



The Karaites & 1844

Karaite Reckoning vs. Rabbanite Reckoning

Was October 22 the Right Date, or Was It September 23?

by Bob Pickle

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The Problem

A number of critics today question the conclusions of Millerites in 1844 that the Jewish Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) that year would occur on October 22. Indeed, the present author perhaps 15 years ago perused an 1844 almanac in the Auburn University library, and discovered that it listed September 23 as the date for Yom Kippur. But that is to be expected.

Millerites in 1844 used the reckoning of Karaite Judaism to come up with the date of October 22. Karaism typically kept their feasts a month later than other Jews. However, the critics claim that the Karaites were no longer using their special form of reckoning in 1844. Is this true? And even if it were true, what would be the correct date for Yom Kippur in 1844, biblically speaking?

We begin by discussing the reasons behind the differences of the Karaite Jewish calendar.

Of Karaism and Calendars

Toward the end of the 8th century AD, a back-to-the-bible movement in Judaism arose in opposition to Rabbanite Judaism. It is called Karaism (or Caraism). The Rabbanites followed the traditions of the Talmud in addition to the Scriptures, but the Karaites abandoned all such traditions and went just by Scripture. This necessitated differing from other Jews in the manner in which they kept their calendar, and this meant that they often kept their festivals in different months than other Jews.

The Julian and Gregorian Calendars are solar calendars. They are tied to the number of days that it takes for the earth to revolve about the sun. Moslems, on the other hand, have a lunar calendar, one that is tied to the number of days that it takes for the moon to revolve around the earth.

While the earth revolves around the sun once every 365.242199 days, the moon revolves around the earth once every 29.530588 days. In a lunar calendar, about half the months are 29 and about half are 30 days long. 12 of such months would add up to about 354 days, about 11 days short of a solar year.

The Julian and Gregorian calendars keep in time with the seasons though an intercalary day (Feb. 29) every 4th year, commonly called a leap year. The Gregorian calendar skips three of these every 400 years, and is thus more accurate than the Julian calendar.

The Islamic calendar uses no intercalation. Thus it falls behind the seasons 11 additional days every year. After 33 years or so, their months have rotated through the seasons until they are back to where they were before.

The Jewish calendar uses an intercalary month. In a leap year, which occurs about 7 times every 19 years, the 12th month Adar is followed by a second Adar, and this postpones the beginning of the first month of Nisan till the following month.

Moslems and Karaites begin their months when the new crescent moon is first visible. This may occur, weather permitting, 18 hours or more after the astronomical new moon. Sightings are attempted soon after sunset. If the new crescent is large enough, and is far enough

away from the setting sun, and at the right angle, then it will be seen and the new month will be declared to have begun.

The Bible specifies that the Passover must be celebrated during the first month. It also specifies that on the morrow after the sabbath after the Passover (differing interpretations identify this as either a Sunday or the 16th of Nisan), a sheaf of ripe barley was to be waved before the Lord (Lev. 23:10-12). Up until the 2nd century AD, Rabbanite Judaism added their intercalary months in such a way that there was always ripe barley for Passover. After that point, they relied solely on mathematical calculations tied to the equinox, and totally disregarded whether the barley was ripe or not. Thus they were not following the Scriptures in the matter of when to begin their years.

When Karaism arose, it reverted back to the original way of calculating the beginning of the year. You can read more about this matter at <http://www.karaite-korner.org/>. Particularly interesting are [Abib \(Barley\)](#), [Abib FAQ](#), and [Ancient Abib Reports](#).

October 22, Karaism, and Snow

Beginning in the summer of 1844, Millerites in general, though not William Miller himself, became convinced that Christ would return on October 22 of that year, what was considered the Day of Atonement by Karaite reckoning. This idea was first presented by Samuel S. Snow. Critics today deny that the Karaites were still using their special reckoning in 1844. Thus, it is claimed, this Millerite date, and the subsequent date used by Seventh-day Adventists for the beginning of the antitypical Day of Atonement, is flawed.

A key piece of evidence that is used is this quote, written in 1860:

And for some time now the quest for the Abib has been abandoned even in the Land of Israel and they [the inhabitants of Israel] intercalate years using the above mentioned system [i.e. the 19 year Rabbinic cycle] like we do outside of Israel, [this is] against the legal decision of the Rav [i.e. Baschyatchi] and the Hachamim [mentioned in the above quoted passage of Aderet Eliyahu] perhaps in order to unite with all the communities and so that we will not have a disagreement between them and us in fixing the

year. (From "Gefen Ha'Aderet", Shlomoh ben Afedah Hacoen, Israel 1987, pp.22-23 (written in 1860) [translation from the Hebrew by Nehemia Gordon, square brackets added by translator for clarity.])

