

the heads of the great rabbinical academies of Babylonia. (The Jews continued to use the term Babylonia even after the Arabic name for the area, Iraq, was generally accepted.) The enhanced power of the scholars was perhaps influenced by a parallel development in Islam: the emergence of a class of jurists responsible for creating a systematic and logical groundwork for Islamic law. Jewry had for many centuries possessed such a class of legal experts in the rabbis, and during the early Islamic period the authority of the two rabbinical academies (*yeshivot*) of Babylonia, Sura and Pumbeditha, won increasing recognition from the Jewish diaspora and from the Muslim state as sources of authoritative guidance for Judaism.

In the eighth century, exilarch and academy heads cooperated in establishing the Babylonian halakhah as binding law throughout the diaspora, especially in those areas, such as Syria and Egypt, that had previously taken their direction from the rabbinic Sanhedrin in the Galilee. In the view of Pirkoi ben Baboi, a Babylonian scholar of the late eighth century, the rulings of the Palestinian Talmud not in accordance with the Babylonian had been formulated under the pressure of Christian persecution, and hence were invalid. The Palestinian rabbinate revived in the ninth century, but never regained pre-eminence. An attempt in the early tenth century by Palestinian rabbis to reassume control of the calendar, which would have enabled them to determine leap years, festivals, and fasts, was soundly defeated by the Babylonian leadership. The triumph of the Babylonian halakhah as the authoritative rabbinic law was to be an important factor making for a more uniform style of Jewish life and for the cohesion of the Jewish legal tradition throughout the Middle Ages and into modern times.

In the eighth century the exilarch was still clearly supreme over the academies and appointed their heads at will. Soon afterward the heads of the academies became more independent, claiming the right to nominate the exilarch. (His appointment had to be confirmed by the caliph.) Taxes from certain districts in Iraq and Persia were now sent directly to the academies rather than to the exilarch, and in these areas the academy heads had the exclusive right to appoint judges. This three-way division of power and revenue did not always function harmoniously; instances of discord between exilarchs and academy heads and of rivalry between the two academies are mentioned in the few historical sources surviving from that time. Gradually the authority of the exilarch declined relative to the academies, and by the tenth century the *yeshivot* had moved from their original locations in Sura and Pumbeditha to Baghdad, where their leadership had direct access to Jewish bankers influential in the government. By the eleventh century the exilarch had become an honorific position, and the Pumbeditha-Baghdad *yeshivah* (it retained its original name after moving to the capital) had gained pre-eminence over the Sura-

Baghdad yeshivah, reversing the relationship between the two academies in the earlier Muslim period. By the end of that century, however, a new network of yeshivot of a different kind, to be discussed shortly, had arisen in the West, so that the Baghdad rabbinate lost its primacy in world Jewry.

In their heyday, the rabbinic academies of Iraq were institutions of great prestige throughout the diaspora, and students came from all over to study there. But like the yeshivot in talmudic times, the yeshivot of Sura and Pumbeditha during the caliphate were much more than institutions for the training of young rabbis: They were institutes of advanced study and discussion among scholars, and they were judicial bodies whose rulings were a form of legislation—legislation through the interpretation of talmudic precedents. The scholars of the yeshivot did not hesitate to adjust certain aspects of Jewish law to the new economic situation of the Jews. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, the academies exerted direct control over many Jewish communities: They invested local and territorial leaders with their offices, and they collected revenues from the local communities in order to maintain a large salaried staff at the mother yeshivah.

From the seventh century on, the president of the academy, known as the gaon (excellency), was a powerful figure in whose name all the legal rulings of the yeshivah were issued. (The title *gaon* was a shortened form of the Hebrew phrase *rosh yeshivat geon Ya'akov*, "head of the academy which is the pride of Jacob," the last phrase being based on Ps. 47:4.) During the months of Adar and Elul in the spring and fall (the *kallah* months, as they were called) the gaon delivered lectures on the law to large groups of scholars and laymen who traveled to the yeshivah to study. At this time he announced his binding opinions on halakhic inquiries addressed to him from throughout the diaspora. Extant rabbinic literature of this period consists of many such *responsa* (answers to questions on rabbinic law) and a few incompletely preserved law codes. Some of these *responsa* are lengthy treatises, which contain almost our only information on certain aspects of the history of Judaism at this time, such as the *responsa* by the geonim Amram and Saadiah on the correct order of prayers, our earliest written prayer books; and Sherirah Gaon's letter on the chain of rabbinic authority, the main source for the history of the rabbinical institutions during the first millennium. The geonic literature (so-called because the *responsa* were issued in the name of the gaon) forms an important link between the legal thought of the talmudic period and the later authorities.

