

# The Khazars by Prof. Revilo P. Oliver

The publication of an early translation into Ladino of Yehudah<sup>1</sup> (ben Shemu'el) ha-Levi's often cited book about the Khazars<sup>2</sup> suggests that a summary statement of the question it raises may be of interest.

The Khazars, a tribe of uncertain race, first appear in history shortly before A.D. 198, when they occupied a part of the Caucasus and the northwestern shores of the Caspian Sea. Their 'heartland' appears to have been the delta of the Volga, which flows by many channels into the Caspian. Their most important neighbors were the Alani, a Sarmatian people of Iranian (Aryan) origin. Through this territory passed wave after wave of peoples migrating westward from central Asia, Tatars, Bulgars, Slavs, and many others, whom it would be tedious to enumerate. The Khazars and their neighbors were conquered and subjugated by the Huns in 448 and by the Turks in 560, but recovered their independence, and around 600 established a stable monarchy that, from its capital, Itil, at the mouth

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<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew name YHWDH, now vocalized as *Yehudah*, is often written in English as 'Judas' or 'Judah' on the basis of the forms found in the Septuagint and "New Testament," which represent the pronunciation in the two centuries divided by the beginning of the Christian Era. The name simply means 'Jew.' The Hebrew spelling may have been devised to create a religious etymology by which the name could be interpreted as meaning 'Yahweh leads' or 'is praised.'

<sup>2</sup> Ladino is the mongrel language the Jews made out of Spanish, as they made Yiddish out of German. Ladino was used by Jews throughout the Mediterranean world, as Yiddish was used in Northern Europe. (Cf. *Liberty Bell*, May 1985, pp. 11-17.) The book in question is YEHUDAH HALEVI, *The Book of the Khazars . . . a 12th Century Ladino translation . . .*, edited by Moshe Lazar and Robert Dilligan. Culver City, California; Labyrinthos, 1990. It is reviewed unfavorably by Dwayne E. Carpenter in *Speculum*, LXVIII (1993), pp. 534 f. He does not raise the tactless question why composers' time, paper, ink, and space on library shelves should be wasted by this publication. So far as I can judge from the review, no one seems to have made the preliminary investigation that should have preceded publication. Was the Ladino translation made from the Arabic original or from the translation into Mediæval Hebrew? Is the Ladino translation accurate? If so, it is worthless; if not, does it contain mistranslations that might have given rise to some later writer's mistakes about the subject or contents of the original? If not, it is worthless. Only if it explains some important misconceptions (I do not know of any) was the publication justified.

of the Volga, ruled a territory extending from the northern shore of the Caspian to Crimea, and flourished until 884, after which it rapidly declined. The Khazars were finally conquered by the tribes of southern Russia under the command of Verangian (Scandinavian) rulers in 965, and disappeared from history.

If the Khazars had a literature, it has vanished without a trace. We cannot even identify their language. Our information about them comes almost entirely from Moslem travelers and historians, supplemented by references (not always perspicuous) in Byzantine chronicles.

During the period of their great prosperity, the Khazars' realm had a population that doubtless retained genetic elements from all the diverse races and ethnic groups that had passed through the territory. There was a much inferior race, the Kara Khazars, described as squat, ugly, and having dark complexion; they may have been biological débris left behind by the Huns. The ruling class is described as having white skin and black hair; the men were of good stature, fine physique, and considered handsome; the beauty of the women was celebrated.

The prosperity of the Khazars depended on their geographical position athwart the trade routes between East and West, North and South. Goods from many lands were imported, bought, sold, and exported. When you know that, you need not be told that the race of international parasites swarmed into Khazaria, not only batten on commerce but, like the 'court Jews' of Mediæval Europe, attaching themselves to the ruling dynasty and the aristocracy as physicians, financial agents, and administrators. We may be quite certain that from the rise of the Khazar kingdom to its decline, the land was lousy with Jews. Our historical knowledge is so fragmentary that there is no evidence that they contributed to the nation's decline and downfall, in keeping with racial habits.

