
American Jewish Personalities

Professor George Bush: American Hebraist and Proto-Zionist

Shalom Goldman

George Bush (1796–1859), professor of Hebrew and Oriental literature at New York University from 1832 to 1846, was, according to the *Dictionary of American Biography*, “prominent in his day as scholar, writer, and controversialist.”¹ Though now well-nigh forgotten, he was once considered “one of the most profound and ingenious scholars of the present age,”² and his over thirty volumes of polemic, biblical commentary, and interpretive history of religion enjoyed great popularity in the mid-nineteenth century. His views on the Hebrew language, the Jews, and their place in Christian society, and his statements about the possibility of a restoration of the Jews to the Holy Land, had considerable influence. Thus his books have to be taken into account in any evaluation of the early study of Hebrew and Judaism in America. They are equally important in tracing the roots of “Christian Zionism” in American Protestant circles.³

Education and Early Life

The scion of an old colonial family, George Bush was born in Norwich, Vermont, in 1796. At age eighteen he enrolled in nearby Dartmouth College, having gained, in his high school years, considerable proficiency in Greek and Latin, and having then read widely in the classics. Ever since childhood Bush had been a bookworm, and it was difficult for his family to interest him in a trade. “Put into a printing shop that he might not injure his health by too much study, he was tolerated by them but a short time because he would become so interested in reading the manuscripts that he forgot to set the type.”⁴

At Dartmouth, Bush found in the study of religion a focus for his intellectual energies. Upon graduation he entered the Princeton Theological Seminary, where he was ordained to the Presbyterian ministry and later became a tutor. The seminary stressed a thorough grounding in the study of the Bible in its original languages and early translations,

and in this area Bush showed great promise. In addition to Hebrew, he mastered Aramaic and Syriac, later using his knowledge of these languages in his multivolume *Notes on the Old Testament*, published in the 1840s. But he did not lead the life of a sequestered scholar, for throughout this period his teachers were grooming him to be one of Presbyterianism's denominational leaders. As a result, he preached regularly at the church in Morristown, New Jersey. And it was there that he met the young woman he was later to marry, a certain Miss Condict.

In 1824 Bush was ordained and installed as pastor of the Presbyterian church in Indianapolis, Indiana. His wife came out from New Jersey to join him. In his new post his independent and inquiring spirit asserted itself and he was soon making statements from the pulpit to the effect that "there was not a shadow of scriptural authority for the Presbyterian form of church government." The ensuing controversy led to Bush's removal from the pulpit. Around this time his wife died after a sudden illness and he decided to move back East.

For some while Bush had been interested in Islam, a subject then little known in the United States, and in 1830 he published the first American book about it, *The Life of Mohammed*, issued in the popular *Harper Family Library* series. While the book's tone was inimical to Islam and its founder (the preface describes the work as "a selection and arrangement of leading particulars of the Impostor's history"), it served as a guide to, and summary of, the small body of scholarly literature in English about Islam and Moslems.⁵

In his years at Princeton, and later in Indiana, Bush had gained a reputation as a preacher and a scholar. With the success of *The Life of Mohammed* a popular book was now added to the roster of his achievements. He was offered a number of professorships, and is said to have turned down his alma mater, Dartmouth, where he was offered an appointment as professor of theology and pastor of the Hanover, New Hampshire, church.⁶

Aside from his personal attainments, Bush was in demand because competent Hebraists were a rare commodity in early-nineteenth-century America. The tradition of Puritan biblical scholarship had declined considerably, and as W. F. Albright remarked in his survey of biblical studies in the United States, "At that time there was probably no native-born American who knew enough Hebrew to teach it properly."⁷

The paucity of Hebraists was partly the result of a declining interest in Hebrew. American higher education had undergone significant changes in the first decades of the nineteenth century. As the “inflexible curricula” of the early American colleges became more flexible, training in the classical languages of antiquity was no longer the focus of higher education. Latin and, to a lesser extent, Greek were still offered, but Hebrew had lost its luster.⁸ Although Hebrew had been taught in most of the colleges founded before the Revolution, it had never been a popular subject, and students often complained about its inclusion in the curriculum—a legacy of the Puritan emphasis on understanding Scripture in its original languages.

At New York University

When New York University was founded in the early 1830s, it was intended to be forward-looking and scientifically oriented, a school that would make a break with the classical past, and more specifically, “an English college, one in which a knowledge of Latin and Greek should not be required.”⁹ Unlike so many American colleges, NYU was a secular institution with no denominational ties, but while it did not have a theological school, it did have a professorship of Hebrew and Oriental literature, and in 1831 the board of the new university invited George Bush to become the post’s first incumbent.¹⁰

Bush accepted and remained at NYU for fourteen years (1832–46). He did not remarry during this period and was, in the words of a contemporary, “one thoroughly delivered up to the student life more than any person I ever met.” After a few years he moved his effects, including one of the largest personal libraries in New York City, to a large loft on Nassau Street in lower Manhattan.

