

Jits van Straten
The Origin of Ashkenazi Jewry

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The Controversy Unraveled

De Gruyter

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Preface

Why does a microbiologist write a book about the history of Ashkenazi Jews?

To answer this question, I first have to go back to the beginning of the 1960s. During that period, I lived in Israel, in a neighborhood with Moroccan immigrants. These people did not resemble the type of Jews I was familiar with in the Netherlands at all, physically or culturally. In addition, I met other types of Jews who made a rather exotic impression on me, like Yemenite and Indian Jews. I had no reference material for the former, and the latter were just Indians to me.

Years later, back in the Netherlands for some 20 years after all kinds of wanderings, I started to think about the different types of Jews again, and I got the idea that something was wrong. I grew up with the notion that Jews had hardly married non-Jews, and that they had not bothered with converting non-Jews. If this was true, how could it be that after 2,000 years of diaspora, there were Jews who looked like Europeans, Moroccans, Indians, or Ethiopians, if they all originally originated from the the Land of Israel? To answer this question, it seemed a good idea to investigate the matter myself. Because I am of Ashkenazi origin, I decided to investigate the history of the Ashkenazi Jews first. Although Ashkenazi Jews consist mostly of East European Jews, I had to include Central and Western Europe in the investigation as well in order to get a good idea about their origin.

I had two goals in mind: what I would find had to be biologically sound, and the results had to be the same from whatever discipline (history, demography, anthropology, linguistics, and genetics) I approached the problem.

The kind of approach that is needed to unravel the origin of Ashkenazi Jewry is well put by Faber and King (1984): “No solution to the question of the origin of Ashkenazic Jewry will be reached without an interdisciplinary approach, encompassing the fields of archaeology, cultural anthropology, demography, genetics, history, genetics, and paleography.” It was impossible for me to study all these fields. Cultural anthropology and paleography will not be dealt with. I found the remaining fields already quite a job, because none of these fields is my own. However, when I see how

often it occurs that “experts” in those fields put forward diametrically opposite opinions, I feel somewhat at ease about this investigation after all. Furthermore, I discussed the various subjects with experts (who have no personal interest in them). Any mistakes that may occur, are obviously my own doing.

One of the nice things about writing this book was that I came in contact with a number of very friendly people from different fields, at home and abroad. They provided me with new information and ideas. I would like to thank a small number of people.

Bernard Bachrach drew my attention to the publications of the archaeologist Sven Schütte, whose publications provided a decisive answer to the question whether Jews lived in Germany continuously since antiquity. Bernard’s advice was also essential for the organization of the text. Eckhard Eggers was always available to help with questions about linguistic and historical aspects of the development of Yiddish. Dini Goldschmidt-Klein provided me with texts from Israeli libraries. Rolf Hoekstra and Piet Stam helped me with a number of aspects of genetics, including the statistics of population genetics. Marc Kiwitt filled me in on medieval Judeo-French.

I am very thankful to Morgan Kousser, executive editor of *Historical Methods*, and the anonymous referees for the trust put in me, as a result of which I was able to publish a number of articles in that journal. Sven Schütte kept me continuously informed about new finds in the dig in Cologne, and he allowed me to report data he had not published himself yet. Harmen Snel, with whom I published two important articles, in addition provided me with new, interesting information about the Amsterdam Jews in the eighteenth century.

Ad van der Woude was the first one to point out to me that the supposed increase from 30,000 Jews in Eastern Europe in 1500 to more than seven million in 1900 is impossible. I regret having to write that he passed away on 14 June 2008. I want to thank Hans Zeller for adapting a number of maps and pictures. The employees of the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana of the University of Amsterdam were exceptionally helpful, and the same holds for the employees of the library Ets Haim - Livraria Montezinos in Amsterdam. Thanks to their help, I was able to spare myself quite a bit of traveling time.

I would also like to thank my editor, Julia Brauch, for her suggestions concerning the text, and the pleasant cooperation. Steve Dodson, my copy editor, showed me what English should look like, which I appreciate.

