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THE KHAZAR KINGDOM'S CONVERSION TO JUDAISM*

OMELJAN PRITSAK

I

The Khazar Kingdom was ruled by the A-shih-na dynasty of Western Turks (Türküts), who, after losing both Turkestans to the Chinese, took over the territory of the former Ak-Katzirs (Ἀκάτζιροι > Khazars) in southeastern Europe.¹ T'ong She-hu (*yabyu*), ruler from 618 to 630, acquired the high title of *šad* in 627;² his son established the new realm in the 630s and 640s. Gradually, the Western Turkic newcomers replaced the Bulgars-Onoghurs (*Bulyar*, *Onoyur*) in Eastern Europe.

Other Western Turkic charismatic tribes who joined in the new venture were the *Barč* (< *Warāč* ~ *Warāz*), the *Kābar*, and the *Aba*. The most important role was played by the *Barč* (> *Balč-ān* > *Bolč-ān* >> *Bolān*),³ which was the leading "brother-in-law tribe." Its members intermarried with the ruling dynasty, and its chief held the high title of *beg* in Turkic, *ixšēd* in Iranian. During the first period of Turkic-Khazarian history, which was marked by an abortive struggle with the Arabs for hegemony in the Caucasus, the chief was usually a military commander who gradually attained the status of a majordomo.

The Turkic-Khazar Pax, which was closely connected with the Western

* This paper is based on a lecture delivered at the Tōru Haneda Memorial Hall of the University of Kyoto on 16 September 1978, and at the Toyo Bunko, cosponsored by the Tōhō Gakkai, Tokyo, on 22 September 1978.

¹ I deal with the *Ak-Katzir*/*Khazar* problem in volumes 4 to 6 of my study *The Origin of Rus*, in preparation.

² T'ong She-hu, who was visited by the famous Buddhist pilgrim Hsuan-tsang in 630 (see Hui-li, *The Life of Hsuan-tsang*, trans. by Li Yung-hsi [Peking, 1959], p. 43), concluded an alliance with the Byzantine emperor Heraclius (610–41) against the Sassanid emperor Chosraw II Parvēz (591–628) in 627. The Byzantine sources call him Ζιέβηλ (see Edouard Chavannes, *Documents sur les Tou-Kiue Occidentaux* [St. Petersburg, 1900], pp. 228, 252–53). Concerning Ζιέβηλ also see Gyula Moravcsik, *Byzantino-turcica*, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (Berlin, 1958), pp. 130–31.

³ The *Warāč*/*Barč* and others are discussed in volumes 4 to 6 of *The Origin of Rus*.

Turkic ruling clan, had three major provinces. The first province, *Khwalis* (< *Khwali-Ās*),⁴ on the Lower Volga, was the realm of the trading Eastern Iranians; its twin city *Āmol/Ātil*, also called *Sāriyčīn/Khamlikh* (PVL: *Xvalisy*),⁵ was ruled by a governor with the title of *tarkhan* (*Ās tarkhan*).⁶ After the catastrophe of A.H. 104/A.D. 722–723,⁷ the capital of the Turkic Khazars was transferred to the twin-city.⁸ The western city, *Āmol* or *Sāriyčīn*, became the center of rites and government, while the eastern city, *Ātil* or *Khamlikh*, became the commercial district.

The second province, *Semender/Sabīr*,⁹ lay in the Northern Caucasus. Its ruler, who belonged to the Barč clan, resided in the town of Semender on the Terek River. Until 722–723, Semender had been the capital of the Turkic-Khazar realm.

Šārkel, the third province, was situated near the lower Don, in the area where the Volga makes a bend. The province was a shipping crossroads, for goods were portaged across the narrow neck of land that separates the two great rivers there. In about 834 the Byzantine engineer Petronas, surnamed Camaterus, built a stone city, also named *Šārkel*, in the province at the request of the Khazar government.¹⁰ The city was the seat of the Khazars' main customs office, headed by an official whom the Arabs called "lord of the Khazars" (*ṣāhib al-Khazar*).¹¹

⁴ For the etymology, see Norman Golb and Omeljan Pritsak, *Khazarian Hebrew Documents of the Tenth Century* (Cornell University Press, in press).

⁵ The names of the twin-city are discussed in Golb and Pritsak, *Khazarian Hebrew Documents*.

⁶ *Āstarkhān* (*A.s.t.r.khān al-Khwārizmī*) appears in the Annals of at-Ṭabari (*Ta'rikh*, ed. by M. J. de Goeje, ser. 3 [Leiden, 1879–80], p. 328) as the Turkic Khazar commander of a major attack against Transcaucasia in 762–764. The Armenian historian Levond (8th c.) called him *Raž-r'arkhan* in his "History of Armenia" (continuation of Sebēos to A.D. 788), ed. by K. Ezeanc' (St. Petersburg, 1900), p. 132; cf. al-Ya'qūbī, *Historiae*, ed. by M. J. de Goeje, vol. 2 (Leiden, 1883), p. 446: *Rā's Tarkhān*, where *Raž/Rā's* goes back to **avrs-* ~ **arsya-* (cf. E. G. Pulleyblank, *Asia Major*, vol. 9 [London, 1954], p. 220). Cf. also Douglas M. Dunlop, *The History of the Jewish Khazars* (Princeton, 1954), p. 180, fn. 3; V. Minorsky in *Oriens* (Leiden), 11 (1958): 127, 136; and Károly Czeglédy, "Khazars Raid in Transcaucasia in 762–764 A.D.," *Acta Orientalia Hungaricae* (Budapest), 11 (1960): 83–86.

⁷ Concerning these events see Dunlop, *History of the Jewish Khazars*, pp. 62–66.

⁸ In A.H. 119/A.D. 737 the capital was already the city of *al-Baiḍā'* (= *Sāriyčīn*); see Ibn al-Athīr, *Chronicon*, ed. by Carolus Johannes Tornberg, vol. 4 (Leiden, 1870), p. 234.

⁹ The *Semender/Sabīr* tribes are discussed in volumes 4 to 6 of *The Origin of Rus'*. There the city of Semender is identified with modern Kizljär on the Terek River (Northern Caucasias).

¹⁰ Constantinus Porphyrogenitus, *De administrando imperio*, ed. by Gyula Moravcsik (Budapest, 1949), p. 42 (text) = p. 43 (Eng. trans., by R. J. H. Jenkins); cf. also p. 64 (text) = p. 65 (Eng. trans.).

¹¹ See the emendations to Ibn Khurdāqbeh, *Kitāb al-masālik wa'l-mamālik*, ed. by

The pax also included tributary hereditary realms governed by kings with the Turkic title *el-tebir*. There seem to have been seven such territories:

(1) *Khotzir*¹² (< *Akkatzir*) — realm of the Khazars proper, who, once their leading role in Eastern Europe ended, found refuge on the Crimean Peninsula, as had the Goths before them. Their ruler was called *khat'ir-litber* by an Armenian source (Levond) in connection with events of 764.¹³ Its capital was Phullai,¹⁴ site of present-day Planerskoe, located on the coast between Sugdaea and Theodosia.¹⁵

(2) *Hun*¹⁶ — realm of the former masters of the steppe, who had settled in the basin of the Sulak River, to the north of Derbend. Its capital was called *Varač'an* in the Armenian sources and *Balanğar* in the Islamic.¹⁷

(3) *Onoγur*¹⁸ — realm along the banks of the Lower Kuma River. Archeologists have identified its capital with the site of Madžary.¹⁹

(4) "*Turkoi*" — Byzantine designation for the people who would become Hungarians²⁰; in the ninth century they were settling in the basin of the Sivers'kyj Donec' (*Lebedia*).²¹

M. J. Goeje, *Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum* (hereafter BGA), vol. 6 (Leiden, 1889), p. 154, that I give in "An Arabic Text on the Trade Route of the Corporation of ar-Rūs," *Folia Orientalia* (Cracow), 12 (1970): 254–57.

