidated by ten faults in procedure (piecemeal cutting, irregular cutting, etc.).

I. Ritual Cleanness is impaired by contact with a corpse, menstruation or flux, sexual intercourse or nocturnal emission of semen, and leprosy. ‘We must understand that as far as uncleanness contracted from a corpse is concerned, no purification from it is possible in this our time... since today there is neither Temple, nor priest assuredly qualified, nor ash of the red heifer.’ Such uncleanness is therefore treated the same as any other uncleanness, which is remedied by ablution and washing of one’s clothes.

J. Tithes are not obligatory in the Dispersion, and are replaced by voluntary contributions for the support of the poor, of synagogues, of study houses, etc. These are called “self-assessment” (‘arīkāh).

K. The Sources of Law are three: the text (naṣṣ) of the Torah, analogy (qiyyās) based on it, and the consensus (ijmā‘) of the scholars in problems not solvable by the two preceding sources.

L. Inheritance is regulated in Scripture only with reference to real estate (Num. 27:1-11). The testator may dispose

---

37 The cutting of the veins is not required in Rabbanite law.
38 In Rabbanite law, five (Maimonides, Hilḳōt sheḥiṭāh, III, 1). The additional Karaite faults are: incomplete incision (hashārāh); incision of the wide (‘swallowing’) part of the gullet (hablāqāh); incision carried on too high or too low (hamshākāh); complete severance of neck (hattāzāḥ); and tearing without incision (nitti‘aq). Aaron (88b) also counts ten faults, but Bashyatchi (II11a) criticizes him for it and reduces the number to seven.
39 Aaron, 98a ff.; Bashyatchi, 123a ff. The law governing contact with a corpse has been the subject of much controversy among Karaite scholars; cf. Aaron, 127a ff., and Bashyatchi, 133a-b.
40 The Hebrew terms are, respectively, kātūh, heqqēš, and sēbel ha-yerūshāh (Bashyatchi, Introduction, 6th preliminary leaf, recto).
of his movables as he wishes, within the bounds of reason and prudence, and with fair consideration of his rightful heirs.  

A few observations in summing up may be appropriate here. Some general earmarks of this manual fairly leap to the eye. First, the complete absence of any mention of the turbulent early history of Karaism, of Saadiah Gaon (the Rabbanite Antichrist in Karaite eyes, if one may be permitted to use such a mixed metaphor), and of the centuries of controversy between Karaites and Rabbanites. Second, the absence of any mention of the internal disagreements among Karaite scholars on a wide variety of subjects, and of the modest reforms which eventually resulted therefrom. Third, the cautious formulation of the subject matter, caused presumably not only by deference to local—Egyptian—custom but also by a desire to avoid any conflict whatsoever. The six-articled Creed, for example, represents no doubt the older tradition, prior to Bashyatchi’s expansion of it into ten articles (of which no mention is made here), and so does the absolute prohibition of fire on the Sabbath, concerning which the Near-Eastern Karaites remained generally unanimous, thus avoiding the pertinent dissension which affected their brethren in Turkey, Poland, and Russia. The exposition of the calendar is drastically brief, and no mention is made of the conflict between the older traditional method of visual observation of the new moon and the “reformers’” advocacy of mathematical calendation à la rabbinique. Whether the appended conversion tables of Hebrew, Muslim, and Christian dates indicate that the

41 Aaron, 165a ff.; Bashyatchi, 172a ff. The reason given by both jurists for this lack of testamentary legislation in Scripture is that successive inheritance is an essential social institution (Aaron: han-hāgāḥ medīnī; Bashyatchi: sōder medīnī) which was well established long before the revelation of the Torah and needed no legislative sanction.

42 If I am not mistaken, the latter term does not occur in the text at all.
author silently sanctioned the mathematical calendar, I feel not certain enough to answer affirmatively or negatively. Equally brief is the exposition of the Seventh Commandment, with no mention of the reform abolishing the suicidal catenary theory (rikkūb) of incest and of the serious controversy which attended it. The same brevity characterizes the exposition of the second source of law, analogy, which was subjected to severe restrictions by the abolition of the rikkūb principle. The non-recognition of the Rabbinic post-Biblical tradition is likewise passed over in silence.

The basic points of difference between Karaism and Rabbanism do of course remain visible—the fixing of Pentecost on Sunday, the stricter dietary laws, etc. But the overall impression is one of mildness, of a gentle but powerful tendency to avoid the limelight of conflict by retreat into peaceful and comfortable obscurity—a tendency which in the modern period of history applies as well to Karaism as a whole.