That Karaites afar from Palestine were using Rabbanite reckoning long before 1844 is indeed true. And at some point prior to 1860, apparently even Karaites in Palestine were as well. But how long before 1860? The history is difficult to trace back from our day.

As late as 1641 we learn from a Karaite pilgrim from the Crimea that the Karaites of the Middle East still followed the Biblical calendar and that in that year they celebrated all the holidays one month after the Rabbanites. (*Karaite Korner Newsletter* #6: Biblical Holidays 1999)

For now, we will say that at some point between 1641 and 1860, Karaites in Palestine started using Rabbanite reckoning. Yet regardless of what the Karaites were or were not doing in 1844, what was the true date for the Day of Atonement, biblically speaking? The question is difficult to answer without detailed crop reports from that year, but we know what the barley crops are like in recent years, thanks to Karaite leader Nehemia Gordon.

Yom Kippur, 1999

In 1999 his newsletter declared:

According to the Abib (barley) and the New Moon the Biblical Feasts and Holidays in 1999 fall out on the following dates:

- * October 11, 1999 Yom Teruah (Day of Shouting)
- * **October 20, 1999 Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement)**
- * October 25, 1999 Hag HaSukkot (Feast of Booths)
- * November 1, 1999 Shemini Atzeret (*Ibid.*) (bold added)

October 20 is awfully close to October 22. But the average Jew kept the Yom Kippur in 1999 a whole month earlier.

Concocted by Snow?

Back to the Millerites of 1844. Some critics have claimed that Samuel Snow concocted the idea of Yom Kippur being in October so that he would have longer for his message to take effect. This is not true, for Millerites were well aware of Karaite reckoning before Snow came around with his message the summer of 1844:

Now there is a dispute between the Rabinical, and the Caraites Jews, as to the correct time of commencing the year. . . . The Caraites Jews on the contrary, still adhere to the letter of the Mosaic, and commence with the new moon nearest the barley harvest in Judea; and which is one moon later than the Rabinical year. The Jewish year of A D 1843, as the Caraites reckon it in accordance with the Mosaic law, therefore commenced this year with the new moon on the 29th of April, and the Jewish year 1844, will commence with the new moon in next April, when 1843 and the 2300 days, according to their computation, will expire. (*Signs of the Times*; June 21, 1843; p. 123)

While Miller himself never espoused such dating, principal Millerite leaders did. Thus the idea of using Karaite reckoning wasn't something concocted by Snow. Notice also that if the Jewish year of 1844 began with the new moon of April, Yom Kippur, a little over six months later, would land on October 22, not September 23.

In a discussion of the 70 weeks of Daniel 9, we read:

In an "Economical Calendar" of Palestine, which has been prepared with the greatest care, is the following remark under the month commencing with the new moon of *April*. "Wheat, zea or spelt and *barley* ripen." (*Signs of the Times*; Dec. 5, 1843; p. 134)

In this article is a good bit of material dealing with the Karaite form of reckoning. Much of this was repeated, with some additions, in the March 20, 1844, issue, after the *Signs* had changed its name to the *Advent Herald and Signs of the Time Reporter*. But the *Signs* a.k.a. *Advent Herald* wasn't the first journal to publish comments along these lines:

In an article on the Jewish year, published in the *Cry of April* 27, 1843, Bro. Whiting says: "The rabbinical calculation makes the first day of Nisan commence with

the new moon *nearest* the day on which the sun enters Aries, on the vernal equinox. It ought, however, to be observed, that the Karaite Jews maintain that the rabbins have changed the Calendar, so that, to present the first fruits on the 16th of Nisan would be impossible if the time is reckoned according to the rabbinical calculations, since barley is not in the ear at Jerusalem till a month later. **The accounts of many travelers confirm the position of the Caraites.** (*The Midnight Cry*; Oct. 11, 1844; p. 117) (bold added)

So well over a year before Snow got going, Millerites were talking about Karaite reckoning, and even claiming that "many travelers" to Israel had confirmed the fact that the barley is not ripe for Passover the way the Rabbanites calculate the beginning of the year.

Mr. E. S. Calman

Now we need to investigate the question of what were the Karaites doing in 1844. We have the testimony of Shlomoh ben Afedah Hacoen that long before 1860 the Karaites of Palestine has given up their form of reckoning the commencement of the year. This must be balanced with the following, from an article which was quoted in part by the Dec. 5, 1843, issue of *Signs* and the March 20, 1844, issue of *Advent Herald*:

The following is a communication from Mr. Calman, written as long ago as 1836 . . . (*American Biblical Repository*, April 1840, p. 398)

This Mr. Calman was a converted Jewish Rabbi who at the time of writing was about to return to Jerusalem from Beirut where he was recovering his health. Before going to Beirut:

Having left England, under the patronage of a few private individuals, as a missionary to the Jews in the East, he had proceeded first to Baghdad and then to Jerusalem . . . (p. 400)

Calman's article is critiquing a book written by a Ridley Herschell, with which he differs on some points.

