

The Khazar Myth

By Mottel Baleston - www.MessiahNJ.org

Throughout their history, the Jewish people have often been the target of ill-informed rumors and myths. In medieval ages, superstitious peasants were fed the falsehood that the plagues and death sweeping through cramped villages were caused by “the Jews poisoning the wells.” It had been observed that Jewish people were succumbing to diseases at a much lower rate than the general population, and so the rumor was hatched in an attempt to justify violence against Jewish communities. In reality, the reason for lower death rates was that the Jewish community held to a strict code of sanitation mandated in Jewish religious tradition, including handwashing before meals, something not practiced in the general population. Other prejudices were ludicrous, such as the charge that Jewish people use the blood of a Christian child in order to make Passover matzah. A charge like this is so irrational and absurd that the hateful intent of the people inventing the fiction becomes clear. What is especially sad is that a significant number of the people making these false charges in years past were members of large institutional churches and imagined themselves to be Christians.

For those of us who are Jewish believers in Messiah Jesus, these slanderous statements, along with the bias found in some Christian communities against the Jewish roots of the faith, are very unsettling. While we are comfortable in our skin as Jewish believers in our Messiah, we find ourselves often fending off foolish and ignorant negative theories about the Jewish people. These theories have become more common with today’s social media and YouTube videos made by people with a very biased agenda and little interest in telling the whole truth.

A more recent myth has grown in popularity, even in the evangelical community. It has a pseudo-scientific sound to it, but its effect in stirring up anti-Jewish sentiment is the same as the older myths. It is summed up in an email question I received in January 2017:

“Is it true that most of the Jews in the world today are not blood Israelites but are in fact Khazars who converted to Judaism many centuries ago?”

To understand the question, let’s define some terms:

“Jewish”:

Simply put, the biblical definition of a Jew refers to someone who is ethnically and biologically descended from one of the 12 sons of Jacob, who formed the 12 tribes of Israel. Members of all 12 tribes are represented among the Jewish people today. The notion of “lost tribes”, i.e. that entire tribes migrated away and are being recovered today, is proven false upon careful research. Additionally, the Bible uses the terms “Israel” and “Jewish” interchangeably. So, whether one is descended from the ten northern tribes of Israel or the two southern tribes of Judah, by New Testament times all were termed as Jewish, as seen in Romans 11:1. While in modern liberal Judaism some would like to redefine

Jewishness as a code of common ethics, the Scriptures are clear in defining it by ethnicity. A person can be Jewish without embracing the beliefs of modern Rabbinic Judaism.

The Jewish people are broadly divided into two ethnic groups:

- Sephardic-Mizrachi Jews, centered around Israel, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean
- Ashkenazic Jews, whose ancestors migrated from the Middle East into Europe around A.D. 800

“Khazar”:

The kingdom of Khazaria was an amalgamation of some Turkic and Mongol tribes who established a capital in A.D. 720. Located in the Caucasus region of modern-day Russia and Azerbaijan, the kingdom eventually expanded into parts of Ukraine and Romania, but by 1030 it had shrunk to a small size and was breaking into parts.

So, is there a Jewish connection to the Khazars? This is where written records are scarce and legends loom large. Further retelling of the earlier legends leads to later revisions. One version of the story says that in the year 860, the Khazar King Bulan was listening to a debate between proponents of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and decided that Judaism was the faith he preferred. While he was able to convince a number of his family members and nobles to convert with him, the vast majority of Khazars did not convert. Even those who believe this story to be authentic conclude that the number of Khazars who continued holding to a Jewish faith was relatively small, approximately 2% of the worldwide Jewish population of their day. They further believe that, as the Khazarian kingdom weakened and dispersed, this very small number was absorbed into Jewish communities in Europe by the year 1100.

There are other reputable historians who say that the King Bulan story is a myth, derived only from oral tall tales and legends and assembled into a book titled *The Khazar Correspondence*, which was first published in 1577 in Constantinople. Of course, the book was printed 600 years after the supposed conversion of King Bulan. Even at the time it was published, many contemporary historians doubted its credibility.