Just as an exilarchic dynasty supplied political leadership to Jewry, the geonim were, with few exceptions, drawn from a half dozen venerable Babylonian families who provided the uppermost echelon of rabbinic leadership. During the height of the influence and prestige of the geonic

yeshivot, a small group in Iraq virtually monopolized a fixed system of rabbinic precedence and honor designated by special seats and titles in the collegium of scholars. The rabbinic academies of Iraq from the seventh through the eleventh centuries were far more hierarchical in their structure and exclusive in their membership than Jewish intellectual institutions in earlier or in later times. As we shall soon see, this closed, tightly knit religious establishment provoked considerable opposition among Jews to the authority of talmudic law.

The Babylonian leadership, at its most harmonious and dignified, is portrayed in the following (abbreviated) description of the installation of an exilarch, from an old chronicle.

On Thursday they assembled in the synagogue, blessed the exilarch, and placed their hands on him. They blew the horn, that all the people, small and great, might hear. When the people heard the proclamation, every member of the community sent him a present, according to his power and means. All the heads of the community sent him magnificent clothes and beautiful ornaments, vessels of silver and vessels of gold, each man according to his ability. . . . When he arose on Sabbath morning to go to the synagogue, many of the prominent men of the community met him to go with him to the synagogue. At the synagogue a wooden pulpit had been prepared for him on the previous day. . . . They spread over it magnificent coverings of silk, blue, purple, and scarlet, so that it was entirely covered, and nothing was seen of it. Under the pulpit there entered distinguished youths, with melodious and harmonious voices, who were well-versed in the prayers and all that appertains thereto. . . . When all the people were seated, the exilarch came out from the place where he was concealed. Seeing him come out, all the people stood up, until he sat on the pulpit which had been made for him. Then the head of the academy of Sura came out after him, and after exchanging courtesies with the exilarch, sat down on the pulpit. Then the head of the academy of Pumbeditha came out, and he, too, made a bow, and sat down at his left. . . . Then the exilarch would begin to expound matters pertaining to the biblical portion of that day, or would give permission to the head of the academy of Sura to deliver the exposition, and the head of the academy of Sura would give permission to the head of the academy of Pumbeditha. They would thus show deference to one another, until the head of the academy of Sura began to expound. . . . He expounded with awe, closing his eyes, and wrapping himself up in his *tallith*, so that his forehead was covered. While he was expounding, there was not in the congregation one that opened his mouth or chirped or uttered a sound. If he became aware that anyone spoke, he would open his eyes, and fear and terror would fall upon the congregation. . . .<sup>9</sup>

### *Messianism and Karaism*

Widespread sectarian conflict within Islamic society during the early Middle Ages had its equivalent in Jewish society too. That the social and



cultural dislocation of the time produced upheaval among the Jews of the Middle East is evident in the many Jewish sects mentioned in the historical sources. (The Hellenistic and Roman periods, which also brought about a major transformation in Jewish life, had likewise been times of conflict between different Jewish groups.) Unfortunately, information about these matters is limited. Several brief Arabic and Jewish descriptions refer to messianic movements among Persian Jews in the mid-eighth century, involving armed uprisings against the Muslim authorities. Although the practices and ideology of the groups headed by Abu Isa of Isfahan (probably 745–755) and his disciple Yudghan (756–765) cannot be determined in detail, it is known that they advocated ascetic practices, additional daily prayer services, and the recognition as legitimate of certain prophets to the gentile nations (especially Muhammad), and presumably they desired to bring an immediate end to the Jewish exile. These revolts were quickly suppressed, but a more enduring threat—this time, not to the Muslim state but to the Jewish establishment—appeared later in the eighth century and eventuated in a separate, anti-rabbinic form of Judaism: Karaism (from the Hebrew word *mikrah*, “Scriptures”).