¹² The name ὁ Χοτζήρων/ὁ Χοτζίρων appears in the project of the Gothic archbishopric from the last quarter of the eighth century; see C. de Boor, "Nachträge zu den Notitiae episcopatum," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 12 (1891): 531, 533–34. On the connection between Χοτζίρ- and Ἀκάτζίρ, see K. Czeglédy, "Bemerkungen zur Geschichte der Chazaren," *Acta Orientalia Hungaricae* 13 (1961): 244. More data about Χοτζίρ- and Khazar are given in volumes 4 to 6 of *The Origin of Rus'*.

¹³ < *khat'ir* – *ilt(e)ber*, Levond, ed. by K. Ezeanc', p. 132. Cf. K. Czeglédy in *Acta Orientalia Hungaricae* 11 (1960): 84–85.

¹⁴ The seat of the bishopric ὁ Χοτζίρων was also in Phullai; see A. A. Vasilev, *The Goths in the Crimea* (Cambridge, Mass., 1936), pp. 97–98.

¹⁵ V. V. Kropotkin, "Iz istorii srednevekovogo Kryma," *Sovetskaja arxeologija* 28 (1958): 212–18. Cf. Jonathan Shepard in *Byzantine Studies* (University of Pittsburgh), 1, no. 1 (1974): 24–25.

¹⁶ This was also the name of the bishopric: ὁ Οὐννων. See de Boor, "Nachträge zu den Notitiae episcopatum," p. 531.

¹⁷ Joseph Markwart was first to recognize that the *Balanğar* of the Arabic sources corresponded to the *Varač'an* of the Armenian sources, in his *Osteuropäische und ostasiatische Streifzüge* (Leipzig, 1903), p. 16. The subject is discussed in volumes 4 to 6 of *The Origin of Rus'*; the identification of the city of Varač'an with Tarqu (Tarkhu), near Petrovsk (now Maxač-kala), is also given there.

¹⁸ This was also the name of the bishopric ὁ Ὀβογούρων; see de Boor, "Nachträge zu den Notitiae episcopatum," p. 531.

¹⁹ See N. A. Karaulov in *Sbornik materialov dlja opisanija mestnostej i plemen Kavkaza*, vol. 38 (Tiflis, 1908), pp. 20–21.

²⁰ All data from the Byzantine sources are collected in Moravcsik, *Byzantinoturcica* 2: 321–22. Cf. also O. Pritsak, "Yowár und Káβap Kāwar," *Ural-Altäische Jahrbücher* 36 (1965): 383.

²¹ The explanation for this localization of Lebedia is given in Omeljan Pritsak,

(5) *Volga-Bulgar* — the realm's capital, *Bulḡār* (*Bul̄yar*), was located on the Volga.²²

(6) *Volga-Sovār* — the realm's capital, *Sovār*, was also on the Volga.²³

(7) *Furtas* (< **furt-ās* or 'River-As')²⁴ — realm along the middle Volga whose inhabitants the Islamic sources call *Burṭās*.²⁵

As in all steppe empires, commerce was the economic base of the Khazar realm. Therefore the Khazars maintained good relations with economic centers, and tried to control neighboring city-states whenever possible, by either peaceable or military means. The sources mention three types of Khazar rule over the city-states. The first type was through an elected primate, referred to as "father of the city,"²⁶ in Khazarian *babaḡuq*.²⁷ Such rule existed in two important Crimean cities: *Cherson/Korsun'* (ca. 705–710 to 840)²⁸ and *Phanagoria*.²⁹ The second type of administration was through an appointed primate, whom the Khazars called *baliyči*, or "fishermen."³⁰ Under such rule were *Bosporus*, on the

"From the Sábirs to the Hungarians," in *Hungaro-Turcica: Studies in Honour of Julius Németh* (Budapest, 1976), pp. 17–30.

²² The most detailed account on the Islam of the Volga-Bulgars is found in the *Risāle* of Ibn Faḍlān, which relates his journey of A.D. 922: A. Zeki Validi Togan, *Ibn Faḍlān's Reisebericht* (Leipzig, 1939); A. P. Kovalevskii (Kovalivs'kyj), *Kniga Aḫmeda Ibn Faḍlana o ego putešestvii na Volgu v 921–922 gg.* (Xarkiv, 1956). Cf. also V. Minorsky, *Ḥudūd al-'Ālam* (London, 1937), pp. 460–61; Minorsky, *Marvazī on China, the Turks and India* (London, 1945), pp. 109–122.

²³ On the Sovārs see Zeki Validi Togan, *Ibn Faḍlān's Reisebericht*, pp. 203–210.

²⁴ More data on this etymology are given in volumes 4 to 6 of *The Origin of Rus'*.

²⁵ Tadeusz Lewicki, "Ze studiów nad źródłami arabskimi. Część III. I. Siedziby i pochodzenie Burtasów," *Slavia Antiqua* (Poznań), 12 (1965): 1–14.

²⁶ The title was apparently of colonial Crimean Greek origin; see Constantinus Porphyrogenitus, *De administrando imperio*, ed. by Gy. Moravcsik, p. 184 (Eng. trans., p. 185): Μέχρι γάρ Θεοφίλου τοῦ βασιλέως οὐκ ἦν στρατηγὸς ἀπο τῶν ἐντεῦθεν ἀποστελλόμενος, ἀλλ' ἦν ὁ τὰ πάντα διοικῶν ὁ λεγόμενος πρωτεύων μετὰ καὶ τῶν ἐπονομαζομένων πατέρων τῆς πόλεως, i.e., "For up till the time of Theophilus, the emperor [829–42], there was no military governor sent from here to the city of Cherson (Korsun'), but all administration was in the hands of the so-called primate, with those who were called the fathers of the city."

²⁷ See fn. 28. V. Minorsky, who was not aware of the Byzantine testimony given in fn. 26, mistakenly took this title to be "restored as **Babajiq* (better **Babajuq*) 'Little Father,' quite a plausible name in a Uralo-Altaic milieu," in *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* (hereafter *WZKM*), 56 (1960): 131.

²⁸ In 705 Cherson was ruled by the emperor's plenipotentiary, who had the title *tudun* (see fn. 34), and by the primate of Cherson (πρωτοπολίτης), named Zoilus (Ζωίλος); Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. by C. de Boor (Leipzig, 1883), p. 378 (subsequent references are to this edition). See also fn. 26.

²⁹ The title has been reconstructed on the basis of an information in Theophanes' *Chronographia*, which mentions, for ca. 703, a Khazarian official of Phanagoria called Παπατζύς (p. 373, l. 8). Cf. fn. 31.

³⁰ V. Minorsky, "Balgitzī – 'Lord of the Fishes,'" *WZKM*, 56: 130–37. The title is of Alanian origin: Ossetian *Kāfti-Sār Khuyān-don-āldar* 'Lord of the Fishes, Prince of the Strait' (Minorsky, *WZKM*, 56: 135).

