

THE JEWS OF KHAZARIA (SECOND EDITION)

Kevin Alan Brook. Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, MD, 2006. xii + 317 pages.

THE OTHER ZIONS: THE LOST HISTORIES OF JEWISH NATIONS

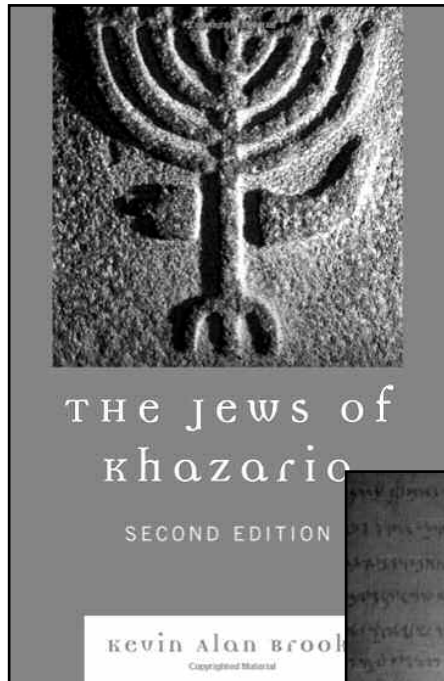
Eric Maroney. Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, MD, 2010. xii + 209 pages.

Reviewed by Mark Golden

“We live in the Diaspora and there is no power in our hands. They say to us every day, ‘Every nation has a kingdom, but you have no memory of such’ But when we heard about my master the King, the might of his monarchy, and his mighty army, we were amazed Were it that this news would gain added strength, for through it we will be elevated further.”

This quotation from Brook’s *The Jews of Khazaria* (p. 99) might represent the daydream of a Zionist some time before the founding of Israel in 1948. But in fact it describes the reaction of Hasdai ibn Shaprut, a Cordoban physician and advisor to the caliphs, upon hearing of the kingdom of the Khazars 1000 years before Herzl wrote *The Jewish State*. *The Jews of Khazaria* and Maroney’s *The Other Zions* demonstrate that Jewish political nationalism has had a much longer history than is usually recognized and that there have been a surprising number of independent Jewish states (or other entities) outside and before Israel.

Maroney’s book covers a remarkable amount of ground, and not just metaphorically. Opening chapters establish definitions (what does it mean to be politically independent?), raise issues (who is a Jew? what is a Jewish state?), fill in background (especially the “ten



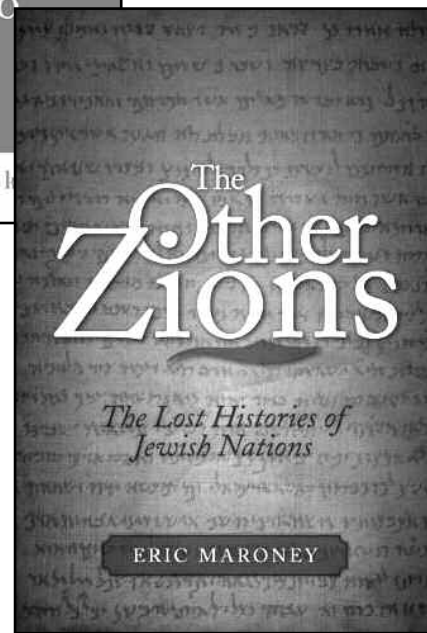
lost tribes of Israel,” often thought to explain Jewish enclaves throughout the world). *The Other Zions* then moves from the Beta Israel of mid-millennium Ethiopia—the term falasha, “landless peasant,” is a derogatory designation applied after they lost control of their territory in the isolated highlands—to modern Soviet Birobidzhan. Along the way there are detours to a number of destinations few of us have visited or even heard of: the Khazars of medieval Eastern Europe; the tribes of the Hijaz and the Kingdom of Himyar (Yemen) before the rise of Islam and the Berbers who sought to fight it; Adiabene (in what is now Iraq) in the first century of our era.

Diversity is a theme: the nomadic tribes of North Africa are

different from the great multi-ethnic empire of the Khazars, or the kingdom of Adiabene, whose rulers may have dreamed of an empire of their own which included Jerusalem. The thriving cities of Arabia were not much like the bleak expanses of the Siberian Far East. The Beta Israel, claiming as they did descent from King Solomon and Queen Sheba, are a far cry from the kings of Khazaria and Adiabene, converts for whom Judaism may have represented a third way between Christianity and Islam, or Parthia and Rome. Judaism took many forms. And Jewish Autonomous Region it may be, but Birobidzhan is obviously less free to do as it likes than a state such as Israel. (Who isn’t?) A final chapter provides a clear summary of the book’s contents and further reflections on Jewish identity. Maroney concludes, “Just as

there is no one definition of who is a Jew, so there is no one example of what is a Jewish state” (165).