According to later sources, the first in the line of Karaite sectarians was Anan ben David, who founded a group known as the Ananites sometime in the 760s.<sup>10</sup> Anan’s conception of Jewish observance is extremely pietistic and severe. He considered rabbinical practices that emphasize the joy of the Sabbath and the festivals to be contrary to the mourning that should mark Jewish life in exile. Anan did not allow lights or fire in Jewish households during the Sabbath, which were permitted by rabbinic law as long as they were kindled beforehand. He promulgated a seventy-day fast resembling the Muslim Ramadan, extended the prohibited degrees of marriage far beyond the rabbinic definition of incestuous relations, and declared that consulting physicians showed lack of religious faith. Additional matters in which Anan and later Karaites criticized excessive rabbinic leniency were *kashrut* (dietary laws) and regulations concerning ritual impurity. The Karaites also returned to a calendar based on direct observation of the new moon. Underlying these details was the Karaite rejection of the Talmud and their insistence that Jewish law should adhere as literally as possible to the Bible. (In their legal writings the Karaites reasoned by analogy from biblical verses, one of the methods also used by the Muslim jurists.)

After Anan, the next early figure of the Karaite tradition was Benjamin of Nahawend in Persia (second quarter of the ninth century), who wrote several law books in Hebrew. (Anan had used Aramaic and later Karaites used Arabic.) Benjamin was the first to use the term *Karaites* to designate followers of the Bible only, in contrast to the term *Rabbanites*, designating those who adhered to the rabbinic tradition. Benjamin seems



to have taught that Jews should decide individually which practices were implied by the biblical legislation.<sup>11</sup> Personal freedom of interpretation became a fundamental Karaite principle: A Karaite scholar from the end of the tenth century cited as a dictum of Anan: "Search thoroughly in the Scriptures and do not rely on my opinion."

By the early tenth century, a wide range of different Jewish groups could be found in Palestine, Iraq, and Persia, all of whom rejected rabbinic law and devised their own regulations in its stead. The metamorphosis of this deviant fringe into a coherent movement was helped by the establishment of a Karaite academy in Jerusalem. Daniel al-Kumisi, a Persian Karaite of the late ninth century, seems to have been the first to call on Karaites to settle in Jerusalem in order to pray constantly that Israel's sins be forgiven and to appeal to God for redemption. Karaite "mourners for Zion" (*avelei Zion*) deprived themselves of wine, meat, and other luxuries. One of the epistles of a Jerusalem Karaite, who traveled around the diaspora to win Jewish converts to the movement, conveys the rhetorical passion of the Karaite demand for repentance and the bitterness of their attacks on the Rabbanites:

This is the practice of Karaite Israelites who have sought God's pleasure and secluded themselves from the desires of this world. They have given up eating meat and drinking wine and have clung to the Lord's Law and have stood in assiduous watch before the doors of His Temple. Because of the greatness of their grief and the depth of their sighing, they have lost their strength to stand up against all stumbling blocks, and the skin of their bodies has become wrinkled with premature senility. Yet notwithstanding all this, they forsook not their goal, nor did they relinquish their hope; rather they continue to read the Law and interpret it, acting as both teachers and pupils, turning many persons away from evildoing, and saying, "O all ye who are athirst, come ye to the water!" . . . May God fulfill regarding them His promise to turn the ashes covering heads of Zion's mourners into an ornament of splendor. . . .

In God's mighty Name have I come to awaken the hearts of His people of Israel; to turn them back to the Law of the Lord; to arouse their conscience and their thoughts to the fear of their God; to make them dread the Day of Judgment, which is coming with terror and wrath, and the day of the Lord's vengeance upon those who forsake His Law; and to warn them not to rely upon ordinances contrived by men and learned by rote [i.e., the rabbinic law]. . . . How can I fail to do so, when my bowels cry out within my belly and my kidneys are consumed within my bosom with pity for my brethren and for the children of my people? Many of them have been forced to put a great distance between themselves and the Lord and to walk in a way which is not good, because of their leaders [the rabbis] who oppress them remorselessly. . . . Whosoever does not give according to their demand, they wage holy war against him; they subjugate and tyrannize him by means of bans and excommunications and by recourse to

the gentile officials. They punish the poor by forcing them to borrow at a high rate of interest and to make payment to them. Part of what they thus take from the poor they present to the gentile officials, so that they may strengthen their hold over the people. They vaunt their holiness and purity and demand that the people bring them all kinds of sweetmeats and wine, exacted as payment of fines, so that they may eat and drink. . . .<sup>12</sup>