Kerch Strait,³¹ and the city on the Taman Peninsula called *Tamatarcha* in the Byzantine sources, *Jewish Samkarč* (*S.m.k.r.š al-Yahūd*)³² in the Islamic sources, and *T'mutorokan* in the Rus' Primary Chronicle.³³ The third type of administration was by a Khazar governor called *tudun*.³⁴ During the Khazars' rule over the Crimean Gothic realm (especially A.D. 786 to ca. 810), the Gothic capital of *Doros* was so governed.³⁵

In addition to the provinces and tributary realms, the Khazar pax included several tributary peoples. According to King Joseph's reply (the long version), they were three Slavic groups — the *Ventič* (*W.n.n.t.y.t.*), the *Sever* (*S.w.w.r.*), said by the Primary Chronicle to be descendants of the Poljane and Derevljane, and the *Slovene* (*Š.l.w.y.w.n.*) — and three Fennic groups — the *Ār*, the *Ves'* (> *Īsū*), and the *Čeremis*.³⁶

The Khazars' most important trade routes passed through the basins of the Don and Volga, along the shores of the Azov Sea, and across the territories between the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea, and the Aral Lake. Sometime after the fall of the Avars, in the mid-ninth century, when Regensburg (Ratisbona) became the capital of the eastern Carolingian state, a transcontinental trade route developed from Regensburg to Itil, with transit centers at newly founded Vienna and Kiev.³⁷

The Khazar government maintained a standing army of 12,000 men. The recruits were Eastern Iranians of the Muslim religion (mainly Khwārizmians) called *Ārsiya*. Their commander held the rank of minister (*vezier*) in the Khazar government.³⁸

³¹ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, p. 373, l. 8–9: ἐντειλάμενος Παπατζύν, τὸν ἐκ προσώπου αὐτοῦ ἐκεῖσε ὄντα, καὶ Βαλγίτζιν, τὸν ἄρχοντα Βοσπόρου, ἵνα, ὅταν δηλωθῇ αὐτοῖς, ἀνέλωσιν Ἰουστινιανόν "He [i.e., the Khazar emperor] commanded Papatzys, who was his representative there [i.e., in Phanagoria], and Balgitzis, the governor of Bosphorus, to kill Justinian [II, 685–95, 705–711], when a message would come to them."

³² P. Kokovcov, A. Zajaczkowski, and V. Minorsky correctly identified the בלשצי BWLŠSY of the MS "Schechter" (fol. 2a, ll. 20–21) with the title *baliyči* (Pavel K. Kokovcov, *Evrejsko-xazarskaja perepiska v X veke* (Leningrad, 1932), pp. 118–19, fn. 6; A. Zajaczkowski, *Ze studiów nad zagadnieniem chazarskim* (Cracow, 1947), p. 36; Minorsky in *WZKM*, 56: 131–32.

³³ About Tmutorokan, see M. I. Artamonov, *Istorija xazar* (Leningrad, 1962), pp. 439–45.

³⁴ The (Khazaro-) Bulgarian form of that title was *trun* (< *tūdun*); cf. A. A. Šaxmatov, "Zametka ob jazyke volžskix bolgar," *Sbornik Muzeja antropologii i etnografii* (Petrograd), 5 (1918): 398–400. Cf. B. F. Manz in this issue, p. 288.

³⁵ See Vasiliev, *Goths in the Crimea*, p. 106. Cf. also fn. 28.

³⁶ "אלה שמותם בורטס בולגר סואר אריסר צרמיס ונחית סוור צלויך" [King Joseph's reply (the long version)], ed. P. K. Kokovcov, p. 31, l. 11–12.

³⁷ Fritz Rörig, *Die Europäische Stadt und die Kultur des Bürgertums im Mittelalter* (Göttingen, 1964), p. 17.

³⁸ See Golb and Pritsak, *Khazarian Hebrew Documents*.

The religious tolerance typical of all nomadic empires is known to have existed in the Khazar state. During the first half of the tenth century, the Muslim traveler and prolific writer al-Mas'ūdī confirmed its practice as follows:

The predominating element in this country [Khazaria] are the Muslims, because they form the royal army. They are known in this country as Ārsiyah and are immigrants from the neighborhood of Khwārizm. . . . They also have Muslim judges (*quḍāt*). The custom in the Khazar capital is to have seven judges. Of these, two are for the Muslims, two for the Khazars judging according to the Torah, two for those among them who are Christians judging according to the Gospel, and one for the Ṣaqāliba, Rūs and other pagans judging according to pagan law, i.e., on theoretical principles: when a serious case is brought up, of which they have no knowledge, they come before the Muslim judges and plead there, obeying what the law of Islam lays down. . . .

. . . If the Muslims and Christians there are agreed, the King cannot cope with them. . . .³⁹

In 737 the emperor (*qayan*) converted to Islam,⁴⁰ which had already been accepted in several quarters of the Khazar pax (for instance, among the Volga Bulgars) sometime at the beginning of the tenth century.⁴¹ An heir-apparent to the Khazar throne who professed the Islamic religion is mentioned as late as the middle of the tenth century.⁴² In 787, the Seventh Ecumenical Council in Nicaea (Niceanum II) proposed the creation of a Gothic metropolitanate as an archdiocese which would embrace the seven bishoprics of the Khazar state.⁴³ The document referring to this proposal, the so-called De Boor's "Notitia episcopatum," is valuable in that it lists the seven component parts of Khazaria.⁴⁴

II.

1.

From the time their state took form, the Khazars played a crucial role in the Eurasian political community. As the Turks did before them, the

³⁹ *Les Prairies d'or*, ed. Ch. Pellat, vol. I (Beirut, 1966), p. 213, l. 8, and p. 214, l. 13; Eng. trans. in Dunlop, *History of the Jewish Khazars*, pp. 206–207.

⁴⁰ The circumstances are discussed in Dunlop, *History of the Jewish Khazars*, pp. 83–84.

⁴¹ See fn. 22.

⁴² Al-Iṣṭakhri, *Via regnorum*, ed. by M. J. de Goeje, BGA, vol. I (Leiden, 1870), p. 224; Eng. trans. in Dunlop, *History of the Jewish Khazars*, pp. 97–98.

⁴³ Vasiliev, *Goths in the Crimea*, p. 97.

⁴⁴ See de Boor, "Nachträge zu den Notitiae episcopatum," pp. 531, 533–34. Cf. Vasiliev, *Goths in the Crimea*, pp. 97–101.

Khazars usually allied with the Byzantine emperor against the Arabs, although they often coveted the Byzantine "climes" on the Crimea. The first hundred years of their history was essentially a fierce struggle with the Arabs for Azerbaidjan and for control of the trade routes leading to Iran.

Contacts between Byzantium and the Khazar state must have been well established, for the Khazar and Byzantine dynasties intermarried. Justinian II (ruled 685–711) married Theodora, a sister of the Khazar emperor, in 698. Constantine V (741–775) married the Khazar princess Tzitzak, baptized Irene, in 733; their son became Emperor Leo IV the Khazar (775–780). Some Byzantine spiritual leaders and prolific writers were also of Khazar origin, for instance, Photius, patriarch of Constantinople (858–867, 877–886). Despite these direct ties, no Byzantine author, not even the historian Theophanes (d. 818) or the learned emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (913–959), made any mention of the conversion of the Khazar Kingdom to Judaism.

The first Muslim writers to mention that the Khazar ruler professed the Jewish faith date to the early tenth century — Ibn Rūste, ca. 912, and Ibn al-Faqīh, who wrote after 903.

2.

As far as we know, the contemporary centers of Judaism in Palestine, Iraq, and Constantinople failed to record or take note of the Khazar conversion. Even in the first half of the tenth century, both Rabbanite and Karaite sources mention the Khazars only matter-of-factly, without any religious reference or designation.

Sa'adyah Gaon (b. Joseph; b. 882, d. 942), who, although born and raised in Egypt, became the greatest scholar of the gaonic period and leader of Babylonian Jewry, mentioned the Khazars on several occasions. For instance, he explained "Hiram, king of Tyre" as being not a proper name, but a title, "like caliph for the ruler of the Arabs and khaghan for the king of the Khazars."⁴⁵ Also, in commenting on a biblical verse (Exodus 19:9), Sa'adyah mentioned a certain Khazar custom which required a man executing royal orders not to tell his king (*melekh*) it was carried out until he received another.⁴⁶ In yet another instance, the gaon

⁴⁵ Abraham Elija Harkavy, "רב סעדיה גאון על דבר הכחריים" [Rab Sa'adyah Gaon on the Khazars], *Semitic Studies in Memory of Alexander Kohut* (Berlin, 1897), pp. 244–45. Cf. Dunlop, *History of the Jewish Khazars*, pp. 220–21.