Finally, I want to thank my friend Dini Venema for her patience in listening constantly to my stories, for reading the manuscript several times, and for providing useful comments.

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I.

The Controversy: Germany or Khazaria

In Eastern and Western Europe, both Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews are found. The latter are the ones whose ancestors were expelled from the Iberian peninsula at the end of the fifteenth century. They hardly play any role in my research, because the number that went to Eastern Europe is very small.

Therefore, this book is about Ashkenazi Jews, and particularly those from Eastern Europe, who, before World War II, made up 90 percent or more of Ashkenazis. In this book, East European Jews are defined as those who, from long before 1500, lived in Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine, and European Russia and their descendants. In the year 1900 their number totaled over seven million, of whom a great many already lived outside Europe. Essentially, there are two contradictory hypotheses that try to explain how this large number arose.

The Germany Hypothesis

The first hypothesis, the prevailing one, which for the sake of convenience I will call the “Germany hypothesis,” states that the Jews originally came from the Land of Israel and initially went to Italy, France, and Germany. Afterwards, during the various pogroms that took place during the Middle Ages, mainly in Germany, they fled to Poland and Lithuania, and from there they spread over the rest of Eastern Europe. These Jews are supposed to have brought Yiddish, a language based on German, to Poland. As the number of Jews in Germany was relatively small in the Middle Ages, the supporters of this hypothesis assume that at the end of the Middle Ages, in 1500, the number of Jews in Poland and Lithuania must also have been small, between 10,000 and 55,000. An important implication of this assumption is that between 1500 and 1900, the Jewish population must have increased exceptionally fast in order to reach more than seven million in 1900. Supporters of this hypothesis are, for example, the historian B. Weinryb (*The Jews of Poland: A Social Economic History of the Jewish Community in Poland from 1100–1800*, 1972), the linguist M. Weinreich (*History of the Yiddish Language*, 1980), the geneticist M. F. Hammer

(*Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA* 97, 2000), and the demographer S. DellaPergola (*Papers in Jewish Demography* 1997, 2001).

Weinryb (1972, 24–31) mentions the following arguments in favor of this hypothesis. According to him it appears from historical facts and source material that Jewish settlements were probably established in Poland only toward the end of the twelfth or the beginning of the thirteenth century. In Silesia, at the time part of Poland, Jewish gravestones were found dating from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Inscriptions (except for one) seem to resemble the ones in Germany. There are remnants of a synagogue in Breslau (now Wrocław, Poland) from the beginning of 1200 that show the same building pattern as the synagogues in Regensburg, Worms, Erfurt, and Speyer. The synagogue in Kazimierz (a district of Krakow), dating from the fourteenth century, resembles the synagogues in Prague and Worms. Ritual traditions of the Polish Jews from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries resemble those of the French, German, and Bohemian Jews. Weinryb also draws attention to the Jews who, due to the persecutions in the fifteenth century, fled to Poland from Germany, Austria, Silesia, and Bohemia.

The Khazaria Hypothesis

I will call the second hypothesis the “Khazaria hypothesis.” It states that ancestors of the East European Jews did not originate in Germany but in Khazaria. Khazaria is named after the Khazars, the tribe that ruled the area. An unknown number of them converted to Judaism. During the ninth and tenth centuries, they had a mighty empire that was destroyed by Kievan Rus in the end. With the loss of the empire, the Jews from this area are supposed to have moved from there in the direction of Hungary, Poland, and Lithuania. There they finally grew into the populous East European Jewry. Yiddish is supposed to have developed by the first half of the twelfth century through contacts with German city dwellers in Poland, who spoke the form of German used by Eastern colonists. An important implication of this hypothesis is that before the year 1000 Jews were already living in Eastern Europe. Supporters of this hypothesis are the historian A.N. Polak (*Khazaria* 1943), the linguist H. Kutschera (*Die Chasaren* 1910), and the author A. Koestler (*The Thirteenth Tribe*).

