
Hebrew at the Early Colleges: Orations at Harvard, Dartmouth, and Columbia

Shalom Goldman

Along with Greek and Latin, the primary “learned languages” of the European humanist tradition, Hebrew was taught at the American colleges founded before the Revolution.¹ As in Europe, where university instruction in Hebrew began at the University of Paris in the thirteenth century, commencement orations were delivered in the ancient tongues.² Not surprisingly, most commencement addresses were delivered in Greek and Latin, but investigation of college histories indicates that a number of them were presented in Hebrew.

The purpose of the “inceptio,” as the commencement exercise was known in medieval Europe, was to demonstrate acceptance into the guild of teachers and mastery of the languages of learning.³ The speech was often written by the school’s professor (or professors) of languages, and memorized by one of his more promising pupils. At Oxford and Cambridge, and later at the “American Cambridge,” Harvard, the tradition continued. At the 1685 Harvard College commencement exercises, four orations were delivered: one in Latin, two in Greek, and one in Hebrew. The Hebrew speaker was Nathaniel Mather, the sixteen-year-old son of the college’s newly appointed president, Increase Mather.⁴ Nathaniel died only four years later, at the age of twenty. After his death, making reference to the notion popular among Puritans “that they would heard Hebrew upon entering the gates of heaven,”⁵ Cotton Mather, Nathaniel’s older brother, wrote of him that “the Hebrew language was become so familiar with him, as if he had apprehended it should quickly become the only language which he should have occasion for.”⁶

At Yale, founded in 1718, and then at Dartmouth, established by graduates of Yale in 1769, Hebrew was a central (if unpopular) component of the curriculum. There are records of seven Hebrew orations being delivered at Dartmouth commencements.⁷ They seem to have

been written by John Smith, “Professor of English, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Chaldee.” Though Smith demonstrated considerable knowledge of Hebrew in his *Hebrew Grammar, Without Points, Designed to Facilitate the Study of the Scriptures of the Old Testament, in the Original*,⁸ his command of the language did not extend to matters of composition. The oration in 1799 was delivered by Jacob Patch, who went on to study medicine and later settled in Maine as a physician.⁹

The address written by Smith, with its awkward syntax and lack of compositional unity, stands in sharp contrast to an oration given a year later at the 1800 Columbia College commencement exercises. This speech was written by Gershom Mendes Seixas, chazan of the Shearith Israel Congregation of New York City and a trustee of Columbia College.¹⁰ Its style is that of the medieval rabbinic responsa, and it can be easily understood by the modern reader of Hebrew. Its content was apologetic; the oration offered a schema of American history into which the Jewish experience would fit. The Columbia oration was delivered by Sampson Simson, a Jewish student, and was titled: “Historical Traits of the Jews, from their first settlement in North America.” Jacob Rader Marcus has described Sampson Simson’s address as “the first evidence of a communal self-consciousness among American Jews.” But its message was, of course, lost to the audience. To provide a translation of an oration would have destroyed the charming illusion that the assembled knew the learned languages.¹¹

The 1799 Dartmouth oration had no such clearly defined theme, and was, rather, a vague exhortation to lead the good life and avoid the pitfalls of evil. It was composed of a pastiche of words and short phrases, many of them from the Bible, especially Proverbs and the Psalms, with some additional words and phrases culled from the Hebrew of the Mishnah.¹²

The text of the oration opens with a reminder that “the wise man will perform all of his deeds on the straight path, though the scoundrels would want him to stray down wayward paths.” He should avoid evildoers and their follies, and show contempt for their unjust deeds.

This opening is followed by an awkwardly constructed Hebrew paraphrase of the Christian maxim “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” adding, “Only in this will you find righteous-

ness: in bringing joy to others. But many of the people follow their passions rather than their reason and thus bring misfortune to all men." The oration closes with an often-quoted verse from Ecclesiastes, "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man" (Eccles. 12:13, King James Version).

The tradition of Hebrew orations at Dartmouth continued sporadically until the untimely demise of Professor Smith in 1809. At Harvard the Hebrew orations were a part of the commencement exercises until 1817, when they were discontinued.¹³ With the decline of interest in the learned languages and the shift away from the "canonical" texts of the humanistic tradition, the study of Hebrew in colleges declined.¹⁴ It was to experience a renewed interest in the mid-nineteenth century, when William Rainey Harper, originally professor of Hebrew at Yale, and later president of the University of Chicago, embarked on a program to introduce the study of the Hebrew language throughout the United States.¹⁵

Notes

1. For a survey of Hebrew studies in early American colleges, see S. Baron, "From Colonial Mansion to Skyscraper: An Emerging Pattern of Hebraic Studies," in *Steeled by Adversity: Essays and Addresses on American Jewish Life* (Philadelphia, 1971).

2. *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1972), s.v. "Christian Hebraism."

3. S. E. Morison, *The Founding of Harvard* (Cambridge, Mass., 1935), pp. 12-13.

4. D. de Sola Pool, "Hebrew Learning Among the Puritans of New England Prior to 1700," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 20 (1911): 55.

5. For example, F. B. Dexter, ed., *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles* (New York, 1901), vol. 3, p. 306.

6. Pool, "Hebrew Learning Among the Puritans," p. 56. "Before Nathaniel Mather completed his twentieth year, overstudy, added to the austere self-mortification and morbid religious torture which he practiced on himself, brought on his death."

7. Dartmouth College, Special Collections.

8. Boston College, 1803.

9. G. Chapman, *Sketches of the Alumni of Dartmouth College* (Cambridge, Mass., 1867).

10. I. Meyer, "Sampson Simson's Hebrew Oration, 1800," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 37 (1947): 430-433.

11. J. R. Marcus, *Studies in American Jewish History* 37 (1960): 231. For further comments on Simson's oration, see J. Kabakoff, "Hebrew Culture and Creativity in America," *Judaism* 3 (1954): 394.

12. On the knowledge of Rabbinic Hebrew among Christian Hebraists, see C. E. Schertz, "Christian Hebraism in 17th Century England as Reflected in the Works of John Lightfoot" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1977), pp. 19-21.

13. For a survey of Harvard Hebraica, see I. Meyer, "Hebrew at Harvard (1636-1760)," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 35 (1939), and H. Wolfson, "Hebrew Books at Harvard," *Harvard Alumni Bulletin*, April 29, 1932.

14. On the decline of the study of Hebrew, see G. F. Moore, "Alttestamentliche Studien in Amerika," *Zeitschrift fuer alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 3 (1888): 11.

15. C. Adler, "Hebrew and Cognate Learning in America," *Lectures, Selected Papers, Addresses* (Philadelphia, 1933), p. 286.

Shalom Goldman is Assistant Professor of Hebrew Studies at Dartmouth College. He is the organizer of a conference sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities entitled "Hebrew and the Bible in Colonial America: Historical, Literary and Theological Aspects."