Validity of Religious Teachings in Karaite and Quranite Views

Hassan Rezaee Haftador

Hadith and Qur'anic Sciences Department, University of Tehran

ABSTRACT

A trend exists among both Jewish and Muslim thinkers emphasizing that the written Torah and the Quran are sufficient. They deny tradition either entirely or as a valid divine source. Deniers of tradition in Judaism and in Islam are called Karaites and Quranites, respectively. There are Quranites dispersed throughout the Islamic world geographically (e.g. in the Indian subcontinent, Egypt, Iran, and Eastern Asia) and denominationally (e.g. Sunnis, Khawarij, Mutazilites, and Shias). All of them, however, believe that Sunnah or tradition holds no authority. Most were motivated by reforming the religion, purging myths, and paving the way to progress in Islamic societies. In a way, their slogan of a return to the Quran was influenced by the achievements of the Western world. The geographical and denominational variety existing among Quranites cannot be found among the Karaites. However, they too were influenced by external thought—that is, Mutazilite thought.

INTRODUCTION

In Judaism, the Written Torah and Oral Torah and in Islam, the Quran and Sunnah are considered sources of religious knowledge. Josef Horovitz was the first to contend that between the Quran and hadith, there is a relationship similar to the Jewish oral and written traditions [1]. Goldziher posited the possibility that Muslims were influenced by Jews in the denial of tradition, stating that similar events at the advent of Islam confirm the refutation of tradition [1]. For instance, it is said that as the number of traditions were increasing during the time of Umar, some written hadiths were brought to him, and he commanded that they be burned. Then he said, “Do you really want a Mishnah like the Jewish Mishnah?” [2].

This research seeks to answer the following questions using a descriptive-analytical method.

• In what way is tradition rejected in Judaism and Islam?
• What similarities and differences exist between deniers of tradition in Judaism and Islam?

Oral Tradition in Judaism:

Prior to discussing the viewpoint of those who deny Jewish oral tradition, a short explanation of the authority of Jewish oral tradition may be appropriate. According to popular Jewish belief, two Torahs exist, the Written Torah and the Oral Torah. Each is equal in chronology, validity, and authority [4]. It is stated that on Mount Sinai, God revealed the Holy Scripture, Mishnah, Haggadah, and Talmud to noble Moses in that order. Also, it is believed that God even revealed to Moses answers to questions to be asked in the future [5].

The Talmud has two components, namely the Mishnah (the main text) and the Gemara (an elucidation of the Mishnah). Judah HaNasi collected the Mishnah, circa 200 CE. The Gemara is divided into the Jerusalem Talmud and Babylonian Talmud. Rabbi Yochanan compiled the former, and compilation of the later is ascribed to Rav Ashi and Ravina, about one century later. These compilations were completed sometime between 500 to 600 CE. Among the Jews, it is believed that the Mishnah was revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai and that forty recipients cited it throughout successive generations until reaching Judah HaNasi. While the Temple still stood as a Jewish center, it was forbidden to write down these teachings [6]. Ibn Mimun claims that the reason why writing oral tradition was forbidden was to prevent a multiplicity of views, formation of various schools of thought among the Karaites and Quranites, respectively. There are Quranites dispersed throughout the Islamic world geographically (e.g. in the Indian subcontinent, Egypt, Iran, and Eastern Asia) and denominationally (e.g. Sunnis, Khawarij, Mutazilites, and Shias). All of them, however, believe that Sunnah or tradition holds no authority. Most were motivated by reforming the religion, purging myths, and paving the way to progress in Islamic societies. In a way, their slogan of a return to the Quran was influenced by the achievements of the Western world. The geographical and denominational variety existing among Quranites cannot be found among the Karaites. However, they too were influenced by external thought—that is, Mutazilite thought.

© 2014 AENSI Publisher All rights reserved.


Corresponding Author: Hassan Rezaee Haftador, Hadith and Qur’anic Sciences Department, University of Tehran, E-mail: hrezaii@ut.ac.ir
thought, and confusion among believers. However, this led to the loss of a portion of the Jewish legacy over the years [7]. There are cases where the Oral Torah took precedence over the Written Torah [8].