No single person could plausibly pretend to be an expert on all this. Maroney is in fact not an academic historian at all, but an old-fashioned man of letters, the holder of an



MA in Philosophy and the author of a book on religious syncretism as well as one of fiction. Nevertheless (or “therefore”) he writes well, lays out evidence and arguments clearly, and appears to be a reliable guide through the thicket of anecdote, rumour and legend which enshrouds the history of many of these far-off times and places. Mind you, myth too may deliver a message. The Kahina, Queen of the Berbers, may be as

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The OUTLOOK on Books

made-up as Wonder Woman, and only one source says she was a Jew besides. But her tale (like the much more widespread medieval legend of the land of the warrior Red Jews on the other side of Prester John's kingdom) testifies to the deep desire of many Jews throughout history for a place of their own with all the powers and protections that implies, however and wherever they could find it. From this perspective, the present state of Israel is just another Zion, a further chapter in the narrative of Jewish political nationalism, and not necessarily the story's end.

Brook is not a professional historian either, but if he is an amateur, it is in the root sense of the word: he has a passion for his topic, demonstrated by many articles, his stewardship of the website of the American Center of Khazar Studies (Khazaria.com), and the first (well received) edition of this book (1999). The Khazars are the best-known inhabitants of another Zion, the subject of a famous book by Arthur Koestler (*The Thirteenth Tribe*) and of more explicitly fictional treatments, such as Michael Chabon's fantasy *Gentlemen of the Road*. Turkic-speaking nomads who settled in south Russia in the early medieval period, they were characterized by an unusual dual leadership. The kagan, the supreme ruler, was a sacred religious figure who lived in seclusion from the people and (originally at least) had his reign ended by a ritual execution (perhaps after 40 years). Administration and war were under the control of the bek,

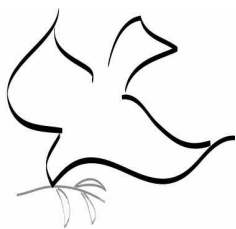
who led a standing army strong enough eventually to make the Khazars a third force between Christian Byzantium and the Islamic Caliphate, a centre of trade and a refuge for the persecuted of many faiths.

Though Jews were among the many peoples of Khazaria from the start, its identification as a Jewish state began only with the conversion of the bek Bulan from shamanism in the first half of the ninth century. Other members of the elite soon followed, and Khazar coins, some recently discovered, began to bear Jewish symbols as early as 838. Though it is uncertain how much of the population was Jewish, synagogues, Hebrew script and distinctive names (Pesach, Hanukkah) were widespread. Weakened by war, the kagan converted to Islam in the 960s in order to gain the support of the Caliphate; a combination of Byzantine and Russian forces put an end to Khazar independence in 1016.

The Khazars' influence has been detected throughout history, from the development of the Cyrillic alphabet and the trident emblem of Ukraine, to the transmission of the game of chess from Persia and the prevention of the Arab advance into Eastern Europe. Modern Ukrainian fiction figures Khazaria as a model of tolerance and co-existence, Russian anti-Semitism portrays it as a dark period of subjugation by the Jews. No claim has carried more weight than Arthur Koestler's theory that today's Ashkenazi Jews are their descen-

dants. Though on many issues Brook is content to report what scholars say (in many different original languages), here he comes to firm conclusions based on up-to-date genetic research, some of it his own: A very few Yiddish words (including yarmulke and davenen, "to pray") may be Turkic in origin, and there is a possible link between the Khazars and Ashkenazi Levites. "Based on the ... analysis of the history and genetics of East European Jews, we may say that it is very probable that there is a small Turkic Khazarian element among them" (226). But in general, the Ashkenazis stem from the Middle East. Nor are other groups, such as the Karaites or Kymchuks or Mountain Jews, likely of Khazar descent.

The generous reporting of others' views and profusion of detail sometimes make *The Jews of Khazaria* tough going. It might be best to read Maroney's chapter on the Khazars beforehand. But Brook supplies a timeline, a glossary, a list of Khazar names, an appendix on other examples of conversions to Judaism, and maps to help the reader who is less familiar with the subject than he is. This includes almost all of us: I for one am grateful for the mass of material he provides. Taken together, these two books supply testimony on the rich and often surprising political history of the Jews, rooted in (or around) the Biblical land of Zion but able to flourish and flower elsewhere as well. ♦



Rosh Hashonah Greetings
from the Montreal Outlook Collective,
with best wishes
for peace in the New Year.