It is certain that there never was a state religion in Khazaria to which the rulers tried to convert their subjects by either persuasion or coercion. A large part of the population doubtless retained their native ("pagan") beliefs, and there were conversions

to Christian and Moslem cults, and doubtless also to the Jews' religion. It is hard to believe that any member of the ruling class was actually converted to Judaism and submitted to the barbaric rite of circumcision. Whether Jewish physicians, like their fellow tribesmen in the United States, promoted the sexual mutilation of male infants of other races is not known.

It is true that after the Arabic conquest of Persia the Khazar kings professed Judaism, at least nominally. That was simply an act of political prudence. Their policy was to remain, so far as possible, at peace with both of their powerful neighbors, the Moslems and the Christians, and to avoid alliances with either. Had they remained "pagan," both powers would have been eager to invade their realm and slaughter them *ad maiorem gloriam Dei*, and if they had professed either Islam or Christianity, they would have exposed themselves to godly incursions and perhaps conquest by the other power. But the two fanatical religions that were irreconcilable antagonists were both based on Jewish mythology and thus required to tolerate and protect the insidious race that had supposedly been the sole concern and cherished darlings of their God for millennia. For the Khazar kings, a profession, perhaps hypocritical, of Judaism was politically necessary.

The history of Khazaria, so far as we can reconstruct it from our few sources, would be no more interesting than the history of any other of the many barbaric kingdoms that suddenly appeared and quickly disintegrated in the course of the sad history of mankind, but for the questions that were suggested by the description above. How extensive and numerous were the conversions to Judaism among the Khazars? And when the fortunes of the Khazars sharply declined, their numerous parasites would naturally seek more prosperous hosts, so whither did they go?

The Khazars who migrated in large numbers into the increasingly prosperous nations of northern Europe were either Khazars who had been converted to Judaism or were "Khazars" only as most of the Jews who swarmed into the United States in the Nineteenth Century were "Germans."

During the past century, many Christians who resented the depredations of the Jews, chiefly Ashkenazim, but wanted to retain faith in their favorite story-book, elaborated the theory that their parasites were not really God's People but only the descendants of Khazars who had been converted to

Judaism. The theoretical evasion was so attractive to them that it became an article of Faith, and it was finally adopted by a prominent Jew, Arthur Koestler, who expounded it in *The Thirteenth Tribe: the Khazar Empire and Its Heritage* (New York, Random House, 1976).<sup>3</sup>

This brings us to Yehuda (Judah) ha-Levi. He was a Jewish physician, born c. 1085, who, after the Christian conquest of Toledo, moved to Cordova, then still Moslem territory, where he assumed an Arabic name, Abu'l Hasan, much as Jews in our world assume English or Scotch names. Probably in 1140, shortly before his death, he wrote, in passable Arabic, a book with a formidable title, *Kitab al-Hujjah wal-Dalil fi Nuṣr al-Din al-Dhalil*. This was translated from the Arabic into German by Hartweg Hirschfeld and published at Breslau in 1885.<sup>4</sup>

A prolific Jewish writer, commonly known as Judah ben Saul ibn Tibbon (1120–c. 1191), who was born in Spain but spent the greater part of his life in southern France, translated ha-Levi's work into Rabbinic Hebrew under the title *Sefer ha-Kuzari* ("Book of the Khazars"), and it is in this form that the work is generally known. The accuracy of the translation is problematical: ibn Tibbon is quoted as having confessed in another work that he knew Arabic, which he regarded as much the superior language, better than any kind of Hebrew, and having said that his method was to make a literal translation of an Arabic original and then rewrite it in his Hebrew as though it were an original work of his own. So far as I know, however, this fact has given qualms to none of the many who cite ha-Levi from that translation with unqualified confidence. I cite it on the assumption that the translation preserves at least the principal substance of the original.

The author, ha-Levi, wrote, as I have noted above, long after the Khazars had disappeared, but he knew of them and had heard that the rulers of

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<sup>3</sup> Despite his odd claim that his book did not invalidate his race's claim to the territory now called Israel, Koestler's demolition of the "Chosen People" myth was savagely denounced by many of his fellow Ashkenazim. Some speculate that the hostility of his fellow tribesmen may have influenced the joint suicide of Koestler and his wife not long thereafter.