**Karaite**

The Karaites are a Jewish denomination that emerged in the second half of the eighth century CE in Babylon. Anan ben David, a contemporary of Mansur Abbasi, is considered to be the founder of the Karaite denomination. He gained a following in Egypt, Palestine, and Iran. This movement was named Ananite after its founder, but in the time of Benjamin Nahawandiwas changed to Karaite. They did not believe in the Oral Tradition and only considered the Written Torah to be valid. This opposition to tradition as an authoritative interpretation of the Holy Scripture must be considered as opposition to rabbinic traditions since the Karaites had their own special tradition [9].

**Origins of the Karaites**

With the establishment of the Karaite denomination, Anan dismissed all authorities, especially rabbinic authority. In this way, anyone could have their own interpretations of the Holy Scripture free of the influence of any external authority. This protest against rabbinic circles calls to mind the Christian Protestant movement. There are various views about the origins of the Karaite denomination. Some believe that it finds its roots in the Sadducees, others name BeneiSedeq as the origin. It is also stated that the Karaite beliefs go back to the time of Jeroboam I. External influences such as the development of Islam as a monotheistic religion cannot be underestimated, however. Muslims had singled out Jewish international teachings. Instead of seeing God as a being incarnate in nature, history, or humans, Muslims see God as transcendent and fundamentally different [10].

**Reasons behind the Opposition of Karaites with the Oral Torah or Tradition**

In a philosophical work entitled EitzHaChayyi (Tree of Life), Aaron ben Elijah of Nicomedia discussed the Karaite views about Oral Tradition. The book is considered an authoritative source for Karaites. Some reasons behind the opposition of Karaites with the Oral Torah as discussed in EitzHaChayyi are as follows.

- In some issues, the Mishnah does not present correct explanations. There are cases where it advocates one view, but embraces an antithetical view elsewhere.
- If the Oral Torah were correctly attributed to noble Moses, it would not contain contrasting laws and decrees.
- The Written Torah does not even once mention the Oral Torah. “And the LORD said unto Moses: ‘Come up to Me into the mount and be there; and I will give thee the tables of stone, and the law and the commandment, which I have written, that thou mayest teach them’” [11]. This shows that the commandments were written and there is no indication of an Oral Torah.
- According to a report, the Written Torah was lost for fifty years and was completely forgotten until temple priests rediscovered it. If this report is correct, how can one believe that the Oral Torah remained in people’s memories? [12].

The Karaites did not oppose interpretation and exposition of the Halakha since they wrote many interpretations on the Holy Scripture, which are not currently available. Rather, their opposition was mostly due to the fact that the Talmud and Mishnah were given precedence over the Written Torah, and many popular customs were contrary to the apparent meaning of the Torah. It may even be stated that the Karaites had their own tradition.

**Karaite Theology**

The Karaites consider the Talmud and the Oral Tradition to be human interpretations. They believed that the Written Torah was contrary to the Oral Torah or Mishnah. Though they had a special exegetical method or tradition, contrary to the Rabbis, they never considered their interpretations to be divine or authoritative. For example, Anon ben David would emphasize the point to his students that they must explore and contemplate the Holy Scripture and must not rely on his view [13]. Therefore, even though some Karaites made use of the Oral Tradition, they never considered it divine. Under no circumstances did they accept interpretations or legislations against the apparent meanings of the Holy Scripture. They assert that if the text is clear, one cannot resort to exegesis and force one’s own interpretations on the Holy Scripture. Influenced by Mutazilites, the Karaites insisted on belief in monotheism. Moreover, it might be stated that a common characteristic of all Karaites was their emphasis on reason. Jacob Qirqisani (circa 940 CE) strongly believed in the authority of reason. It was his belief that one must accept the judgments of reason and it is not important to the teachings of which sect rational judgments conform [14].