Kutschera (1910, 197) states that there were already numerous Jewish settlements in Kievan Rus in the eleventh century. Moreover, the Russian historian Karamzin emphatically mentions that during the reign of Vladimir I (980–1015) large numbers of Jews left Khazaria for Kievan Rus.

“According to the most important researchers,” Jews were supposed to have migrated to Poland for the first time during the reign of Boleslaw I Chrobry (992–1025). This period coincides with the time when the empire of the Khazars was seriously weakened. In addition, he refers to the “authorities” Neumann and Karamzin, who are of the opinion that the Jews who resided in Poland and Russia during the Middle Ages were descendants of the Khazars (*ibid.*, 201–202).

Polak (1943, 255, 262) considers the simultaneous flourishing of Polish-Lithuanian Jewry and the large-scale emigration of the Khazar Jews to these countries, as well as the garb of the ultra-Orthodox Jews, the *shtraymel* (fur hat) and the kaftan (long coat), as evidence for the role the Khazar Jews played in the development of East European Jewry.

As to Yiddish, he asserts that part of the Khazar Jews already spoke a German dialect in their own region, the Gothic language that until the fifteenth century was spoken in the Crimea (*ibid.*, 256).

Matters in Dispute

Weinryb (1972, 21–22) has no confidence in any hypothesis that relates to an origin in southern Russia:

“Most of these theories, however, are no more than myths or speculation or wild guesses based on some vague or misunderstood references [...] The efforts by some historians and writers to find in certain Polish toponyms (place names) some indication of the former Khazar or Jewish-Khazar settlements were in vain. It has been proven that these names have nothing to do with Khazars or Khazar tribes. They all have other meanings in Polish.”

On the other hand, Kutschera (1910, 235) entertains great doubts about the Germany hypothesis. He does not understand how a small number of German Jews in Eastern Europe could have increased to a number ten times as large as that in Germany proper. Independent of the Khazar hypothesis, this demographic problem was also raised by the linguists Mieses (1924, 291) and King (1992, 431).

DellaPergola (2001) defends the very fast growth of East European Jewry by referring to certain statistical tables that make such a fast growth theoretically possible.

Summing up, there are four matters in dispute concerning the development of the large East European Jewish population in 1900, of which the first determines the remaining three:

- a. the origin within Europe,
- b. the direction of the migration,
- c. the numerical increase, and

- d. the development of Yiddish into the lingua franca of the East European Jews.

Method

For an unbiased researcher, it is difficult to decide which hypothesis is correct. None of those who agree with either of the two is able to provide unequivocal evidence. How then do we find out which is the right one? Are any of these hypotheses right?

The first two matters in dispute come up in chapters II, III, and IV. First, the history of the Khazars will be discussed (chapter II), not to underline the importance of the hypothesis but because the Khazars also come up during the discussion of other countries. Next, I will deal with the history of the Jews in the potential “donor” countries and regions, France, Germany, Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia, and Hungary (chapter III). The earliest development of Polish-Lithuanian Jewry (up to 1500) will be the next topic (chapter IV), which will also include migrations from southern Russia. In this publication, southern Russia is the area between the Caspian Sea and Moldavia, or parts of it. During the discussion of the period 1500 to 1900 (chapter V), I will discuss at length the third matter of dispute, the numerical increase of the East European Jews. The last matter of dispute, the development of Yiddish as the vernacular of the East European Jews, will have to be integrated into the solution of the controversy (chapter VI).

I must emphasize that the subjects being discussed will concentrate mostly on events that may be connected in some way to the above-mentioned matters of dispute. This means that some events that are important from a general historic point of view will not be discussed. At the end of each chapter, it will be decided to what extent a conclusion may be drawn as to one or more of the four above-mentioned points.

Two disciplines have not been mentioned as yet, because the results of studies in these fields were not brought up by the supporters of either hypothesis. They are anthropology and molecular genetics. The latter got into its stride only during the 1990s. The possible impact of the research in these two disciplines on the results presented in this study will be investigated (chapter VII).