<sup>4</sup> I have not consulted this work, which is rather rare, but fundamental to any thoroughgoing consideration of the question I am cursorily presenting here. I do not know whether the Arabic text has been published; if not, it certainly called for the effort that was wasted on the paltry Ladino version. I also do not know whether ha-Levi's Arabic differs substantially from the translation, mentioned below, from which it is commonly cited.

the Khazars had adopted Judaism. His interest is theological, not historical. He imagines a long dialogue between a learned Jew, a Khazar king who is still a “pagan,” and exponents of Christianity, Islam, and human reason. In five tedious chapters, the Jew “proves” that only a “revealed” religion has validity, and he refutes not only the Christian and Moslem doctrines, but mentions Neo-Platonism and produces an elaborate “refutation” of rational philosophy as represented by Aristotle, whom he treats with some respect, since he comes to the conclusion that if only Aristotle had lived at the proper time to become acquainted with the miracles wrought by Yahweh for his people, Aristotle would have been a convert to the True Religion of God’s Race.

The long dialogue ends, needless to say, with the Khazar king’s determination to become a Sheeny by adoption and to bestow on all of his subjects the blessings of Salvation.

I particularly call your attention to one of ha-Levi’s two principal arguments: that the divinity of the Jews and their religion is proved by the fact that they alone possess a history of the world from its creation by Yahweh, i.e., the farrago of tales collected in what Christians call their “Old Testament.” It may be highly significant in other contexts that the sequence of tales has an appearance of historicity that can impose on uncritical readers.<sup>5</sup>

Ha-Levi could have known a curious document which purports to be a letter from a Khazar King Joseph to a Jew of Cordova (Córdoba), and it is likely that he did, although that cannot be demonstrated. This letter is the only basis for the common story about the wholesale conversion of Khazars to Judaism that seems so important to our contemporaries, including Arthur Koestler.

Hasdai (ben Isaac) ibn Shaprut (915–990?), whose Arabic name was Abu Yusuf, was a Jewish physician famed for his suavity, his wisdom, his cunning, and his “thousand tricks,”<sup>6</sup> who used his knowledge of medicine, as Jews often did, to become physician to Moslem Caliph, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III,

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<sup>5</sup> When speculating about what could have influenced our not unintelligent Germanic ancestors to succumb to so unnatural a religion as Christianity, I have often given weight to the Bible’s simulation of historicity, especially in the appendix to the Jew-book called the “New Testament.”

<sup>6</sup> This eulogy of the Mediæval Kissinger is quoted in the *Jewish Encyclopædia* (1903), s.h.n.; the occasion was his success in inducing the Christian Queen of Navarre to recognize the Moslem Caliph as her overlord and place herself and her son under his protection.

the Omayyad Emir of Cordova, who had proclaimed himself the Caliph of Islam in 929 and was the dominant power in the Iberian Peninsula until his death in 961. The wily Jew so captured that monarch’s confidence that he became his confidant, financial officer, and minister of foreign affairs.

There is extant the text of a letter purportedly written by Ḥasdai in 960 or shortly before that date to the Jewish King of the Khazars, and of a reply from that King, Joseph ben Aaron, who gives an elaborate account of the Khazars’ realm and the conversion of their king and virtually all the Khazars to Judaism at a much earlier time, apparently c. 740, when Yahweh sent a dream to Bulan, the Khazar King at that time, and inspired him to invite to his court “wise men of Israel,” who speedily convinced him that he must worship the Jew’s god. Bulan’s successor, Obediah, imported flocks of rabbis to instruct all his subjects “in the Bible, the Mishnah, and the Talmud.” The King who wrote the letter, Joseph ben Aaron, claimed to be a lineal descendant of the pious Obediah and to rule a religiously Jewish nation.

Is this exchange of letters genuine? Although we would expect it to have created something of a stir among the many Jews in Spain, there is no trace of it until about a century and a half later. Probably in the year 1100, a learned rabbi, Yehudah ben Barzillai, mentions the correspondence and quotes from King Joseph’s letter after explicitly warning his readers that he in no way vouches for the authenticity of documents which may be, partially or entirely, tissues of lies. Proponents of the authenticity of the correspondence sweat as they try to explain away ben Barzillai’s candid and judicious scepticism.