**Quranites**

In Islam, extreme tendencies concerning the Quran date back to the first century of Islam, specifically the second caliph, Umar. At the time, Muslims were reminded of the Jewish proclivity toward tradition and their
neglect of the Torah. They were warned away from such penchants for tradition. According to a narration from Umar, after burning written traditions of the people, he declared, “by turning to the Talmud, the Jews neglected the Torah” [15]. Moreover, Ibn Mas'ud was reported as saying, “Before you, the People of the Book were ruined since they turned to the books of their scholars and forgot their divine book” [16]. It is interesting that some Quranites, at least the moderate Quranites of the Shia world, took up Quranism to prevent the influence of Isra'iliyyat [17]. Goldziher asserts that Mutazilite rationalists were opposed to deduction of religious truths from tradition. In the late second century of the Hijra, the Islamic calendar, Mutazilites were accused of various things including diminishment of Prophetic traditions [18]. On the basis of verse 146 of the Quranic chapter of An’âm, indicating that the complete religion is presented in the Quran, the Khawarij did not have a positive view of tradition [19]. They asserted that nothing is forbidden unless stated by the Quran. They denied all traditions except those cited by the Companions that did not participate in the great fitna [20].

The Quranites can be divided into extremist and moderate sects. For the former, other sources do not serve any function in understanding the Quran, whereas the latter consider other sources (such as tradition) to fulfill secondary and dependent roles [21]. In other words, the moderate movement focused on the Quran, but the extreme movement was restricted to the Quran [22]. The movement of “Quran by Quran” exegesis is identical to the moderate Quranite movement since it accords a special place to the Quran in understanding of the teachings and content of Islam. After the British occupation of the Indian subcontinent, movements such as Ahl Quran (People of the Quran) emerged which mostly sought reform. Seyed Ahmad Khan might be considered the founder of this movement. For acceptance of Prophetic tradition, he enumerated various conditions that to all intents and purposes precluded their use and left no course but to look to the Quran itself [23]. Concurrently, a similar Quranite movement emerged in Egypt. Quranite thought spread to other parts of the Islamic world and today, it has spread throughout the whole world through mass media and the Internet [24].

Sayyid Jamal al-Din Asadabadi, ‘Abduh, and Rashid Rida can be considered to be moderate Quranites. In Iran, moderate Quranites include Muhammad Hasan Shari’atSanglaji, Yusuf Shu’ar, Sayyid Abu al-FadlBarqi’i, Sayyid Mustafa Husayni Tabataba’i, Muhammad JawadGharawiIsfahani, and others who claim to interpret the Quran by the Quran. Obviously, this paper cannot discuss the views of all aforementioned scholars. The views of Sunni scholars, Ahmad Subhi Mansur and Ahmad Qasim, and the Shia Quranite, Shari’atSanglaji are selected for presentation in this work.

According to Ahmad Subhi Mansur, Muhammad ‘Abduh forwarded the idea of Quranism many years before he. Subhi Mansur considers his reformist ideas to be a continuation of ‘Abduh’s school of thought. He has written many books, and some of his most important views are as follows. Subhi Mansur considers the Quran to be comprehensive and meta-temporal as well as the only source of legislation in Islam. In his opinion, the duty of the Prophet (s) was to advocate religion, and legislation can only be performed by God. There is no such thing as abrogating (nasikh) and abrogated (mansukh) in the Quran. In fact, the term naskh in the Quran means write, not abrogate. In addition, the verses of the Quran are not condensations and therefore do not require elaboration. The concepts of kufr (disbelief), iman (faith), and shirk (polytheism) in the Quran differ from their juristic definitions. Judgment about the beliefs of people is God’s task to be performed on the Day of Judgment, and no one else may do such a thing. Many juristic decrees such as the ruling to execute apostates (murtad), the punishment of stoning, declaring those with dissimilar views to be apostates, inspection of beliefs, initiatory jihad, and others have no basis in the Quran. Such traditions were created in the Abbasid era [25]. Also, fabrications of contradicting traditions for use as proof for the legitimacy of each sect goes back to this period [26].

Subhi Mansur is of the opinion that if tradition were really a component of religion, it should have been put in writing from the very start, preventing the affliction of the people with crises and sedition. He asks how it is that Abu Hanifah only recognized seventeen traditions while about one hundred years later Ahmad ibn Hanbal quoted thirty thousand traditions in his Musnad. In short, over time these traditions became a red line for Muslims, across which they would not cross. The science of JarhwaTāḍīl (reliability assessment of narrators) prevents acceptance of some traditions, it is based on speculation. Therefore, narrators are criticized or praised even though the Quran warns against speculation and guesswork [27]. The present tradition of the Prophet (s) has continued successively without the need for composition. In Al-‘AwdaHila al-Qur’an, Qasim Ahmad presents Quran interviews as follows.