The development of East European Jewry will then be described on the basis of the results found (chapter VIII).

Finally, in the epilogue, I look back on the investigation from a personal point of view, and I dedicate some space to *The Invention of the Jewish People* by Shlomo Sand (chapter IX).

II. The Khazars

Introduction

The story about Khazars who converted to Judaism constitutes a controversial piece of the history of European Jewry. The opinions about the involvement of the Khazar Jews in the development of East European Jewry vary from: “the Jews who during the Middle Ages migrated to Poland and Russia and who settled there are to be considered the descendants of the Khazars” (Kutschera 1910, 202; from German) to “The Khazar hypothesis has a certain dramatic background and was propounded as a result of large-scale falsifications in the nineteenth century” (Weinryb 1972, 21). The Frenchman Renan (1883) puts it more mildly. In his lecture about Judaism he says that the conversion of the Khazars was very important for the origin of the Jews who live along the Danube and in the south of Russia.

In this chapter we will ascertain whether it is possible to evaluate the role the Khazars may have played in the development of East European Jewry. Since the Khazars also come up occasionally during the discussion of the history of the Jews outside Eastern Europe, I will discuss their contribution to the development of East European Jewry first.

The Khazar Empire

The Khazars were nomadic tribes who lived between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, where they had a powerful empire between the seventh and the tenth century. The Khazar Empire will be denoted with the name Khazaria, because it appears as *Χαζαρία* in *De administrando imperio* by the Byzantine emperor and historian Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, who lived from 913 to 959, and in the English translation the name Khazaria is used (Jenkins 1967, 64). In Byzantine sources, the name Khazars appears for the first time in 626, when the latter concluded an alliance with the Byzantines against the Persians (Vasiliev 1936, 76).

The borders of the Khazar Empire (see Fig. 1, p. 6) are somewhat difficult to determine, as some places mentioned in the literature are unrecognizable, and the size of the empire often changed as a result of wars. Therefore, in Fig. 1 no borders are shown. In this period, the Magyars (the future

Hungarians) still lived along the Black Sea. In general, it can be said that the southern border consisted of the southern slopes of the Caucasus (Kutschera 1910, 82), while the northern border was roughly determined by a line through Voronezh (Russia) and Kharkiv (Ukraine) (ibid., 125). The eastern and western borders respectively consisted of the rivers Ural (ibid., 126) and Dnister (Moldova/Ukraine) (ibid., 82). The capital was probably located west of the Caspian Sea.



Figure 1. Khazaria (from *The Thirteenth Tribe: The Khazar Empire and its Heritage* by Arthur Koestler, originally published by Hutchinson & Co. in 1976)

It is not known where the Khazars originated. They were possibly a mixed people consisting of Finns and Tatars who had come down from the Ural to the Caucasus and subjugated the Turkish tribes who lived there. Although the Khazars may have been of Finnish descent, for hundreds of years they had maintained close relations with their Turkish-Tatar subjects. It is from them that they borrowed their most important form of government and even the title of their dignitaries, Kagan (Koestler 1976, 24). The Khazars engaged in farming, winegrowing, fishing, and trade (Platonov 1964, 11). During the winter they lived in their cities; in spring they moved to the steppe, to their pastures, gardens, and fields.

It seems that every district of Khazaria had its own king, who for his part was subject to the highest monarch, the Kagan. Ibn Haukal (quoted by Kutschera 1910, 122) writes about the city of Semender, which belonged to the Khazar Empire and was located between Itil and Derbend: "Their king was a Jew and related to the Khazars." Other people related to the Khazars,

the Magyars and the Bulgars, had a similar form of government. As far as the Magyars are concerned, the Byzantine emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus (Jenkins 1967 179) writes: "These eight clans of the Turks do not obey their own particular princes, but have a joint agreement to fight together [...] wheresoever war breaks out. They have for their first chief the prince who comes by succession of Arpad's family." (Byzantine historians called the Magyars "Turks.")