You must not, for a moment, suppose that I mean to

charge Mr. H. with falsehood. Far from it; for I must acknowledge that before I became acquainted with the Judaism of the East, or rather, before I had thoroughly looked into the state of religion and morals among them, in consequence of my labors here for the benefit of their souls, my own views were nearly like those of Mr. H. (p. 410)

Judging from his learning, and his personal acquaintance with Jewish affairs in the Middle East, one would think that Mr. Calman should know what he is talking about.

One Month Too Early

Notice carefully what the very first point he covers is, in the lengthy remainder of his article:

I will begin by stating one fact of great importance, of which I was totally ignorant before I came to this country, which will prove that the *seasons of the festivals*, appointed by God for the Jewish nation, have been annulled and subverted by the oral law of the Scribes and Pharisees, which is now the ritual of the Jews. (p. 411)

Mr. Calman considers the issue of "great importance," and learned of it only since arriving in the Palestine. What immediately follows is a short description of the biblical requirement that the year begin when the barley is in a certain stage of ripeness. Then he says:

But, at present, the Jews in the Holy Land have not the least regard to this season appointed and identified by Jehovah, but follow the rules prescribed in the oral law, namely, by adding a month to every second or third year, and thus making the lunar year correspond with the solar. And when the 15th day of Nisan (*nisan*), according to this computation, arrives, they begin to celebrate the above-mentioned feast, although the *chedesh haabib* may have passed, or not yet come. In general the proper season occurs after they have celebrated it a whole month, which is just reversing the command in the law, which directs that the *chedesh haabib* precede the festival, and not the festival the *chedesh haabib*. Nothing like ears of green

corn have I seen around Jerusalem at the celebration of this feast. (pp. 411, 412) (Hebrew transliterated)

Mr. Calman has thus informed us that "in general," Jews around 1836 were keeping their feasts one month too early. Therefore, just this point makes a good case for October 22 being the correct date for Yom Kippur in 1844, regardless of what the Karaites were doing.

Especially is this so when one considers the range of dates in which Rabbanite Jews were celebrating Yom Kippur at that time. Between 1800 and 1844, the earliest date for Yom Kippur was September 14 in 1842, and the latest date was October 14 in 1815. If "in general" the Rabbanite dates were a month too early, then certainly September 23, 1844, falling in the first third of this range of dates, should have been a month too early.

Karaites in Palestine

. . . regardless of what the Karaites were doing. But what were they doing?

The Caraites observe it later than the Rabbinical, for they are guided by Abib, *abib*, and they charge the latter with eating leavened bread during that feast. I think, myself, that the charge is well founded. If this feast of unleavened bread is not celebrated in its season, every successive festival is dislocated from its appropriate period, since the month Abib, *abib*, is laid down in the law of God as the epoch from which every other is to follow. (p. 412) (Hebrew transliterated)

Though the Karaites of Palestine may have abandoned their form of reckoning by 1860, they were still at it in 1836. So says a knowledgeable former Rabbi who was there at the time. Thus it is entirely possible that they were still at it in 1844.

Conclusion

The case the critics have made today against the idea that October 22 was the correct date for Yom Kippur in 1844 has vaporized.

1. The idea that Snow concocted the idea of using Karaite

reckoning is utterly false, as can be seen from contemporary documents.

2. Generally speaking, Jews in Palestine at that time were keeping the feasts a month too early, for they were starting their years so early that there was not enough time for the barley to ripen before Passover.
3. While the Karaite Jews in Palestine were likewise keeping the feasts too early in 1860, they were not in 1836, leaving open the possibility that they were also not in 1844.
4. Karaite records of what they were doing in other localities are not necessarily helpful, since those afar were using Rabbanite reckoning long before those in Palestine ceased to observe the barley harvests.
5. Even if the Karaites were using Rabbanite reckoning in 1844, it is still apparent that Rabbanite reckoning was almost without question a month too early that year.

Any continued criticism against the validity of the date of October 22 for Yom Kippur in 1844 is sheer speculation, unless of course someone turns up an 1844 crop report for Palestine. If such a crop report did turn up, and if it showed that the barley had entered the Abib stage by March 20 in those cold, pre-global warming days, then and only then would the matter be settled that September 23 was the true Day of Atonement for that year.

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