Two hundred years after the passing of the Prophet (s), Imam Shafi’i forwarded the juristic opinion that the tradition of the Prophet (s) is the basic source of legislation after the Quran. It was after this judgment by Shafi’i, in the late second century of the Hijra that the six Sahih books (sahihisattah) were compiled, and Shia collections of tradition were assembled in the third and fourth centuries [28]. Neglect of the Quran and excessive regard for tradition led to the backwardness of Muslims, and the only way to return to the original teachings of Islam is to return to the Quran [29]. Certainly some sayings of the Prophet (s) remain until today; however, they must be considered, along with the historical circumstances surrounding them, the same as any other historical event. Also, if they are to be considered at all they must not be contrary to the Quran [30]. Advocators of tradition emerged in the second century of the Hijra, one hundred years after the passing of the
Prophet (s). Imam Malik compiled *Al-Muwatta’*, a book containing traditions, in 179 AH. Even so, supporters of tradition insist that tradition was a part of Muslim lives from the very beginning. Qasim Ahmad posits that the details of religious law such as ritual prayer, fasting, and hajj have come down to us through the generations, and that, in fact, these traditions existed from the time of Abraham. In the first two centuries after the Hijra, before traditions had been collected, Muslims prayed in the exact same way that the Prophet (s) did [31]. The Quran is a complete and comprehensive text, and is free of defects and brevity [32]. The emergence of different sects is an effect of neglect of the Quran and recourse to tradition. Many traditions were fabricated after the three internal Muslim wars, in the time of Imam Ali (a) and Mu’awiyah, validating one or the other [33]. On this basis, intercession, punishment of apostates, entrance to heaven for those who recite the *Shahadatayn* (Two Testimonies) before death even if they have no good deeds on their record, and encouragement of asceticism are all in contradiction to the Quran [34]. Tradition also contradicts itself in many cases [35]. The Quran includes both decisive (*muhkam*) and allegorical (*mutashabih*) verses. Decisive verse denote divine commandments and are binding, whereas allegorical verses discuss topics such as heaven, hell, Resurrection, and creation of the world and of humans which are beyond our reach in terms of scientific research. Allegorical verses do not require exegesis, but rather faith [36]. In light of the refutation of tradition, rules must exist for interpretation of the Quran. Some of the most important of these rules include consideration of thematic and historical context and conformity with reality [37]. Considering that the Quran has been revealed by God and is free of contradiction, the existence of abrogation is meaningless. If thematic and historical contexts are considered, it is clear that there is no such thing as abrogation in the Quran [38].

Concerning Shia Quranites, only the view of Shari’at Sanglaji in *KilīdFahm Qur’an* will be explained. Even though understanding manifests differently in each person, in the view of Sanglaji, the Quran can be understood [39]. Understanding the Quran requires understanding of the Arabs in the age of the revelation of the Quran. Regardless, the Quran is comprehensive enough to be able to respond to all the needs of humanity [40]. It is free of distortion [41]. Moreover, the claim of abrogation in the Quran is baseless since mental universals (*kulli ‘aqli*: nature insofar as it is universal) cannot be abrogated. Some Quranites believe that abrogation is possible in details, however [42]. Allegorical verses have been revealed for guidance of the ignorant and the masses. God has downgraded truths to the point of examples and allusions [43]. Instead of relying on self-founded reason, rational arguments must be extracted from the Quran [44]. Therefore, in theological issues, it is wrong to resort to tradition and disciplines such as philosophy, discursive theology (*kalām*), and *irfan* since these disciplines lack a Quranic basis [45]. The method of “Quran by Quran” interpretation must be utilized, and the sayings of other exegetes must be disregarded. The apparent meaning of the Quran is sufficient, and thus the Arabic language plays a special role.