Jewish Sources

Before continuing the history of the Khazars, it is important to indicate which sources from that time, or a little later, provide information about them. These sources are:

1. The book by Yehuda Halevi (1085–1141), *Sefer ha-Kuzari* (Book of the Khazar). This book is a philosophical discussion of the conversion of Bulan, the Khazar king who converted to Judaism. The book does not give any information about the Khazars as a tribe.
2. The letter by Joseph, king of the Khazars, to Hasdai ibn Shaprut, the Jewish physician of the Caliph of Cordoba (Spain). This letter, which is written in Hebrew, is a reply to a letter by ibn Shaprut to King Joseph, written between 954 and 961. There are two versions of the answer by King Joseph, the "Short Version" and the "Long Version."

The first to mention the Khazar correspondence was Rabbi (R.) Yehuda ben Barzilay from Barcelona in a *responsum* (Assaf, 1924). A *responsum* is an answer given by a rabbi of outstanding Talmudic knowledge to a question put to him by a local Jewish court that felt itself incompetent to solve the question. This *responsum* will be pursued in more detail on p. 13.

Polak (1943, 17–23) also treats the Khazar correspondence, but he indicates that its dependability is a point of discussion. According to him, the letters were written at the end of the eleventh century by one person in order to make the Jews acquainted with the Khazars.

Dunlop (1954, 125–170) deals extensively with the dependability of all these documents. About the exchange of letters between ibn Shaprut and King Joseph, he writes: "That the Khazar Correspondence is a forgery of the 16th century can scarcely be taken seriously in view of what has been said" (ibid., 131–132). As far as the letter by ibn Shaprut is concerned, Dunlop concludes: "Against the authenticity of the Letter of Hasday criticism has been unable to produce convincing proofs, so that provisionally it is to be accepted" (ibid., 143–144). He

also has well-founded arguments against Polak's opinion that the correspondence is not a forgery but a work dating from the eleventh century. From a linguistic comparison of the Short Version and the Long Version, it becomes quite clear that different authors wrote the two versions (*ibid.*, 151–153). Dunlop concludes that there are no decisive arguments against the factual content of the Long Version.

As far as the subject of authenticity is concerned, Toynbee (1973, 435) limits himself to a note in which he mentions that there is some doubt about the authenticity of the Hebrew documents. Then he refers to Dunlop.

Weinryb (1972, 21) has the following remark about the correspondence: "a well-founded surmise is that they are apocryphal or purely literary productions of the tenth century or later."

3. A damaged letter in Hebrew, called the Cambridge Document or the *Geniza* letter, by an unknown subject of King Joseph to the emissary of ibn Shaprut in Constantinople, was described for the first time by S. Schechter (1912–1913, 204–210). It will be referred to hereinafter as "the letter to the emissary of ibn Shaprut in Constantinople." For those readers who are not acquainted with the Hebrew word *geniza*, it refers to a storage room in which Jewish documents are deposited that may not be destroyed because they contain the name of God. Such a *geniza* is often a hidden room. The *geniza* we are dealing with here is the one belonging to the old synagogue of Fustat-Misr, just south of Cairo, and it is known as "the *Geniza* of Cairo." The letter to the emissary of ibn Shaprut in Constantinople was found in this *geniza*, and in 1896, together with a large part of the remaining Jewish documents, it was transferred by Schechter to the University Library of Cambridge. The letter was received by many with considerable skepticism, as it contains information that does not agree with the answer of King Joseph to Hasday ibn Shaprut. Zuckerman (1995) studied the letter to the emissary of ibn Shaprut in Constantinople again and managed to elucidate the differences between it and the answer of King Joseph (see pp. 12–14).
4. The Kievan Letter, discovered in 1962 in Cambridge by Norman Golb (Golb and Pritsak 1982, 3–59). This letter, also in Hebrew, was found in the *Geniza* of Cairo as well. The document doesn't have a date, but it is assumed that it dates from the tenth century. The Kievan Letter was signed by eleven Khazar Jews and contains a request for the release of a certain Jacob ben Hanuka. The brother of this Jacob had borrowed money, after which he was murdered and his money was stolen. Since Jacob stood surety for the loan, the creditors had him imprisoned. After having been in jail for a year, the Kievan Jews redeemed