This small footnote to history would have remained obscure were it not for a book written in 1976 by the Jewish author Arthur Koestler. In his *The Thirteenth Tribe*, Koestler argued that modern day Jews of Ashkenazic European background are actually descendants of these Khazar converts and not descendants of the Semitic Israelites of the Bible. Personally, he also saw the opportunity to argue that if Jews were not Semites (whom many in Christendom blame for the crucifixion of Jesus) then the racial basis for anti-Semitism would be removed.

Of course, his was a very naïve assumption because it imagines that racism and bigotry have some rational basis. Further, as Bible believing Christians we understand that the ultimate origin of anti-Semitism lies with Satan in his plan to stop the Jewish people in their two God-appointed tasks: to bring to the world the Scriptures and to bring to the world the Savior.

While many academics criticized *The Thirteenth Tribe* as lacking scholarly historical research, neo-Nazi, Ku Klux Klan, and other toxic racist groups promoted it as part of their anti-Jewish agenda, as did some

Christian groups who already had had an ill-informed bias against the Jewish roots of our Christian faith. Arab governments picked up on it and cited it as a basis for denying the legitimacy of the State of Israel.

For some, it boils down to this: If modern day Ashkenazic Jews are not descendants of ancient Israelites, then they have no right to the land of Israel. Those with an anti-Jewish agenda don't want you to think too closely about that, for if you do, the question arises: What percentage of Jews in Israel are Ashkenazic compared to Sephardic? Most sources report that in Israel 45% are Ashkenazic Jews, whereas the majority, or 55%, are Sephardic or Mizrahi. Of course, because the Khazar theory only questions Ashkenazic Jewish background and not Sephardic, it is not crucial to Israel's legitimacy, for the majority of Jews in Israel are Sephardic or Mizrahi and have never left the Mediterranean or Middle East area!

Modern Genetic Studies

While the actual historical records that touch upon the Khazar issue are small, preserved mostly in Arab and Byzantine writings that only mention the Khazars incidentally, the last 20 years have brought about and additional means of getting to the truth of this matter. DNA and genome testing are not only the new frontier in medical research, but also have made a contribution to genealogical questions. The cautionary warning that many overlook is this: Ethnic identity conclusions based upon DNA tests are only as good as the raw data that the scientists write into the computer program. There is no certain genome identity for "Khazars" that we can test for, as the small number of Khazars who remained in A.D. 1100 assimilated long ago into a dozen different ethnic groups, such as Romanians, Russians, Armenians, Georgians, and Ukrainians.

On the other hand, by looking at the Mizrahi and Sephardic Jewish population which has never left the Middle East and by testing their DNA, particularly looking at men within that group with the names Cohen, Levi, and variations of those, all indicating descent from the tribe of Levi, scientists have found striking genome markers that correlate across geographic areas, all held by Mizrahi/Sephardic Jewish men with that Levite background. The marker appears frequently and consistently, leading some scientists to label it the "Jewish priestly" marker.

In 2013, a very detailed scientific investigation was conducted by Wayne State University, involving many Ph.D. scientists from Europe, Asia, and America on the question of any genetic link between the Khazars and Ashkenazic Jews. Their overview document is 59 pages alone, with many genome charts and methodology used. It is available free online.

The Wayne State University Genome Study concluded this:

We find that Ashkenazi Jews share the greatest genetic ancestry with other Jewish populations, and among non-Jewish populations, with groups from Europe and the Middle East. No particular similarity of Ashkenazi Jews with populations from the Caucasus is evident, particularly with the populations that most closely represent the Khazar region. Thus, analysis of Ashkenazi Jews together with a large sample from the region of the Khazar Khaganate corroborates the earlier results that Ashkenazi Jews

derive their ancestry primarily from populations of the Middle East and Europe, that they possess considerable shared ancestry with other Jewish populations, and that there is no indication of a significant genetic contribution either from within or from north of the Caucasus region.¹

The “other Jewish populations” referred to are the Sephardic Jews who have never left the Middle East.