Thither he transferred his library, collected his books and manuscripts about him, and sat himself down to literature about as completely as any man of our day. His sanctum was a perfect den of learning. And there the professor might be found almost at any time of the day or night, as the presiding genius of the place: walled in by books, thoroughly fortified within ramparts of literature.

According to one of his colleagues at New York University, Bush’s home became an intellectual salon.

In those days the room was the resort of enquiring and ingenious minds from most parts of the country, as well as, frequently, of visitors from abroad. . . . I

think he had a wider range of intellectual sympathy, and enjoyed a larger intercourse with literary and professional men in consequence, than any other I have ever known.¹¹

Ensnconced in this comfortable situation Bush began to produce a steady stream of pamphlets and books. His initial success with *The Life of Mohammed* was followed by *A Treatise on the Millenium* (1832), in which he questioned the notion, then popular in some Protestant circles, that the Second Coming was imminent. As Bush saw it, there was no scriptural basis for such a belief. "The theory of the second personal and visible advent of the Saviour at the opening of the grand sabbatical period of the world, whether this be termed the millenium or the New Jersusalem, is in my opinion one of the most baseless of all the extravaganzas of prophetic hallucination."

The State of Hebrew Studies

The year 1835 saw the publication of Bush's *A Grammar of the Hebrew Language*; and a second edition of this work, "corrected and enlarged," was published in 1839. In this edition Bush acknowledged the help of his colleague the Jewish scholar Isaac Nordheimer, professor of Arabic at New York University.

Nordheimer, who as a young prodigy was a student at the renowned Yeshiva of Pressburg in Slovakia, where he studied with the head of the academy, Rabbi Moses Schreiber, had gone on to train in Semitic philology at the University of Munich, where he received a Ph.D. in 1834. Coming to America in 1835, he was invited to teach "Arabic and other Oriental languages" at NYU.¹²

Though Nordheimer was judged by Edward Robinson, dean of American biblical studies, to be the finest Hebrew scholar of his generation, he was not asked to teach Hebrew. This was still considered to be the province of Protestant clergymen like Bush, and was to remain so until the end of the nineteenth century, for Christian Hebraists, while thoroughly immersed in "Hebrew learning," were deeply ambivalent about Jewish participation in teaching the sacred tongue.

As Jerome Friedman has pointed out in his history of the flowering of Christian Hebraism in sixteenth-century Europe, "essentially, Christendom suffered from an approach-avoidance complex when dealing with things Jewish."¹³ Over a century before Nordheimer was

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VALLEY OF VISION;
OR
THE DRY BONES OF ISRAEL REVIVED.
AN ATTEMPTED PROOF
(FROM EZEKIEL, CHAP. XXXVI. 1-14)
OF
THE RESTORATION AND CONVERSION
OF THE JEWS.

BY GEORGE BUSH,
PROFESSOR OF HEBREW, NEW-YORK CITY UNIVERSITY.

NEW-YORK
SAXTON & MILES, 205 BROADWAY

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appointed to teach at New York University, Judah Monis, a Jew of Marrano extraction had to convert to Christianity in order to receive an appointment as instructor of Hebrew at Harvard College. His conversion did not allay the fears of his colleagues, who suspected that "Rabbi Monis" had not joined the church for the most high-minded reasons.¹⁴

In the preface to his *Hebrew Grammar*, Bush remarked that in the America of his day "several hundreds of young men in different stages of a collegiate and theological education are annually engaging in the study of Hebrew, besides a large number of persons of both sexes in private life who are prompted to the enterprise solely by a desire to drink from the pure fountain of revelation." He expressed his hope that Hebrew would recover the place of importance that it had in Protestant Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. "Judging from the past, we see no reason to doubt that these hundreds will soon be increased to thousands, if indeed the Hebrew be not, like the Latin and Greek, eventually incorporated into every course of liberal education."¹⁵

"Notes on the Old Testament"

The most popular of Bush's works was the series of *Notes on the Old Testament* that he embarked upon in 1840. He published seven of them, working his way through the Pentateuch, Joshua, and Judges, and then moving on to the Psalms. In these editions, the biblical text appeared in the original Hebrew; next to it was the Septuagint Greek and the Latin of the Vulgate. English translations of these three classical sources were then provided. This scholarly apparatus was followed by Bush's extensive notes.