⁴⁶ Harkavy, "Rab Sa'adyah Gaon," pp. 244–47. Cf. Dunlop, *History of the Jewish Khazars*, p. 221.

mentioned a certain Isaac b. Abraham as having left Iraq to settle in Khazaria.⁴⁷

Sa'adyah's contemporary, the Karaite historian and jurist Jacob al-Qirqisānī of Iraq (d. ca. 940), in elaborating on Genesis 9:27 in his *Kitāb ar-riyāḍ wa'l-ḥadā'iq* [Book of gardens and parks], had this to say about the Khazars:

The majority of commentators interpret this pun to mean liveliness and beauty. In their opinion, it means that God had beautified Japheth to the extent that a number of his descendants will enter into the Jewish faith. . . . Now, some other [commentators] are of the opinion that this verse alludes to the Khazars who accepted Judaism. However, others hold that the Persians are here intended. These converted to Judaism in the time of Mordecai, Esther and Ahasuerus even as it is written [Esther 8:17]. "And many among the people of the land became Jews."⁴⁸

In the tenth and eleventh centuries Karaite writers disdained the Khazars as bastards (*mamzēr*). For instance, a passage ascribed to Yepheth b. 'Ali of Basrah (fl. 950–980) explains the term *mamzēr* as "Khazars who became Jews-in-exile."⁴⁹ This usage reflects the fact that the Karaites distinguished sharply between two kinds of converts to Judaism: those who converted before Nebuchadnezzar II's conquest of Jerusalem (587 B.C.) were regarded as full-fledged, honorable members of the congregation; those who converted after the Jews had been dispersed, however, were of doubtful status, at best. The latter category, of so-called bastards, had in the past included Amonites, Moabites, and others.⁵⁰

Although a popular Hebrew historical work written in Italy in the mid-tenth century, the so-called *Sēpher Josippon*, mentions the Khazars, it fails to note their adherence to Judaism.⁵¹ In the nineteenth century,

⁴⁷ Harkavy, "Rab Sa'adyah Gaon," p. 245. Cf. Dunlop, *History of the Jewish Khazars*, p. 221.

⁴⁸ Maximilian Landau edited the passage in question in "מעמדה הנוכחי של בעיית הכוזרים" [The present-day status of the Khazar problem], *Zion* (Jerusalem), 8 (1943): 96. A translation was published by Zvi Ankori, *Karaites in Byzantium: The Formative Years, 970–1100* (New York and Jerusalem, 1959), pp. 67–68.

⁴⁹ See A. Harkavy, "Karäische Deutung des Wortes ממזר," *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* (Krotoschin), 31 (1882): 171; Harkavy, "Rab Sa'adayah Gaon," pp. 246–47; Ankori, *Karaites in Byzantium*, pp. 71–74. However, Yepheth's commentary on the Book of Jeremiah (Jer. 50: 21, 25), has a messianic passage which mentions the "King of Israel"; the simultaneous reference to *Bāb al-Abwāb* (Derbend) suggests that it is the judaized king of the Khazars who is being referred to. The commentary was published by A. Harkavy, "Rus' i russkie v srednevekovoj evrejskoj literature," *Vosход* (St. Petersburg), 2 (1882): 239–51; cf. Ankori, *Karaites in Byzantium*, pp. 77–78.

⁵⁰ Ankori, *Karaites in Byzantium*, pp. 72–73.

⁵¹ A. Harkavy, ed., "Skazaniya evrejskix pisatelej o Xazarax i xazarском carstve,"

Karaite scholars, especially Abraham Firkovič (b. 1785, d. 1874),⁵² created a myth about the Karaite origin of the Khazars — a far cry from the attitude of Karaites of the tenth and eleventh centuries, who would, no doubt, have decried any such ancestry.

3.

Modern Rabbinical scholarship continues to idealize the Khazars and their conversion.⁵³ This stance is due largely to Judah Halevi (b. 1075, d. 1141), who was first to view the Khazar conversion as a central event in Jewish history.

Halevi, undoubtedly the foremost Jewish poet and thinker of the Middle Ages, was born and raised in Andalusian Toledo (or Tudela) while the city was still Muslim but had a vital Jewish religious community and intellectual life. After a happy *Wanderjahre*, the young Jew returned to now Christian Toledo during the *reconquista*, when one Jewish community after another was being destroyed. His “Kitāb al-ḥuḡḡa wa’-d-dalīl fī naṣr ad-dīn aḍ-ḡalīl” [Book of argument and proof in defense of the despised faith], known more commonly as the “Kuzari,” was written in Arabic (ca. 1120–40), in the style of a Platonic dialogue.⁵⁴ The work

Trudy Vostochnogo otdelenija (St. Petersburg), 17 (1874): 298, 300 (text), 301 (Russ. trans.): חוגמה הם עשר משפחות מהם כחר ופצין ואליקנוס וכולגר ורגבינא וטורקי וכח חבוק ואונגרי וטילמץ. כל אלה חונים בצפון ושמות ארצותם על שמותם והם חונים על נהר היחל הוא אטל אך אונגר וכולגר וטילמץ. ופצין חונים על הנהר הגדול הנקרא דוני. Togarma [comprises] ten tribes, which are the Khozar, Pašinakh, ‘Aliqanūs (= Uluči), Būlgar, Ragbinā (?), Tūrqi, *Khūz [Bwz; = Oγuz], Zikhūs, ‘Ūngari, and Tilmaş. They all live in the north, and their lands are named after them. They live along the river Hiṭl, that is ‘Atl [Volga], but the ‘Ūngari, Būlgar and Pūsinakh[sic] live along the great river called Danūbī [Danube].” Cf. the Arabic translation of Josippon: “Togarma [comprises] ten tribes. They are the al-Khazar, al-Baḡanāq, al-‘As-Alān, al-Bulḡar . . . Khyabar, Unḡar, Ṭalmis. . . . They all live in the northern section, and their places are named after them. Some of them live along the river Aṭil. But the al-Bulḡar, al-Baḡanāq and Unḡar live between the mountains of Danūbin, i.e., Dunā [Danube].” Harkavy, “Skazaniia evrejskix pisatelej,” pp. 333–34.

⁵² Concerning A. S. Firkovič, see Ananiasz Zajaczkowski, *Karaims in Poland: History, Language, Folklore, Science* (Warsaw, The Hague, and Paris, 1961), pp. 84–88. See also Ankori, *Karaites in Byzantium*, pp. 58–65.

⁵³ See Bernard D. Weinryb, “The Beginnings of East-European Jewry in Legend and Historiography,” in *Studies and Essays in Honor of Abraham A. Neuman* (Leiden, 1962), pp. 445–502.

⁵⁴ The work was translated into Hebrew in the middle of the twelfth century by Judah b. Tibbon under the title “Sēpher ha-hokhahāh we-ha re’ayah le-hagganat ha-dat ha-bezuyah”; this translation and the original text are commonly known as “Sēpher ha-Khuzari” or the “Kuzari.” A critical edition of the Arabic original (based on the Unicum Codex Bodleiana Hebraica, no. 284) and of Ibn Tibbon’s translation (based on the Codex Parisiensis, no. 677) was published by Hartwig Hirschfeld, *Das Buch*

was not only a Jewish response to the challenge of Aristotelian philosophy, but also an original and, some scholars say, valid conceptualization of Judaism which argued for its religious superiority. Writing during the revival of Jewish Messianism and apocalyptic hopes, Halevi made the proselytic Khazar king the central hero of his dialogue, and thus elevated the Khazar conversion from a marginal happening in Jewish history to a major event.