him from jail by paying 60 gold coins and signed a pledge against the future payment of another 40 coins. The purpose of the letter was to collect these 40 gold coins, which had to be paid by other Jewish communities (ibid., 6–8).

No problems seem to appear concerning the authenticity of the Kievan Letter. However, there are problems concerning the interpretation of the background of the signatories. If the signatories were Khazars, which is assumed by Golb and Prisak (ibid., 32), the signatures cause controversy. First of all, there are two persons who sign with the descriptive title *kohen* (priest) and one with the descriptive title *levi*. Secondly, a number of onomatologists have doubts about the Khazar origin that is deduced from the first names of some of the signatories.

Golb and Pritsak explain the use of the word *kohen* by assuming that the persons in question were shaman priests in Khazaria and that after converting to Judaism, they also called themselves priests, *kohen* (ibid., 27–28). Others disagree with this explanation because, according to rabbinic laws, a non-Jew could not become a priest or Levite. The persons in question would then be descendants of “original” priests and Levites who had married Turkish women. According to rabbinic law, priests are not allowed to marry converted women. In view of the low level of knowledge of Jewish laws among the Khazar Jews, they did not maintain this ban. As to the Levites, it will be shown that they could have descended from non-Jews (see pp. 151–153). It is also not clear whether Jews bearing a name like Kagan are *kohanim*. This name may indeed be Russian for *kohen*, but it may also be viewed as a derivative of Kagan, the title of the Khazar ruler.

Torpusman (Vikhnovich 1991) disagrees with the Khazar interpretation of three of the four first names and indicates that Gostata, Kufin, and Sawarta are actually East Slavic names. As far as Gostata is concerned, Beider (2001, 35) agrees with Torpusman. However, Torpusman is not necessarily right, since in the ninth century, the Slavic language was used along the northern coast of the Black Sea as a lingua franca (Vernadsky 1940–1941).

Where Did the Jewish Religion Come From?

The Jewish religion might have come to the Khazars from two sides, from the Crimea and from the Caucasus. Marquart (1903, 301; from German) writes the following about the Crimea:

“The existence of Jewish communities surrounded by numerous groups of converts has been confirmed from the first to the third century C.E., via inscriptions, for the

cities Pantikapaion (Kerch), Gorgippia (now Anapa at the northwestern end of the Caucasus), and Tanais, which belonged to the empire of the Bosphorus [...] In the eighth century Phanagoria or *Ταματαρχα* (today's Taman) appears as a main seat of the Jews [...] In the ninth century Phanagoria is simply mentioned as 'Samkarts of the Jews.'"

As a result of persecutions, Jews repeatedly moved to different countries, especially from Islamic Central Asia, from Eastern Iran, and from Byzantium, to the territory of the Khazars. Similarly, many Jews moved to Khazaria because of persecutions in Byzantium in 723 under Leo the Isaurian (*Encyclopaedia Judaica* 1930, v. 5, 341).

According to the Georgian chronicle (*Jewish Encyclopedia* 1902, v. 10, 518; Kutschera 1910, 149), some Jewish families had already moved to Iberia (Georgia), to Mtskeh (Mtsketa?), following the destruction of the Judean Kingdom in 587 B.C.E. by Nebuchadnezzar II, and settled there. Later on, during the time of the Khazars, there were already important Jewish settlements in Georgia and Armenia. The letter to the emissary of ibn Shaprut in Constantinople starts with the flight of Jews, the spiritual ancestors of the Jewish Khazars, out of or through Armenia to Khazaria (Golb and Pritsak 1982, 102). The reason for fleeing was the persecutions by idolaters. Then the refugees married the inhabitants of the country. According to this letter, Judaism would have come to the Khazars through the Caucasus. This is not so strange when we realize that their capital was much closer to the Caucasus than to the Crimea.