Though Sanglaji is opposed to independent reasoning (*ijtihād* *bil-ra’*) in tafsir as well as the interpretations (*ta’wil*) of the Isma‘iliyyah, he believes that many verses do not require tradition to understand. Instead, God has assigned the ability to understand such verses to reasoning and intellect [46]. It must be noted, however, that tradition is not completely rejected in Shia Qurani thought. In other words, they mostly present a Quran-focused approach as opposed to Quran sufficiency. On this account, they posit the necessity for recourse to tradition in the details of commandments since the generalities of sharia are discussed in the Quran [47]. In view of the opposition of Shia Quranites to following religious authorities [48] their reliance in God-given reason in contrast to philosophical reason, and their belief that reason and revelation are in harmony [49]. They have unintentionally fostered a type of permissive approach or humanistic tendency in religious commandments, and they cannot tolerate existing boundaries between Islamic sects. It is for this reason that some accuse them of falling under the influence of other sects, including Wahhabism. Like Subhi Mansur, Gharawi Isfahani propounds extensive discussions controverting commandments concerning apostasy, stoning, necessity of Friday prayer, and initiatory jihad [50]. In short, reformism, eradication of superstition, and return to Islam are some of the most notable features in the sayings of the Quranites.

*Comparison between Karaites and Quranites:*

As per the foregoing discussion of Karaite and Qurani thought, similarities and differences between these sects are as follows.

*Similarities:*

Both Karaites and Quranites emphasize the authority of their respective holy books, and denial of the authority of tradition is their most basic belief. Neither accepts reasoning against the apparent meaning of the text, even though they have violated this belief in practice. Both emphasize that their holy books are comprehensive and comprehensible, and therefore do not require tradition. Both trace their origins to the time of the founder of their religion or close to it. Karaites consider their thought to be a continuation of Sadducean doctrine, and the Quranites trace their origins the period of the second caliph in the first century of the Hijra. Regardless, even though the original thought emerged at a time proximate to the founding of the religion, their
factions were formed in later periods. The Karaite sect was founded in the eighth century CE, and the Quranite movement emerged in the nineteenth century CE.

The Karaites and Quranites both have moderate and extremist factions. Some emphasize that their holy books form the core of their faith, but others assert that their book is sufficient and that there is no need for tradition.

Each started their movement with the motto of religious reform, struggle against superstition and myths, and rationality. The Karaites based their thought on the thought of Mutazilites in Basra, and at the very least, the Quranites of Egypt introduced themselves as a type of neo-Mutazilite following the school of Muhammad ‘Abduh. Despite that in Islam those opposing tradition usually introduce themselves as rationalists or neo-Mutazilites, this is not always true. As discussed, the Khawarij were opposed to reason as well as tradition, and therefore, they are also counted among the Quranites. In addition, objection to philosophy, discursive theology, and ifran are common qualities of Shia Quranites.

In each sect, there are those who deny tradition in general as well as people who place conditions on acceptance of valid traditions. For example, they draw a distinction between traditions practiced in the time of the founder of the religion and those that were not practiced. It is clear that such conditions made it difficult for them to derive commandments from their holy books, resulting in independent reasoning, baseless interpretations, and extreme permissiveness.

Due to their emphasis on the apparent meanings of their holy books, both sects assigned a significant role to language (i.e. Arabic and Hebrew in interpretation of the Quran and Written Torah, respectively). Both Quranites and Karaites have a tolerant and pluralistic view toward other sects within their own religion, and consider tradition to be the reason for dispersion of opinions and separatism. The Karaites were free spirits and sought liberation from any type of external authority. In other words, they objected to the rabbinic authority who considered their interpretations equal to the Holy Scripture. It is for this reason that the Karaite sect is likened to the Protestant movement. In the Islamic world, the Quranites present themselves as reformists and opponents of superstition.