The following two passages in the "Kuzari" are relevant to our discussion:

(1) I was asked to state what arguments and replies I could bring to bear against the attacks of philosophers and followers of other religions, and also against [Jewish] sectarians who attacked the rest of Israel. This reminded me of something I had once heard concerning the arguments of a Rabbi who sojourned with the king of the Khazars. The latter, as we know from historical records, became a convert to Judaism about four hundred years ago. To him came a dream, and it appeared as if an angel addressed him saying: "Thy way of thinking is indeed pleasing to the Creator, but not thy way of acting." Yet he was so zealous in the performance of the Khazar religion, that he devoted himself with a perfect heart to the service of the temple and sacrifices. Notwithstanding this devotion, the angel came again at night and repeated: "Thy way of thinking is pleasing to God, but not thy way of acting." This caused him to ponder over the different beliefs and religions and finally [he] became a convert to Judaism together with many other Khazars.⁵⁵

(2) After this the Khazari, as it is related in the history of the Khazars, was anxious to reveal to his vezier in the mountains of Warsān (ורסאן) the secret of his dream and its repetition, in which he was urged to seek the God-pleasing deed. The king and his vezier travelled to the deserted mountains on the seashore, and arrived one night at the cave in which some Jews used to celebrate the Sabbath. They disclosed their identity to them, embraced their religion, were circumcised in the cave, and then returned to their country, eager to learn the Jewish law. They kept their conversion secret, however, until they found an opportunity of disclosing the fact gradually to a few of their special friends. When the number had increased, they made the affair public, and induced the rest of the Khazars to embrace the Jewish faith. They sent to various countries for scholars and books, and studied the Torah. Their chronicles also tell of their prosperity, how they beat

al-Chazari des Abū-l-Hasan Jehuda Hallewi im Arabischen Urtext sowie in der Hebräischen Übersetzung des Jehuda ibn Tibbon (Leipzig, 1887). Hirschfeld translated the "Kuzari" into German as *Das Buch al-Chazari: Aus dem Arabischen des Abu-l-Hasan Jehuda Hallewi* (Breslau, 1885). The first edition of the English translation by Hirschfeld was published in 1905. The most recent edition, with an introduction by Henry Slonimsky, appeared in 1964: *Judah Halevi — The Kuzari (Kitab al Khazari): An Argument for the Faith of Israel* (New York, 1964).

⁵⁵ Edited by H. Hirschfeld, p. 3 (Hebrew trans.; the Arabic original of the page is lost) = p. 35 (Eng. trans. by H. Hirschfeld, 1964).

their foes, conquered their lands, secured great treasures; but their army swelled to hundreds of thousands, how they loved their faith, and fostered such love for the Holy House that they erected a Tabernacle in the shape of that built by Moses. . . .⁵⁶

III.

1.

Why did the Khazars' conversion to Judaism go unmentioned not only in contemporary Jewish literature, but also in the Byzantine and Muslim literatures, which were then more highly developed and have been well preserved? The silence is especially puzzling because the Byzantine and Muslim states had strong contacts, whether friendly or hostile, with the Khazar realm, then ranking with the Frank, Byzantine, and Muslim Arab as a great power, and they must have been interested in the Khazars' activities. Let us look into this strange lack of interest in an event that would seem to be of contemporary importance.

2.

St. Constantine, later apostle of the Slavs, undertook a mission to the court of the Khazar emperor sometime in the mid-ninth century. There, as late as 860, he gave a disputation on religion and practiced baptism, but said nothing about the exclusiveness of the Jewish religion in Khazaria.⁵⁷ The earliest mention of the Khazars' conversion to Judaism was by Druthmar of Aquitaine, a Frankish Benedictine monk at the Corvey monastery in Westphalia. The reference occurs in Druthmar's commentary on Matthew 24:14, written in 864. It reads:

At the present time we know of no nation (*gens*) in the world where Christians do not live. For in the lands of Gog and Magog who are a Hunnish race (*gentes*) and call themselves Gazari there is one tribe, a very belligerent one — Alexander enclosed them and they escaped — and all of them profess the Jewish faith. The Bulgars, however, who are of the same race, recently became Christians.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Edited by H. Hirschfeld, p. 67 (Arabic text) = p. 68 (Hebrew trans.) = p. 82 (Eng. trans., by H. Hirschfeld).

⁵⁷ Concerning St. Constantine's mission, see Francis Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions among the Slavs: SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1970), pp. 49–72; F. Dvornik, *Les légendes de Constantin et de Méthode, vues de Byzance* (Prague, 1933), pp. 148–211. About the mission of the Georgian saint Abo (d. 786), see Paul Peeters, "Les Khazars dans la passion de S. Abo de Tiflis," *Analecta Bollandiana* (Brussels), 52 (1934): 21–56.

⁵⁸ "Nescimus iam gentem sub caelo in qua Christiani non habeantur. Nam et in Gog et Magog, quae sunt gentes Hunorum, quae ab eis Gazari vocantur, iam una gens quae

Because Druthmar's testimony is unchallenged, we can assume that the Khazar conversion must have occurred before 864 A.D., the date when his observations were written.

3.

Apart from Halevi's "Kuzari," there are three other non-contemporary accounts of the Khazar conversion. They are best characterized as epic narratives. Two have come down to us in Hebrew, and the third in Arabic.

The two Hebrew stories must have been written by the beginning of the twelfth century, because Jehudah b. Barzillai al-Bargeloni (an-Nasi), rabbi of Barcelona ca. 1090 to 1105, refers to them in his "Sēpher ha-'ittim," a work dealing with the Sabbath and festivals on the Jewish calendar.⁵⁹

One of the Hebrew stories appears in the so-called Khazar correspondence that comprises the letter of Ḥasdai b. Shaprut (b. ca. 915, d. 970) to the Khazars' King Joseph and two versions of Joseph's reply. The authenticity of the correspondence, which continues to be controversial, is irrelevant here, because the conversion story is taken as an epic narrative, not an official contemporary account. According to the first, short version of King Joseph's reply, the conversion occurred thus:⁶⁰

(1) An angel appeared to him in a dream and said: "Oh, Bol[ē]ān!⁶¹ The Lord sent me to tell you: I heard your prayer and your petition. And so, I shall bless you and multiply you, extend your kingdom to the end of ages and hand all your enemies over to you. Now rise and pray to the Lord." He did thus, and the angel appeared to him a second time, saying: "I saw your behavior and approved your actions. I

fortior erat ex his quas Alexander conduxerat, circumcisa est, et omnem Judaismum observat. Bulgarii quoque, qui et ipsi ex ipsis gentibus sunt, cottidie baptisantur," *Maxima bibliotheca veterum patrum Lugdun.* (Leiden), 15 (1677): 158 = J. P. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus*, Series Latina, vol. 106 (Paris, 1864), col. 1456.

⁵⁹ Kokovcov, *Evrejsko-khazarskaja perepiska*, pp. 127–28 (Russ. trans., pp. 128–31).

⁶⁰ Insofar as this story is concerned, there are no real differences between the two versions.