According to the legends of the Mountain Jews from the Caucasus, their ancestors, who were Jewish exiles, first intermarried with the Tats in Persia and then with the Khazars who lived on the west bank of the Caspian Sea (Weissenberg 1908).

The Conversion of the Khazars

The Judaism of the Khazars starts with the conversion of King Bulan. There is disagreement as to the year his conversion took place. According to Golden (1983), there are no sources from that time that report the conversion. This may not be so remarkable in view of what Golden writes about the event: "the *Tängri-Xan* cult [...] a part of the Türk legacy among the Khazars [...] was not far removed from monotheism. The movement, then, to one of the monotheistic faiths of the Mediterranean world, the primary point of orientation of the Khazar state, was hardly a quantum jump."

The years to be considered are 620, 740, 786 to 809, and ca. 860. Since this last date is the most plausible one, I will only discuss how this date was arrived at.

Marquart, Vernadsky, and Toynbee

Marquart (1903, 11–12) is the first to put the conversion at the beginning of the second half of the ninth century. He is questioning the authenticity of the answer by King Joseph, and he suspects that the answer is of a later date than the work of Yehuda Halevi from 1140. According to the letter by the king, the conversion was preceded by a large raid, and in 730 the Khazars made a successful raid towards Azerbaijan. Possibly the author of the answer of King Joseph to ibn Shaprut was referring to this. It is plausible that Yehuda Halevi was also thinking about this raid when he wrote about the “400 years before his time.” Therefore, the year 740 should not be taken literally. In 737 the Kagan was forced to accept Islam in order to avoid a war. According to the answer by King Joseph, the conversion would thus have taken place around the same time that, according to Arabic sources, the Khazars were forced to convert to Islam. The author of the letter obviously must have alluded to the event in 730 and not the one in 737 (*ibid.*, 13). However, there is something else that still has to be explained: how is the story about the conversion in the answer of King Joseph to be viewed in the light of the story about the conversion by the Slavic missionary Constantine (Cyrillos) as recounted in the Old Slavic *Life of Constantine*? It is known that Constantine himself recorded the story, but it was later published again, anonymously. From the phrasing of the *Life of Constantine* it can be understood that in those days the Khazars were still pagans. The one god they worshipped at that time was the Tängri-Xan, who was the main God of the Huns and the Turks. The journey of the missionary Constantine took place between 851 and 863, which means that the conversion of the Khazars must have taken place after his journey. Marquart mentions some additional proof for his opinion that the conversion must have taken place at about the middle of the ninth century. He refers to the commentary on Matthew by Christian Druthmar, also written around the middle of the ninth century, in which, among other things, there is a report that the Khazars were circumcised and kept the Jewish laws and also that the Bulgars were converting daily to Christianity. Since the baptism of the Bulgarian Khan Boris probably took place in the year 864, Marquart concludes that the circumcision of the Khazars must have taken place between the journey of Constantine and 864.

In his short article “The date of the conversion of the Khazars to Judaism” (Vernadsky 1940–1941), Vernadsky shows that the earliest date, 620, cannot be taken seriously. Its source is unreliable, because neither the Short nor the Long Version is a copy of the original letter. The way the date was arrived at is artificial. Also, from a historic point of view, the date is highly unlikely because the Khazar Kaganate had not yet freed itself from the empire of the Western Turks. Vernadsky also refers to a report by Bishop Israel of Caucasian Albania, who writes that around 680, the Khazars were still pagans. The second date (740) is also historically untenable because, as mentioned earlier, in 737 the Kagan accepted Islam and shortly thereafter again reverted to paganism. Vernadsky considers it almost impossible that between these two dates he would have converted to Judaism. In addition, he refers to the *Life of St. Abo*, which says that around 782 the Kagan was still pagan. After analyzing Arabic and Byzantine sources, he comes to the plausible conclusion that the conversion must have taken place between 862 and 866.