There are obviously two distinct questions. Did Ḥasdai write the letter purportedly addressed to the Khazar King (whether or not that letter was actually despatched)? He could have. The letter gives a glowing description of Moslem Spain that would have gratified ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III. It explains that the writer, having heard there was a kingdom of Jews in Asia, wanted to confirm that report and particularly hoped to find the “Ten Lost Tribes”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> If that subject interests you, consult the erudite, comprehensive, and massive work by Professor Arthur Godbey, *The Lost Tribes, a Myth: Suggestions toward Rewriting Hebrew History* (Durham, North Carolina; Duke University, 1930; reprinted with a new introduction, New York, Ktav Publishing House, 1974).

or obtain news of them.

The obvious function of the letter is to introduce and validate the reply by King Joseph. Clever Ḥasdai could have written it (and the reply). So could any forger before 1100, if he took care to introduce no anachronisms in a letter purportedly written in or before 960. The real question before us, then, is posed by the letter from King Joseph.

To my mind, that letter is patently spurious. That is sufficiently proved by chronological considerations. If Ḥasdai had his inspiration to inquire in 960, that was just in time to get in before the Verangian conquest of the Khazar state in 965. And King Joseph, standing on the edge of the abyss, must have been a champion liar to give no hint of the desperate plight of his kingdom at the time he wrote.

We know from Arabic sources that decades before 960 the Khazar capital, Itil, had become a dwindling city, existing precariously on the customs-duties it could still collect from such trade as had not been taken over by the Verangian states or diverted southward, while the Khazar territory, instead of being the wide and peacefully prosperous realm that Joseph describes, had been progressively invaded and appropriated by its enemies and thus reduced to a fraction of what it had been a century before. In other words, if King Joseph wrote the letter in 960, he described as his realm the Khazar kingdom as it had existed in 800 or 850.

It does not really matter whether Joseph's letter was forged by Ḥasdai or both letters were forged by some later hand. A still later forger, probably in the Thirteenth Century, expanded Joseph's letter to produce what is called the Long Version, preserved by a manuscript in Russia.

Jewish writers have labored hard to prove the authenticity of the letter purportedly written by King Joseph, but all that they have proved is that most of the information about the Khazars given in that letter, *except the mass conversion to Judaism*, can be verified from Arabic sources that describe Khazaria at one or another time in its history—sources which, obviously, could have been consulted by any forger before 1100. Some even go so far as to claim that the “Long Version” is the authentic text, and that the version known in 1100 was a “condensation” of it!<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This is done by Koestler, *op. cit.*, although he honestly quotes the statistics that show the enormous differences in style and language between the two versions. So powerful is

The Jews' interest in making King Joseph's letter authentic is explained by their pretense that they are a religion, not a race. If they are a religion, like Christianity and Islam, they must seek converts—and what better proof than that they once converted a whole kingdom?

If the letter attributed to King Joseph is a forgery, then there is no evidence whatsoever that any considerable number of Khazars were ever converted to Judaism. It will follow, therefore, that the “Khazars” who presumably became the Ashkenazim were simply parasites who flitted from the declining Khazar kingdom to regions where there were more prosperous *goyim* to be exploited. And if the swarms of Jews in Khazaria did not go north, what happened to them? A *real* “Holocaust” about which the race failed to howl and yammer? In short, we have no reason for doubting Professor Mourant's conclusion from hæmatological data that the Ashkenazim do not differ racially from other Jews.<sup>9</sup>

The fabulous conversion of the Khazars to Judaism is only one of the innumerable hoaxes contrived by a predatory race that has survived and surreptitiously conquered by its cohesion and virtual unanimity in insolently massive deceit.

[*Liberty Bell*; October 1993]

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the will to believe what is patently false, which accounts for so large a part of religious and other belief in the supernatural today!

<sup>9</sup> See *Liberty Bell*, July 1987, pp. 1–5; cf. May 1985, 15–17; December 1988, 2–4. The Jews' criterion of race (i.e., a real Jew must be the child of a Jewess, the race of the father being irrelevant) was explicable only in terms of mitochondrial heredity before the recent discovery that genes inherited from a mother differ in their genetic effects from the same genes inherited from a father.