Differences:

Thought there are many similarities, there are also some differences between Karaites and Quranites. These are discussed below. In a word, their motives and main concerns differ. Under the influence of Muslims, especially the Mutazilites of Basra, the Karaites had monotheistic tendencies. They distanced themselves greatly from the rabbinic notions that considered God to be incarnate in nature, history, and humans, and hence in the rabbis themselves. Based on their incarnational thought, the rabbis considered their interpretations of the Holy Scripture to be as holy and authoritative the book itself. However, the Quranites had different concerns. Denial of abrogation and distortion of the Quran have always been issues of great concern for the Quranites, whereas this was a non-issue for the Karaites. In Judaism, a great movement started in opposition to the Karaite view. Saadia Gaon believed that one way to oppose them was to revive and control the Hebrew language. A similar movement cannot be found in the Islamic world. The Quranites consider penetration of Isra’iliyat and fabricated traditions to be an important reason for their disregard for tradition and hadiths, while the Karaites were influenced by the Mutazilites in the Islamic world. In other words, the Quranites specify the Quran as the only authorized source and reference in order to prevent mingling of Islam with other religions and traditions. The Karaites, however, were influenced by a foreign culture (i.e. Mutazilite thought), which in turn was affected by other traditions and schools, especially Greek philosophical thought.

The Karaites, at least Jacob Qirqisani, lacked prejudice about their own thoughts and opinions. Rather, they encouraged others to reach their own understanding of the Holy Scripture. On the other hand, the Quranites in the Islamic world, the Salafis of Egypt if none else, insisted on the accuracy of their understanding. Even though the Karaite sect had a significant following at some point in history, it is now on the verge of extinction. The Quranite movement in the Islamic world is active and growing, though. Rabbis and opponents of the Karaite sect consider the cause behind their formation to be Anan ben David’s personal grudges and lust for power, but the Quranites have no real founder. Quranites exist among almost all Islamic schools of thought, such as the Sunnis and Shias. Among the Jews, the Karaites are in opposition to all other Jewish sects. Theological and legal issues are mostly discussed among the Karaites. In order to refute tradition, they posit theological and philosophical principles beside principles derived from the Holy Scripture. Alternately, the Quranites oppose recognized philosophical and theological discourses among other Islamic sects. Very few works remain from the Karaites, whereas there are many written and even electronic works available from the Quranites.

Conclusion:

As indicated, Quranites are dispersed throughout the Islamic world geographically (e.g. in the Indian subcontinent, Egypt, Iran, and Eastern Asia) and ideologically (e.g. Sunnis, Khawarij, Mutazilites, and Shias). All of them believe that Sunnah or tradition holds little or no authority. Most were motivated by reforming the religion, purging myths, and paving the way to the progress of Islamic societies. In a way, accomplishments in
the Western world informed their motto of returning to the Quran. They believe that neglect of the Quran and excessive reliance on tradition is the reason behind sectarian conflict and backwardness of Muslims. Some Shia Quranites sought to put an end to sectarian conflicts and thought that by returning to the Quran, which is accepted by all Muslims, they could attain true unity. Some Sunni Quranites, however, developed Salafi thoughts. The geographical and denominational variety existing among Quranites cannot be found among Karaites. They too, however, were affected by external (i.e., Mutazilite) thought. Some Quranites regard themselves as neo-Mutazilites. This movement emerged in the Indian subcontinent under the influence of foreign colonials. The Karaites only allowed pluralist thoughts within Jewish sects; however, the Quranites extend this thought to other religions as well. Overall, each sect manifests difficulties in extraction of commandments, indulgence in rules, and a pluralist view of other creeds or religions. Even so, in various aspects, such as principle and approach, they are dramatically different. The Karaites had no objection to interpretation and exposition of the Halakha since they wrote many interpretations on the Holy Scripture, which are not currently available. Strictly speaking, their opposition was mostly due to the fact that, in some cases, the Talmud and Mishnah were given precedence over the Written Torah, and also that many popular customs and traditions were contrary to the apparent meaning of the Torah. It can be stated that the Karaites had their own special tradition, different from that of other Jewish sects. Among the Quranites, some believe in tradition in a limited sense even though they do not consider them a source for legislation of religious commandments.

REFERENCES

[5] Ibid., 238.
[16] Ibid: 334


[27] The Holy Quran 10:36 and 6:116


[29] Ibid., pp: 60-66.


[31] Ibid., pp: 82-84.


[33] Ibid., pp: 96-99, 104-106.

[34] Ibid., pp: 125.


[36] Ibid., pp: 147-150.

[37] Ibid., pp: 151.

[38] Ibid., pp: 154.


[40] Ibid., pp: 33-41.

[41] Ibid., pp: 9-16.


[45] Ibid., pp: 128-156.


[48] Ibid., pp: 162-165.
