CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR
KARAITÉ PRAYER AND LITURGY

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The Bible contains many references to prayer, from Moses's simple entreaty (Numbers 12:13) to Hannah's silent petition (1 Samuel 1:10–16), from Solomon's lengthy supplication (I Kings 8:22–53) to Daniel's benediction (Daniel 2:20–23). The Book of Psalms is an ancient liturgical anthology, containing laments, petitions, songs of praise, and thanksgiving. But while it often describes praying and includes many prayers, the Bible contains no explicit liturgical guidance. Since formal worship was concentrated in the Temple, and sacrifice was its central feature, the Bible provides detailed information concerning the various offerings, the Psalter preserving portions of the divine service. There is silence, however, on the subject of fixed worship outside the Temple. Extra-biblical sources, literary and archaeological, attest to such practices, but it was only after the Temple's destruction in 70 C.E. that a formal replacement for the sacrificial cult was required. The Rabbanite liturgy that developed over the next millennium both memorialized and supplanted the Temple rites. The names of the services—shaharit, minnah, and musaf—were old, and biblical texts were included. But most of the content was new. The blessing or benediction (berakhah) was precisely formulated, and the silent devotion (shemoneh 'esreh, "eighteen benedictions") was given a central place. There were, to be sure, regular prayers for the renewal of the Temple service, but there were also poetic depictions of that cult in a new, florid Hebrew that no Second-Temple Levite would have understood!¹

In its original form, Karaite worship represents a conscious attempt to restore Jewish prayer to its biblical origins. The absence of the

¹ For two sensitive treatments of prayer in the Hebrew Bible, see Greenberg, "Tefillah", Biblical Prose. For a comprehensive interpretation of prayer in Judaism, see Reif, Judaism and Prayer. On the creation of a valid non-sacrificial liturgy, see Langer, To Worship God, ch. 1.
Temple necessitated radical changes, but the Karaites established the
texts, times, and occasions for prayer by scrutinizing the Bible for
liturgical guidance. Like other forms of Karaite literature and prac-
tice, their liturgy and mode of prayer display the marks of conflict
with rabbinic Judaism, while exhibiting traces of acculturation to
Islam. Thus, like Muslims—but unlike Rabbanites—they perform
regular prostrations and also spread their hands during worship, cit-
ing biblical precedents. The rabbinic elements that were preserved
have been accompanied by conscious efforts at self-differentiation:
Deuteronomy 6:4 remains central to the Karaite proclamation of
divine unity (Ar. tawḥīd), but the three paragraphs of the Shemaʾ have
been replaced with a florilegium of verses. Over the course of time,
both Rabbanites and Karaites sought to standardize their services,
each group contending with the growth of new communities and the
development of local practices. During certain periods of rapproche-
ment, Karaite rites were even modified in accordance with Rabbanite
usage, reversing the reactionary tendency of the early sectarians.
Following a general trend in Karaite halakhah, the liturgical forms
prevailing in the West (Byzantium/Turkey, the Crimea, Poland, and
Lithuania) also became dominant in the East (Egypt, the Land of
Israel, Syria, and Iraq), a process facilitated during the nineteenth
century by the printing of the Karaite prayer book in Europe.

I. The Historical Development of Karaite Worship

ʿAnan ben David sought to revise Jewish worship completely, pat-
terning it as far as possible on the ancient Temple services. In accor-
dance with Numbers 28:4, he decreed that only morning and twilight
services be held on weekdays. In place of the daily sacrifice, Numbers
28:1–8 was to be read daily from a scroll, probably by a priest.

2 Al-Qirqisānī, Kitāb al-anwār, I, p. 16, lines 6–11 (prostration), III, pp. 626–627
(spreading and raising the hands). See also Wieder, “Islamic influences”, p. 78.
3 But see n. 43 below.
4 On Rabbanite efforts see Hoffman, The Canonization, Reif, ibid., pp. 131–138.
5 Remarkably, the only monograph on the entire subject is Goldberg, Karaite
Liturgy; the work remains useful, but the criticisms of Nemoy (“Review of Goldberg”) are
justified.
6 For a reconstruction of ʿAnan’s liturgy, see Mann, “ʿAnan’s liturgy”.