⁶¹ *Bolān* (scholars normally use the incorrect spelling *Bulan*) is a tribal designation (eponym), rather than a proper name. The form with / (*Bo/ān*) is Turkic whereas the form with *l'* (*Bolēān*) is Huno-Khazarian. Concerning this phenomenon (in Altaic linguistics called "lambdacism"), see O. Pritsak, "'Der Rhotazismus' und 'Lambdacismus,'" *Ural-Altaische Jahrbücher* 35 D (1964): 337–49. The Huno-Khazarian form survived in the "Ta'rih al-Bāb wa Šarwān," V. Minorsky, ed., *A History of Sharvān and Darband* (Cambridge, 1958), p. 17: "In the year 288 the Khazars with their king (*malik*) K.s'b. Bolēān (*blē'n*) al-Khazari came to attack Bāb al-Abwāb (Derband) in the month of Raḡab [August 901]. Muḥammad b. Hāšim with the ḡāzī's of al-Bāb (= Darband) fought them, beat them off and defeated them with the help of the Almighty" (p. 42).

know that you will follow me with your whole heart. I want to give you the commandments, the law and the rules; and, if you observe my commandments, laws and rules, I shall bless you and multiply you." He answered and said to the angel: "My master, you know the intentions of my heart and you have inquired into my innermost self, and you know that I have placed my hope only in you. But the people, over whom I reign, are unbelievers. I do not know whether or not they will believe me. If I have found favor in your eyes and your mercy has come down on me, appear to so-and-so, their chief prince [i.e., *qayan*], and he will help me in this task." The All-Holy — may he be blessed — granted his request and appeared to that prince in a dream. When he awoke in the morning, he went and told the king about it. Then the king assembled all his princes, his slaves, and all his people and told them all this. They endorsed it, and accepted [the new] faith, thus coming under the protection of Shekhina ["the presence of God"]. And the angel again appeared to him and said: "The heavens and the heavens of the heavens cannot contain me, but you should [still] build a synagogue in my name." He answered, saying: "Lord of the world, I am very ashamed that I have no silver and gold to erect it properly, as I would like." He [the angel] answered him: "Have strength and be manly! Take all your armies with you and go in the direction of Dar-i Alān [the Darial Pass] and Ard[ab]il [located in Azerbaidjan]. I shall place in their hearts fear and terror before you and hand them over into your hands. I prepared two storehouses for you; one of silver and one of gold. I shall be with you and I shall protect you [everywhere], wherever you go. You shall take [that] booty [i.e., goods], return with success, and build a synagogue, in my name." He believed him and did as he had been commanded. He fought, laid a curse on the town and returned safely. [Then] he blessed [the acquired] goods and from them constructed: tents, an ark, a candlestick, a table, a sacrificial altar, and priestly sacred vessels. Until the present day, these have remained whole and in my keeping.⁶²

(2) After this his fame spread widely. The King of Edom [Byzantium] and the King of the Ishmaelites [Muslims] had heard of him and they sent to him their envoys with great riches and many presents, as well as some of their wise men with the plan to convert him to their own religion. But the king was wise, sent for a learned Israelite, searched, inquired and investigated carefully. Then he brought the sages together so that they might argue about their respective religions. Each of them refuted, however, the arguments of his opponent, so that they could not agree. When the king saw this he said to them: "Go home, on the third day I shall send for you and you will come to me." On the second day the king sent for the [Christian] priest and said to him: "I know that the King of Edom is greater than the other kings, and that his faith is respectable. I already have liking as to your religion. But I am asking you to tell the truth: if one takes the Israelite religion and the religion of the Ishmaelites, which of them is better?" The priest answered him and said: "May our Lord the King live long! Know the truth, that there is in all the world no religion resembling the Israelite religion, since the All-Holy, bless him, chose Israel from all the nations. . . ." The king answered him: "Now you have told

⁶² Kokovcov, *Evrejsko-kazarskaja perepiska*, p. 21, l. 5, and p. 22, l. 6 (Russ. trans., pp. 75–77).

me. Truly, know that I will show you my respect." The second day the king sent for al-Qāḍī of the Ishmaelites, asked him and said: "Tell me the truth: what is the difference between the religion of Israel and the religion of Edom, which religion is better?" Al-Qāḍī answered him and said: "The religion of Israel is better, and it is all the truth. . . ."

On the third day he [the king] called all of them together and said to them in the presence of all his princes and slaves and his people: "I wish that you make for me the choice, which religion is the best and the truest." They began to dispute with one another without arriving to any result until the king asked the priest: "If one compares the Israelite religion with that of the Ishmaelites, which is to be preferred?" The priest answered and said: "The religion of the Israelites is better." Now he [the king] asked al-Qāḍī and said: "If one compares the Israelite religion with that of the Edom which is to be preferred?" Al-Qāḍī answered him and said: "The religion of the Israelites is better."

Upon this the king said, "Both of you admitted with your own lips that the religion of the Israelites is the best and truest. Therefore I have chosen the religion of the Israelites, that is, the religion of Abraham. . . . He can give me without labor silver and gold which you had promised me. Now go, all of you, in peace to your land."

From that time on the Almighty God helped him and strengthened him. He and his slaves circumcised themselves and he sent for and brought wise men of Israel who interpreted the Torah for him and arranged the precepts in order. . . .⁶³

(3) After those days there arose from the sons of his [Bolčān's] sons a king, 'Obadiah by name. He was an upright and just man. He reorganized the kingdom and established the [Israelite] religion properly and correctly. He built synagogues and schools, brought in many Israelite sages, honored them with silver and gold, and they explained to him the Twenty-four Books [the Bible], Mishnah, Talmud, and the order of prayers [established by] the Khazzans. He was a man who feared God and loved the law and the commandments.

After him his son Hezekiah became king, and after him, his son Manasseh. . . .⁶⁴

The main elements that emerge from the story are these:

(1) The convert was an officer elevated to the rank of king but not emperor.

(2) There were two stages in the conversion.

(3) The first, or Bol[č]ān, stage was connected with the Khazar victory over the Arabs and their advance as far as Ardabil in Azerbaidjan, which, according to Arab sources, took place in A.H. 112/A.D. 730–731.⁶⁵ This chronology agrees with Halevi's statement in the "Kuzari," written ca.

⁶³ Kokovcov, *Evrejsko-xazarskaja perepiska*, p. 22, ll. 6–23, 15 (Russ. trans., pp. 77–80).

⁶⁴ Kokovcov, *Evrejsko-xazarskaja perepiska*, p. 23, l. 18, and p. 24, l. 4 (Russ. trans., p. 80).

⁶⁵ For sources and details, see Dunlop, *History of the Jewish Khazars*, pp. 68–77, 148.

1130–1140, that the Khazar king became a convert “about four hundred years ago.” But this was a private conversion of the majordomo (= Bol[č]ān), which, possibly, was preceded by the kind of religious dispute that occurred before other royal conversions (cf. the conversion to Christianity of Prince Volodimer of Rus’ in 988).⁶⁶

4.

The other of the two Hebrew stories about the conversion survived in a Geniza fragment which is now in Cambridge, England. The fragment has recently been analyzed by Norman Golb, whose translation of the relevant passage reads as follows:⁶⁷

Armenia, and [our] fathers fled before them. . . . for they were un[ab]le to bear the yoke of idol-worshippers. [The people of Khazari]a received them. For the pe[ople] of Khazaria were at first without Torah, while [their neighbor Armenia] remained without Torah and writing. They intermarried with the inhabitants of the land, in[termingled with the gent]iles, learned their practices, and would continually go out with them to w[ar]; [and] they became one people. However, they were confirmed only in the covenant of circumcision; only a port[ion of them were] observing the Sabbath. There was [at the time] no king in the land of Khazaria; but rather whoever would achieve victories in war would they appoint over themselves as general of the army. [Thus was it] until the Jews once went out with them to do battle as was their wont. On that day a certain Jew prevailed with his sword and put to flight the enemies come against Khazaria. So the men of Khazar appointed him over them as chief officer of the army according to their ancient custom. They remained in this state of affairs for many days, until the Lord took mercy and stirred the heart of the chief officer to repent; for his wife, whose name was Serah, influenced him and taught him to [his] benefit; and he too agreed, since he was circumcised. Moreover, the father of the young woman, a man righteous in that generation, showed him the way of life.