Toynbee (1973, 435) is of the opinion that the conversion of the Khazars was a long process. He does not think that the conversion could have started before 732, as this is the date of the marriage—and the simultaneous conversion to Christianity—of the Khazar princess Chichek (‘Flower’) to Constantine V, the son of the Byzantine emperor Leo III. His argument is that a Jewish princess could not have married a Christian Byzantine. He agrees with Marquart and Vernadsky that the conversion could only have been completed after the visit by the missionary Constantine to the court of the Kagan around 860/862.

Zuckerman

A recent study (Zuckerman 1995) shows that indeed the period between 862 and 866 probably is the correct one. Zuckerman came to this conclusion by comparing the contents of the letter to the emissary of ibn Shaprut in Constantinople to the remaining Khazar correspondence. His analysis is interesting enough to reproduce here in some detail.

The letter to the emissary was written round 949 and had something to do with his visit to the Byzantine capital. Zuckerman starts out with the remark that opinions about the letter vary. Some researchers deny that the author, as he indicates, was present at the events he describes; others (for example Schechter) conclude that if the author was present, he got the dates and persons mixed up; and, finally, there are those who consider the letter to be fake. Zuckerman is, for a number of reasons, of the opinion that the letter is authentic.

The discussion about the three monotheistic faiths is central to the historic review of the letter. In addition to the Jewish data about the conversion, Zuckerman also holds the Byzantine view on the conversion, thanks to the personal report by Constantine, the already mentioned *Life of Constantine*. The date of the report is 30 January 861. According to Zuckerman, the discussion at the court of the Kagan must have taken place in the summer of the same year. This date is not new, and Zuckerman refers to the articles by Marquart and Vernadsky mentioned above. However, the ideas of the latter were generally rejected, because the year 740 seemed more in accordance with other data. It was also not contrary to the remark by al-Mas'udi, which was considered reliable, that the king had already converted to Judaism during the reign of Caliph Harun al-Rashid (786–809).

The story about the conversion in the letter to the emissary of ibn Shaprut in Constantinople appears to differ from that in the answer of King Joseph. In the answer by King Joseph it says that the Khazars adhered strictly to the Jewish laws, while further on it says that this was only the case during the reign of King Ovadia. This is very strange, and it looks as if we are dealing here with more than one author. Zuckerman is not the only one who has problems with this part of the story. Golden (1983) also states that one has to be careful with this Ovadia. Something is indeed wrong with the “follow-up” conversion during the reign of Ovadia. This appears from a *responsum* (see p. 7) by R. Yehuda ben Barzilai of Barcelona, written about 1100, that quotes extensively the answer of King Joseph to ibn Shaprut. From the *responsum* it becomes evident that the rabbi had a text that clearly differed from the text we know. The problem to be dealt with had to do with the custom of the Khazars of sacrificing animals (Assaf 1924), something that was forbidden by the rabbis following the destruction of the Second Temple (70 C.E.). The question was whether the Khazars could thus be considered Jews. In order to answer the question positively, the rabbi extensively refers to the answer of King Joseph to ibn Shaprut. It appears that both versions of the answer by King Joseph were altered in such a way that nothing about animal sacrifices could be found anymore. Furthermore, the orthodoxy of the Khazars and the length of time that they had been Jews were exaggerated. The rabbi apparently had no knowledge of the religious reforms of King Ovadia.

The authors of the Short and the Long Version lengthened the period that the Khazars were Jews by inserting kings into the list of ancestors of King Joseph. In the rabbi's version, there are seven kings; in the Short and Long Versions there are respectively 12 and 13. A consequence is that according to the original answer by King Joseph and the letter to the emissary of ibn Shaprut in Constantinople, the conversion was a one-time act.