Aware that the majority of his readers did not have the training to make use of the ancient languages, Bush explained in the introduction to *The Prophecies of Daniel* that "in placing the Hebrew text, with several accompanying versions, so prominently before the reader, I am aware of the hazard incurred by the somewhat repulsive array of unknown characters, to the popular effect of my expositions." But, he goes on to say, those who have studied some Hebrew will benefit from reviewing the original, and for those who have not, "I have consulted the convenience of the reader to the utmost practicable degree—by exact translation."

The accompanying notes were written for scholars and educated laymen; one did not have to know the Hebrew and the Greek to follow the thread of the argument and exposition. Some of these volumes, which were weighty tomes of three or four hundred pages each, went through as many as ten editions, attesting to their popularity in both schools and homes.

"The Valley of Vision"

Despite his high praise for the study of the language preserved by the Jews, Bush, in the tradition of the European humanist scholars, did not have much regard for the Jews as a people. Though his biblical studies eventually led him to advocate the return of the Jews to Ottoman-ruled Palestine, he cannot be considered a philo-Semite. In his *Valley of Vision; or, The Dry Bones of Israel Revived: An Attempted Proof of the Restoration and Conversion of the Jews* (1844), he argues against a spiritual interpretation of the prophecies concerning "the end of days," and advocates instead "the literal return of the Jews to the land of their fathers." And this, he said, is not to be effected by miraculous means.

Nothing more is implied than that it will be so ordered in Providence that motives will be furnished for such a return, appealing it may be to the worldly and selfish principles of the Jewish mind. It is by no means improbable that the affairs of the nations, or the progress of civilization, may take such a turn as to offer to the Jews the same carnal inducements to remove to Syria, as now promote them to emigrate to this country. Indeed when we consider the force of national predilections naturally operating with that people, and drawing them with a mighty attraction to their paternal soil, we can scarcely doubt, that a much less degree of worldly inducement will suffice to turn their faces and their footsteps thither than to any other region of the earth.

The realism of Bush's call for the return of the Jews was underscored by the inclusion in the book of a map of Palestine with areas marked for the settlement of the returning tribes.

The Valley of Vision was well received, as is illustrated by the review in the *Princeton Biblical Repository* of July 1844:

Prof. Bush is now well known, both in Europe and America, not only as a Biblical scholar and interpreter of Scripture, but as one who has for many years devoted his attention, in a special manner, to the subject of prophecy. . . . We need only say, that in the case before us we are not called upon to sit in judgment

on a flight of fancy, or an ignorant exposition of the English texts, but on a genuine attempt to lay open the true meaning of the inspired original by the help of the best means to which the author has had access.

Swedenborgian Mysticism

In formulating his view of the coming redemption and of the place of the Jews in it, Bush was deeply influenced by the Swedish scientist and mystic Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), a man whose all-encompassing mystical system exerted enormous influence in European esoteric circles. Swedenborg had himself studied Hebrew and had used the texts of Genesis and Exodus as the structural basis for his massive theological work, *Arcana Caelestia* (“Heavenly Secrets”). In this system of arcane symbols the Jew represents the power of the “external,” in contrast to the “internal” religiosity of the Christian. Writing of the Jews, Swedenborg says:

The nature of their fantasies and lusts no one can know . . . and this was granted to me in order that I might know. They love themselves and love worldly wealth more than all others; and besides above all others they fear the loss of honor, and also the loss of gain.¹⁶

By the mid-1840s Bush had become a full-fledged Swedenborgian, a convert to the Church of the New Jerusalem. His advocacy of Swedenborg’s ideas caused quite a stir in America. To promote these views he founded a monthly journal, the *Hierophant*, in which he “elaborated on the nature of prophetic symbols.” The journal lasted only a year, but during that time it was widely read and quite influential.

In 1845, in an address at the Odeon in Boston, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who would later write about Swedenborg in his *Representative Men* (1850), challenged Bush’s presentation of Swedenborgian doctrine. While recognizing Swedenborg’s contributions to modern thought (“No single man can judge of his various works. His wisdom can hardly be estimated”), Emerson questioned the validity of the system derived from the mystic’s work and called on Bush to rescind his support for it.

The 1847 publication of Bush’s *Mesmer and Swedenborg*, in which he attempted to validate the claims of Mesmerism by “spiritual” explanations, served to distance Bush even more from his academic and

clerical associates. Shortly afterwards, in the summer of 1848, he was reordained in the ministry of the Swedenborgians' New Jerusalem Church. He consented to do so "although opposed to all ecclesiastical rites."