Now it happened that when the kings of Macedon [= Byzantines] and the kings of Arabia heard these things, they became very angry, and sent messengers to the officers of Khazaria [with] words of scorn against Israel: “How is it that you return to the faith of the Jews, who are subjugated under the power of all nations?” They said things which are not for us to relate, and influenced the hearts of the officers adversely. Then the great officer, the Jew, said, “Why should we multiply words? Let there come [here] some sages of Israel, some sages of Greece, and some sages of Arabia; and let them tell, each one of them, before us and before you, the deed of [his] Lord [from beginning to] end.” They did so; [M]ace[do]n sent some [of its sages, and also] the kings of Arabia; and the sages of Israel volun-

⁶⁶ Ca. between A.D. 799 and 809. See also A. N. Poliakov, “התגיירות הכוזרים [The adoption of Judaism by the Khazars],” *Zion* 6 (1941–42): 106–112, 160–80.

⁶⁷ A critical apparatus and commentary by Professor Golb will be published with the translation in our joint *Khazarian Hebrew Documents*.

teered to come [in accord with the request of] the officers of Khazaria. Now the Greeks began to give testimony about Him[?] f[irst, and] the Jews and the Arabs began to rebut him [*sic*]. Afterwards [began the Ara]bs, and the Jews and the Greeks rebutted them. And afterwards began [the sages of Isra]el from the six days of creation until the day when the children of Israel came up [from] Egypt and they came to an inhabited land. The Greeks and the Arabs bore witness to the truth and declared them right; but there also occurred a disagreement between them. The officers of Khazaria said, "There is a cave in the valley of TYZWL; bring forth to us the books which are there and expound them before us." They did so. They went into the midst of the cave: behold, books of the Torah of Moses were there, and the sages of Israel explained them according to the previous words which they had spoken. Then Israel with the people of Khazaria repented completely. The Jews began to come from Baghdad and from Khorasan and from the land of Greece and strengthened the men of the land, and [the latter] held fast to the covenant of the "Father of a Multitude." The men of the land appointed over them one of the sages as judge. They call him in the language of Khazar[ia] KGN. Therefore, the title of the judges who arose after him has been KGN until this day. They changed the name of the great officer of Khazaria to Sabriel, and made him king over them.

The importance of the Geniza fragment lies in the fact that it is an indigenously Jewish account, rather than a proselytic one, of the conversion and religious disputation. Nonetheless, the accounts given in the fragment and in King Joseph's reply generally agree, and both refer to a first stage in the Judaization of the Khazar kings. In the Jewish accounts, however, the "Bol[č]ān" of King Joseph's reply is styled as "Sabriel."⁶⁸

5.

Al-Mas'ūdī, author of a world history written in Arabic ca. 943, devoted the seventeenth chapter of his "Meadows of gold" (*Murūğ ad-Dahab*) to a description of the Caucasian peoples. There he singled out the Khazar state:

The inhabitants of this [Khazarian] capital are Muslims, Christians, Jews, and pagans. The Jews are: the king (*al-malik*), his entourage, and the Khazars of his tribe (*ġins*). The king accepted Judaism during the Caliphate of [Hārūn] ar-Rašīd [786–814]. A number of Jews joined him from other Muslim countries and from the Byzantine Empire.

This was because the emperor, who in our time, i.e., A.H. 332/A.D. 943, is called Armanūs [Romanus I Lecapenus, 920–944] converted the Jews of his country to Christianity by force . . . and a large number of the Jews fled from Rūm [Byzantium] to the Khazar country. . . . This is not the place for giving a report of

⁶⁸ Cf. Dunlop, *History of the Jewish Khazars*, p. 158.

the adoption of Judaism by the Khazar king for we have spoken of it in our earlier works.⁶⁹

Unfortunately, the earlier works that al-Mas'ūdī refers to were lost. However, an Arabic geographer of a later period, ad-Dimišqī (fl. A.H. 727/A.D. 1327), made this reference to the conversion: "Ibn al-Athīr [historian, d. 1232] tells how in the days of Hārūn [ar-Rašīd] the emperor forced the Jews to emigrate. They came to the Khazar country, where they found an intelligent but untutored race, and offered them their religion. The inhabitants [of Khazaria] found it better than their own and accepted it."⁷⁰ The eminent German Orientalist, Joseph Markwart (b. 1869, d. 1930), searched the *History* of Ibn al-Athīr in vain for the passage here indicated. He came to the conclusion that it was the work of al-Mas'ūdī, not Ibn al-Athīr, which ad-Dimišqī had meant.⁷¹

In a geographical work written ca. A.H. 487/A.D. 1094, the Muslim Spaniard al-Bakrī included an account which some scholars believe to be a partial reproduction of Mas'ūdī's lost story. The passage reads:

The reason for the conversion of the king (*al-malik*) of the Khazars, who had previously been a heathen, to Judaism was as follows. He had adopted Christianity. Then he recognized the wrongness of his belief and began to speak with one of his governors about the concern with which he was filled. The other said to him: "Oh King, the People of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*) form three classes. Invite them and inquire of them, then follow whichever is in possession of the truth." So he sent to the Christians for a bishop. Now there was with him a Jew, skilled in debate, who disputed with the bishop, asking him: "What do you say about Moses, son of Amram, and the Torah which was revealed to him?" The other replied: "Moses is a prophet, and the Torah is true." Then said the Jew to the king: "He has admitted the truth of my creed. Ask him now what he believes." So the king asked him and he replied: "I say that the Messiah, Jesus the son of Mary, is the Word, and that he has made known the mysteries in the name of God." Then the Jew said to the king of the Khazars: "He confesses a doctrine which I know not, while he admits what I set forth." But the bishop was not strong in bringing proofs. So he invited the Muslims and they sent him a learned and intelligent man who understood disputation. But the Jew hired someone against him who poisoned him on the way, so that he died. And the Jew was able to win the king for his religion.⁷²

This account of the religious disputation is quite similar to that given in

⁶⁹ *Murūğ ad-Dahab*, ed. by Ch. Pellat, vol. 1, p. 212, l. 9 – p. 213, l. 1 = Eng. trans. in Minorsky, *History of Sharvān and Darband*, p. 146.

⁷⁰ *Cosmographie*, ed. by A. F. Mehren (St. Petersburg, 1866), p. 263 = Eng. trans. in Dunlop, *History of the Jewish Khazars*, pp. 89–90.

⁷¹ Markwart, *Osteuropäische und ostasiatische Streifzüge*, p. 3.

⁷² Edited by Baron V. Rosen in A. Kunik and Baron V. Rosen, *Izvestija al-Bekri i drugix avtorov o Rusi i slavjanax* (St. Petersburg, 1878), p. 44, ll. 1–13; Eng. trans. in Dunlop, *History of the Jewish Khazars*, p. 90.

King Joseph's reply, and it says that the Khazar convert was king (*malik* = *melekh*), rather than emperor (*qayan*), as do the two Hebrew epic narratives.

6.

Both al-Mas'ūdī and ad-Dimišqī dated the conversion of the Khazar king to the reign of the Abbasid caliph Harūn ar-Rašīd (A.H. 170–178/A.D. 786–809). This seems to be inconsistent with the Jewish tradition preserved in the “Kuzari,” which dated the conversion to more than a half century earlier, ca. 730–740. The contradiction is readily resolved, however, if one considers that the Muslim historians most probably understood the Khazar conversion to have occurred with its second stage — i.e., when the Khazar king ‘Obadiah accepted the Jewish religion publicly and introduced the corresponding legal reforms — rather than with the first — i.e., when General Bol[č]ān converted privately. This differing view was all the more likely because in 737, at about the time of the conversion's first stage, the supreme Khazar ruler, the emperor (*qayan*), converted to Islam.⁷³

That the emperor remained the supreme ruler and military commander of the Khazar realm until 799 is confirmed by the data of the historian al-Ya'qūbī (d. 892). By 833, however, the emperor was already sharing his power with the beg (= *melekh*). According to Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (ca. 948), Khazar envoys were now being sent to Byzantium not by the emperor alone, but jointly, by both the emperor and the beg (ὁ γὰρ χαγάνος . . . καὶ ὁ πᾶν Χαζαρία).⁷⁴

Since Harūn ar-Rašīd died in 809, one may assume that the reforms of ‘Obadiah, i.e., the official conversion of the beg, took place sometime between 799 and 809.

