

Are modern Jews descendants of converts from the extinct kingdom of Khazaria or ancient Israel?

Eran Ehaik is an Israeli geneticist with a controversial idea. His highly controversial and contested research suggested that Ashkenazi Jews, the bulk of modern Jewry, are not of ancient Middle Eastern origin with a way station in Central Europe. Rather, Ehaik believes most modern Jews are descended from a now extinct people called the Khazars who are related to pagan Turks and settled in the Caucasus mountains in the 8th century around the same time that the nobility converted to Judaism.

"The Khazars certainly existed, though not much is known about them," [writes](#) Israeli historian Shaul Stampfer in the current Jewish Review of Books.

However, the story (or myth) of their conversion to Judaism has seized the imagination of generations of writers, from Judah Halevi, whose 12th-century classic *The Kuzari* is a philosophical dialogue between a Khazar king and the rabbi who convinces him of the truth of Judaism, to Michael Chabon, who considered calling his 2007 novel *Gentlemen of the Road* "Jews with Swords."

The historical evidence and most genetic research strongly contradicts Elhaik's belief. Rather, the evidence suggests the bulk of Jewish male lineage traces to ancient Israel and about half of Jewish females have ancient Israelite roots. Many Jewish men emigrated to Rome and Central Europe and took on local women as wives, but raised their children as Jews. The Jewish communities were very insular. Intermarriage with non Jews was rare. Writes Stampfer:

In a detailed review in the *Proceedings of the Russian Academy of DNA Genealogy*, Anatole A. Klyosov dismissed much of [Elhaik's] analysis as mere acrobatics. ... Recently, at least two studies have come to similar conclusions. A scientific team led by M. Metsapalu announced that it has found "no indication of Khazar genetic ancestry among Ashkenazi Jews" (the paper is forthcoming). Meanwhile another team led by M. Costa has argued both that there is strong evidence of the admixture of European women in the ancestry of Ashkenazi Jewish women and that there is no evidence for significant Khazar ancestry. On his website, Elhaik has argued that neither paper disproves his thesis. A third team, led by Doron Behar, has a paper coming out in the journal *Human Biology* whose title announces "No Evidence from Genome-Wide Data of a Khazar Origin for the Ashkenazi Jews." But Elhaik will, no doubt, maintain his position.

Critics note that Elhaik included only 8 Ashkenazi males in the study, which is important because he was doing analysis that depends solely on the Y chromosome. “The trouble with obtaining Khazar DNA is that no population group today is recognized to have descended from the Khazars,” writes Stampfer. Elhaik claims he got around that problem by analyzing Georgians and Armenians, but they are a dubious substitute, mainstream geneticists maintain.

While the evidence suggests that male Jews of recent Eastern European descent—Ashkenazim—trace their ancient roots to Israel, the story of Jewish women is cloudier and still widely debated. Analysis of mitochondrial DNA, which is passed along from mother to daughter through generations, shows that a sizable percentage—as little as 40% but possibly much more—came from indigenous Europeans, mostly from Rome, which was a Jewish outpost after the destruction of the Second Temple. As [Nicholas Wade reported in The New York Times](#), at least one recent study suggests that Jewish men who had settled in the Roman Empire took on local wives:

[Martin] Richards [the geneticist who analyzed the mitochondrial DNA] sees this as a possible time and place at which the four European lineages could have entered the Jewish community, becoming very numerous much later as the Ashkenazi population in northern Europe expanded from around 25,000 in 1300 A.D., to more than 8.5 million at the beginning of the 20th century.

Elhaik’s study has been widely circulated in anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli websites. It’s used to bolster a political and religious argument: that modern Jews have no historical or ancestral connection to ancient Israel but are really European interlopers who have unfairly taken away land from indigenous Arabs. Many religious Jews, supported by many Christians, claim a “right of return” to Israel based on the words of the Bible, and in fact Israel grants automatic citizenship to anyone who can confirm he or she has recent Jewish ancestry.

As the GLP’s [Jon Entine wrote at Forbes](#), “While Elhaik’s work has provided ideological support for those seeking the destruction of Israel, it’s fallen flat among established scientists, who peer reviewed his work and found it sloppy at best and political at worst.”

[NOTE: For more on this debate and the genetic history of the Middle East, read Entine’s book on Jewish and Arab ancestry: [Abraham’s Children: Race, Identity and the DNA of the Chosen People](#).]

“There is at least one virtue of Elhaik’s article,” Stampfer writes. “It is a valuable reminder that despite sophisticated-looking methods, peer review, publication in a prestigious scientific journal, not to speak of media coverage, there is no alternative to critical reading.”

When all is said and done, the accepted wisdom is still acceptable. There is no evidence that Ashkenazi Jews are descended from Central Asian “Jews with swords,” and there is every reason to think that they simply came from Central Europe. The findings of other genetic researchers that the DNA of most Jews seems to link them with other Jews more than with any other group has not been disproven.

Sources:

- [Are We All Khazars Now?](#), Shaul Stampfer, Jewish Review of Books
- [Genes Suggest European Women at Root of Ashkenazi Family Tree](#), Nicholas Wade, New York Times
- [Israeli Researcher Challenges Jewish DNA links to Israel, Calls Those Who Disagree 'Nazi Sympathizers'](#), Jon Entine, Forbes

Additional Resources:

- [Sudan connection: Are Ethiopian Jews descendants of the ancient Israelites?](#), Genetic Literacy Project
- [Ashkenazi Jewish women descended mostly from Italian converts, new study asserts](#), Genetic Literacy Project