In the tenth and eleventh centuries, the Jerusalem Karaites included some of the most distinguished literary figures of eastern Jewry. Karaite scholars in Jerusalem composed handbooks of law, wrote commentaries on the Bible, furthered the growth of Hebrew philology, and engaged in theological and philosophical speculation. Some Karaites were among the first Jews to use the rationalist approach being developed at the time by Muslim thinkers.<sup>13</sup>

The main characteristics of Karaism in the first centuries of its history are asceticism, yearning for an end to exile, rejection of rabbinic authority, individualistic biblical interpretation, and growing interest in rationalistic criticism of rabbinic Judaism and rationalistic defense of the Jewish faith. We do not know how extensive their following was among the Jewish masses, but the emergence of the Karaite intellectual was an understandable consequence of the exilarchic-geonic system.<sup>14</sup> Many of the Karaite leaders drew on the example of the prophetic literature of the Bible to attack what they saw as hypocrisy and compromise. The Jewish commandments meant for them self-denial and separation from the gentile world. Though opposed to rabbinic authority, they did not evolve a nonlegal form of Judaism; though acknowledging the right of individual interpretation, they did not advocate leniency. Frustrated by the closed character of the Babylonian yeshivot and imbued with calling the people to return to God, the Karaites were willing to strike out on their own and defy the growing power of the established Jewish leadership. (The Muslim rulers permitted the Karaites to secede and live by their own practices.) Attacking the rabbis meant attacking the Talmud itself, the source of rabbinic authority. One Karaite author of the tenth century (Jacob al-Kirkisani, to whom we are indebted for most of our information about Jewish sects of the early Muslim period) compiled a history of the movement in which he links Karaism to the Sadducees of the Second Temple, who, he claims, wanted to restore the Judaism of biblical times against the usurpation of the Pharisaic sages. The Karaites thought of themselves as adherents of the only authentic form of Judaism; they were, in the biblical phrase, the "remnant of Israel."

Apparently, the Karaite intellectuals capitalized on a resistance to the growing uniformity of practice being achieved in rabbinic Judaism at that time and to feelings of resentment against the wealth and comfort enjoyed by the Jewish elite. They were also an early sign of an important

long-range development: the broadening of the Jewish scholar class to include men not tied to the personal direction and patronage of the dominant group in Babylonia. (The vast enlargement of the leadership of Judaism will be described in the next section.)

By the tenth century, the Karaites had successfully established their own network of synagogues in the Middle East. (Apart from one small group that appeared in Spain, the Karaites never gained a following in Western Europe.) Polemics against the Karaites became frequent among writers loyal to the Talmud. As the social composition of the movement changed, Karaism lost much of its earlier severity; Karaites in Egypt and elsewhere became prosperous merchants. (It is not unusual for small, ascetic religious groups to attain economic success.) The ascetic features of Karaite ritual were modified accordingly (for instance, the prohibition on Sabbath lamps was gradually dropped) and the concept of a postbiblical tradition, called by them *sevel ha-yerushah*, the "burden of the heritage," was accepted. After the destruction of the Jerusalem community during the First Crusade, the center of Karaite literary activity moved to the Byzantine empire; from there Karaites founded settlements in the Crimea and in medieval Poland and Lithuania. The Karaite community in Egypt also continued to maintain itself.<sup>15</sup> Relations between Karaites and Rabbanites varied in the following centuries; sometimes ties were close and there was intermarriage between them, although at other periods one or the other side emphasized the gulf between their respective ways of life. After the eleventh century, however, Karaism did not have a large base of support, and it has survived down to the present as a small minority in a larger minority, the Jewish people.

### *The Revival of the Western Diaspora; the Jews of Muslim Spain*

Already in the eighth century, the unified Muslim empire began to break apart. When the Abbasid caliph overthrew the Umayyads in 750, Muslim-ruled Spain remained independent under the single surviving descendant of the Umayyads. Even during the century when the Abbasids were at the height of their prestige and power, they were losing control of outlying territories: Morocco (780s), Tunisia (around 800), large areas of Persia (820s), Egypt (860s). After 850 the Abbasids began to find themselves virtual captives of their Turkish troops, a process that reduced the office of caliph to a façade behind which Turkish generals held the real power. In 909 the Fatimids, a Shiite dynasty, took over control of North Africa; in 969 the Fatimids conquered Egypt and Palestine.<sup>16</sup> By the end of the tenth century, the Islamic realm was divided into a number of smaller states, frequently at war with each other; nevertheless, there was an active exchange of goods and ideas through the