Despite these changes in his religious outlook, Bush's colleagues still thought highly of him. An associate of his wrote:

His mind was omnivorous and devoured everything that it came in contact with. Gifted with a retentive memory, and ready on any subject, all the stores of literature and science seemed open to him. . . . His conversational powers were remarkable, while his amiable disposition and simplicity of manners rendered him accessible to all.¹⁷

But because of his increased involvement with the Swedenborgian Church, of which he was now one of the chief exponents in the United States, Bush left the academy and stopped publishing scholarly works. On leaving his university post and his large Nassau Street studio, "his den of learning," he set out to build a new life. In 1849 he married for a second time. His wife, Mary W. Fisher, shared his enthusiasm for his work in the new church and they were a close couple until Bush's death in 1859.

Bush spent the last decade of his life in furthering the cause of his newly adopted church. In a series of books he defended its doctrines, and toward the end of his life he published what is considered his most radical treatise, *Priesthood and Clergy Unknown to Christianity; or, The Church a Community of Co-equal Brethen*. Divested of his library, which he sold, and of his academic post, from which he had retired, he moved to the small New Jerusalem Church community in Brooklyn. A close friend, visiting Bush there several months before his death, found the former "controversialist" a changed man.

I do not think he ever loved controversy except as an instrument for the discovery or establishment of truth; but *now* his liking for it he declared to be gone. . . . His whole character had become softened and spiritualized; and, although then but slightly ill, he seemed like one getting ready to depart.¹⁸

In later years both Dartmouth and New York University seem to have been embarrassed by Bush's association with them. The college histories refer to him as a promising academician who was led astray by his unconventional beliefs. The Dartmouth alumni records note his

conversion to Swedenborgianism and his adoption of "the modern myth of spiritualism. These changes were much lamented owing to his high character and distinguished scholarship."¹⁹

One wonders whether Bush would have been surprised by the realization of the dream of the Return to Zion, then advocated only by a small group of "Christian Zionists"? And could he have imagined that a direct descendant of his brother would someday become the president of the United States? Surely he felt that the Divine Plan manifests itself in unusual ways, and that these ways may not appear to be miraculous. In the concluding pages of *The Valley of Vision* he wrote,

While I anticipate, moreover, the most august developments of providence on the field of human destiny, of which the dawns may even now be perceived by the enlightened eye, I look with equal confidence for a gradual accomplishment of all the splendid purposes of Infinite Wisdom.²⁰

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Notes

1. *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York, 1928), vol. 3, p. 347.
2. R. W. Grisworld, *Prose Writers of America* (Philadelphia, 1847), p. 354.
3. On the phenomenon of "Christian Zionism," see *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (1972), s.v. "Zionism" (vol. 16, col. 1154).
4. W. B. Hayden, "Reminiscences," in W. M. Fernald, *Memoirs and Reminiscences of the Late Prof. George Bush* (Boston, 1860), pp. 186-189.
5. G. Bush, *The Life of Mohammed* (New York, 1830).
6. F. Chase, *A History of Dartmouth College and the Town of Hanover, N.H.* (Brattleboro, 1913-28).
7. *Dictionary of American Biography*, s.v. "Moses Stuart."
8. See my "Biblical Hebrew in Colonial America: The Case of Dartmouth," *American Jewish History* 79, no. 2 (Winter 1989-90): 173-180.
9. *A History of New York University* (1836).
10. J. Chamberlain, *Universities and Their Sons: New York University* (Boston, 1901), p. 91.
11. Hayden, "Reminiscences," loc. cit.
12. On Nordheimer, see E. Robinson, *Bibliotheca Sacra; or, Tracts and Essays* (New York, 1843), pp. 379-390.
13. J. Friedman, *The Most Ancient Testimony: Sixteenth-Century Christian Hebraica in the Age of Renaissance Nostalgia* (Athens, Ohio, 1983), p. 15.
14. For a recent summary and review of the literature on Monis, see M. Klein, "A Jew at Harvard in the 18th Century," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 97 (1985): 135-145.

15. G. Bush, *A Hebrew Grammar* (New York, 1835).
16. S. Warren, *A Compendium of the Theological Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg* (New York, n.d.). On Bush and Swedenborg's writings, see *New Church Magazine* (London), no. 499, January–March 1931.
17. Hayden, "Reminiscences," p. 186.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 195.
19. G. Chapman, *Sketches of the Alumni of Dartmouth College* (Cambridge, Mass., 1867).
20. G. Bush, *The Valley of Vision; or, The Dry Bones of Israel Revived* (New York, 1844), Addendum B, p. 5.