The major representative of the so-called classical school of Islamic geography, al-Iṣṭakhri, who worked ca. 930–951, gives an important account of the Khazar realm:

The Khaghanate is in a group of notables who possess neither sovereignty [after 799] nor riches. When the chief place [the office of emperor] comes to one of them, they appoint him without regard to what his condition is. A reliable witness told me that he had seen in one of their markets a young man selling bread. They said that when their emperor died, there was none worthier to the Khaghanate than he, only he was a Muslim, and the Khaghanate is never [in the tenth century!] given to

⁷³ See p. 266.

⁷⁴ Constantinus Porphyrogenitus, *De administrando imperio*, p. 182, l. 27.

any but a Jew. The throne and canopy of gold which they have are never set up for any but the emperor. . . .⁷⁵

Here al-Iṣṭakhri has brought up an element not mentioned in the Hebrew accounts, namely, the Judaization of the institution of the Khaghanate.

The two earliest Islamic sources which mention Judaism as the religion of the Khazars, written by Ibn al-Faḳīh and Ibn Rūste, respectively, date to ca. A.H. 290/A.D. 903. Ibn al-Faḳīh owed much of his material to the works of Ibn Khurdāḡbeh, dating ca. 846–885, whereas Ibn Rūste incorporated data from the so-called Khorasanian corpus of information on Eastern Europe and Central Asia, ca. 880–900. According to Ibn Khurdāḡbeh, only the Khazar king (*al-malik*) professed Judaism.⁷⁶ The later Khorasanian Codex, however, described a different situation:

They have a king (*malik* = *melekh*) who is called *ixšēd* [= beg].⁷⁷ The supreme king is *Khazar khāqān* [emperor]. He does not enjoy the obedience of the Khazars but has the name, only. The power to command belongs to the *ixšēd*. . . . Their supreme ruler is a Jew, and likewise the *ixšēd* and those of the generals and the chief men who follow his way of thinking. The rest of them have a religion like the religion of the Turks [known as the Tengri religion].⁷⁸

This development must have become known after 885, the date of the “second” redaction of Ibn Khurdāḡbeh’s work, because the historian, although then also head of Abbasid intelligence, did not yet know that the Khazar emperor was a Jew.

In his *De administrando imperii* of 948, Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus mentioned a Khazar civil war:

The so-called Kābaroi were of the race of the Khazars. Now, it fell out that a secession was made by them to their government [led by the beg] and when a civil war broke out their first government [led by the beg] prevailed, and some of them were slain, but others escaped and came and settled with the Turks [the future Hungarians who were in the service of the khaghan] in the land of the Pechenegs [i.e., modern Ukraine], and they made friends with one another.⁷⁹

Unfortunately, the learned emperor gave no date for this civil war.

⁷⁵ *Via regnorum*, ed. by de Goeje, p. 224, l. 17 – p. 225, l. 1; Eng. trans. in Dunlop, *History of the Jewish Khazars*, pp. 97–98.

⁷⁶ The most accurate version of the text is by al-Yāqūt, *Muḡam al-buldān*, ed. by Ferdinand Wüstenfeld, vol. 2 (Leipzig, 1867), p. 437, l. 8: *wa-maliku-hum yahūdīyyun* “and their [the Khazars’] king (*malik*) is a Jew.”

⁷⁷ In Ibn Rūste’s manuscript the final -*δ* is dropped: the text has ‘*yš*’ (*Kitāb al-a’lāq an-nafīsa*, ed. by M. J. de Goeje, BGA, vol. 7 [Leiden, 1892], p. 139, l. 13). Gardīzi’s text preserved the final -*δ*: *bš’d*, but Arabic *b* is to be corrected into *y*; W. Barthold, ed., in *Akademik V. V. Bartol’d: Sočinenija*, vol. 8 (Moscow, 1973), p. 36, l. 5; see also Minorsky, *Hudūd al-‘Ālam*, p. 451.

⁷⁸ *Ibn Rūste*, ed. by M. J. de Goeje, p. 139, ll. 9–14.

⁷⁹ Edited by Gyula Moravcsik, p. 174 (Eng. trans., p. 175).

Ahatanhel Kryms'kyj (b. 1871, d. 1942) suggested that it probably occurred between 833 and 843.⁸⁰ He argued that by 833 the emperor, although already having a secondary role, still took active part in the Khazar government; by 843, however, he had lost all power, for the Arab caliph now corresponded with only the beg, completely ignoring the emperor. Probably the beg, in order to prevent another civil war, forced the emperor to accept Judaism, and had the law passed that prompted al-Iṣṭakhri to write "the Khaghanate is never given to any but a Jew." Al-Iṣṭakhri added, however, that some members of the Khazar dynasty, even the theoretical heir-apparent, still professed the Islamic faith as late as the first half of the tenth century.

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In the eighth to tenth century, two other Turkic peoples converted to religions based on the revelation of divine truth: the Uighurs in Mongolia converted to Manichaeism in 763; and the imperial Turks, or Karakhanids, in Turkestan converted to Islam ca. 900. A perhaps contemporary account by some Manichaean "electi" (*dindarlar*), preserved in an Uighur Turkic translation (possibly dating to the ninth century), attributes the decisive role in the Uighurs' conversion to Central Asian merchants (*sartlar*) having the low rank of Manichaean "hearers" (*niyošaklar*).⁸¹ The role of merchants is stated more explicitly in the conversion to Islam of the Karakhanid ruler Satuq Buyra Qayan (d. A.H. 344/A.D. 955). Like the Khazar king, he first converted privately and only some time later professed his new religion openly and converted the ruling elite.⁸²

Elsewhere, I have argued that the ar-Rāḡāniya, a Jewish trading company based in Provence, directly influenced the official Judaization of the Khazar kings.⁸³ Here, I emphasize that all three conversions of warrior steppe societies in eighth- to tenth-century Eurasia occurred without professional missionaries or learned theologians sent from the respective religious centers.

Long-distance merchants alone were responsible for the conversions of the Uighurs, imperial Turks, and Khazars. The merchants' regular con-

⁸⁰ *Ural-Altaische Jahrbücher* 36 (1965): 390–92.

⁸¹ Edited by Willy Bang-Kaup and Annemarie von Gabain in *Türkische Turfan-Texte II* (Berlin, 1929), pp. 3–14.

⁸² See Omeljan Pritsak, "Von den Karluk zu den Karachaniden," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* (Wiesbaden), 101 (1951): 290–92; O. Pritsak, "Die Karachaniden," *Der Islam* (Berlin), 31 (1953): 24–25.

⁸³ The problem is discussed in *The Origin of Rus'*, volumes 4 to 6; see also my inaugural lecture, *The Origin of Rus'* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), pp. 19–20.

tacts made them familiar with these societies and allowed them to act as proselytizers of their respective faiths. The merchants presented their beliefs in a popularized version attractive to people unaccustomed to theological abstractions. Had trained religionists approached the steppe warrior societies, their dogma and ideology would have been totally alien and incomprehensible. It was precisely because they did not, and because the three conversions were achieved by unofficial merchant popularizers, that the events themselves went unrecorded in the respective religious centers of the time.⁸⁴

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⁸⁴ One answer to the much-disputed question of what happened to the Khazarian Jews after they were conquered by Prince Svjatoslav of Rus' is proposed in my *Origin of Rus'*, volumes 4 to 6.