A second genome study, published in 2013 by Stanford University scientist Peter Underhill, Ph.D., along with Siiri Rootsi Ph.D. and several other researchers, made this summary statement:

Previous Y-chromosome studies have demonstrated that Ashkenazi Levites, members of a paternally inherited Jewish priestly caste, display a distinctive founder event within R1a, the most prevalent Y-chromosome haplogroup in Eastern Europe. Here we report the analysis of 16 whole R1 sequences and show that a set of 19 unique nucleotide substitutions defines the Ashkenazi R1a lineage . . . In contrast to the previously suggested Eastern European origin for Ashkenazi Levites, the current data are indicative of a geographic source of the Levite founder lineage in the Near East and its likely presence among pre-Diaspora Hebrews.²

This second study addressed the fact that older, imprecise studies had found some similarities between Ashkenazic Jews and the general European population; but having used more modern methodology, it found among Ashkenazic Jews the same genome identity markers for the Levite tribe as it did in Sephardic Jews. So, in summary, these Levite genetic markers are found very strongly in Jewish populations that are clearly recognized to be Jewish with origins in Israel:

- Mizrachim from the Middle East
- Sephardim from Turkey, Greece and the Balkans
- Falasha from Ethiopia
- Temanim from Yemen
- Ashkenazim from Europe

Of course, all five of these groups also have an easily demonstrable Jewish history, have genuine artifacts of Jewish worship going back for centuries, and were having Jewish services all during that time. In contrast, recent Jewish claims by small groups in central Africa and their descendants, as well as Asian tribes in the Himalayas, have very weak evidence. Photos of their worship service reveal Jewish prayer shawls and head coverings only purchased recently.

¹ "No Evidence from Genome-Wide Data of a Khazar Origin for the Ashkenazi Jews" (2013). Human Biology Open Access Pre-Prints. Paper 41. http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/humbiol_preprints/41.

² Rootsi, S. et al. Phylogenetic applications of whole Y-chromosome sequences and the Near Eastern origin of Ashkenazi Levites. Nat. Commun. 4:2928 doi: 10.1038/ncomms3928 (2013).

What Do the Scriptures Say?

While recent scientific studies clearly show a Middle Eastern Hebrew origin for Ashkenazic Jews, our focus should be on the promise of God to preserve the Jewish people intact and as a visible people who can be identified. As Jeremiah 31:36-36 says:

Thus says the LORD, who gives the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar— the LORD of hosts is his name. “If this fixed order departs from before me, declares the LORD, then shall the offspring of Israel cease from being a nation before me forever.”

The very events of the last days are dependent upon having an identifiable people of Israel and the nation of Israel back in their own land. We are privileged to live in a time where we have seen this biblical truth come alive with our very own eyes, as Jews of various skin colors and cultures, but all Jewish, have come together in our ancient homeland just as prophecy foretold.

The Khazar myth is one of a long string of false charges made to delegitimize the Jewish people. In Romans 11, the Apostle Paul addresses Gentile believers, but reminds all of us of this truth:

For I do not want you, brothers and sisters, to be ignorant of this mystery—lest you be wise in your own eyes—that a partial hardening has come upon Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; and in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, “The Deliverer shall come out of Zion. He shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob. And this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins.” Concerning the Good News, they are hostile for your sake; but concerning chosenness, they are loved on account of the fathers— for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. (Rom. 11:26-29 TLV)

May we see more and more examples of believers embracing, and not fearing, the Jewish roots of our Christian faith, embracing Jewish friends and neighbors with unconditional love, and sharing with them that the greatest example of the love of God for His Jewish people was sending them their Messiah, Yeshua.

This article was originally published in ARIEL MAGAZINE, Spring 2018. www.Ariel.org. Used by permission.

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