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HEBREW and the Bible in America

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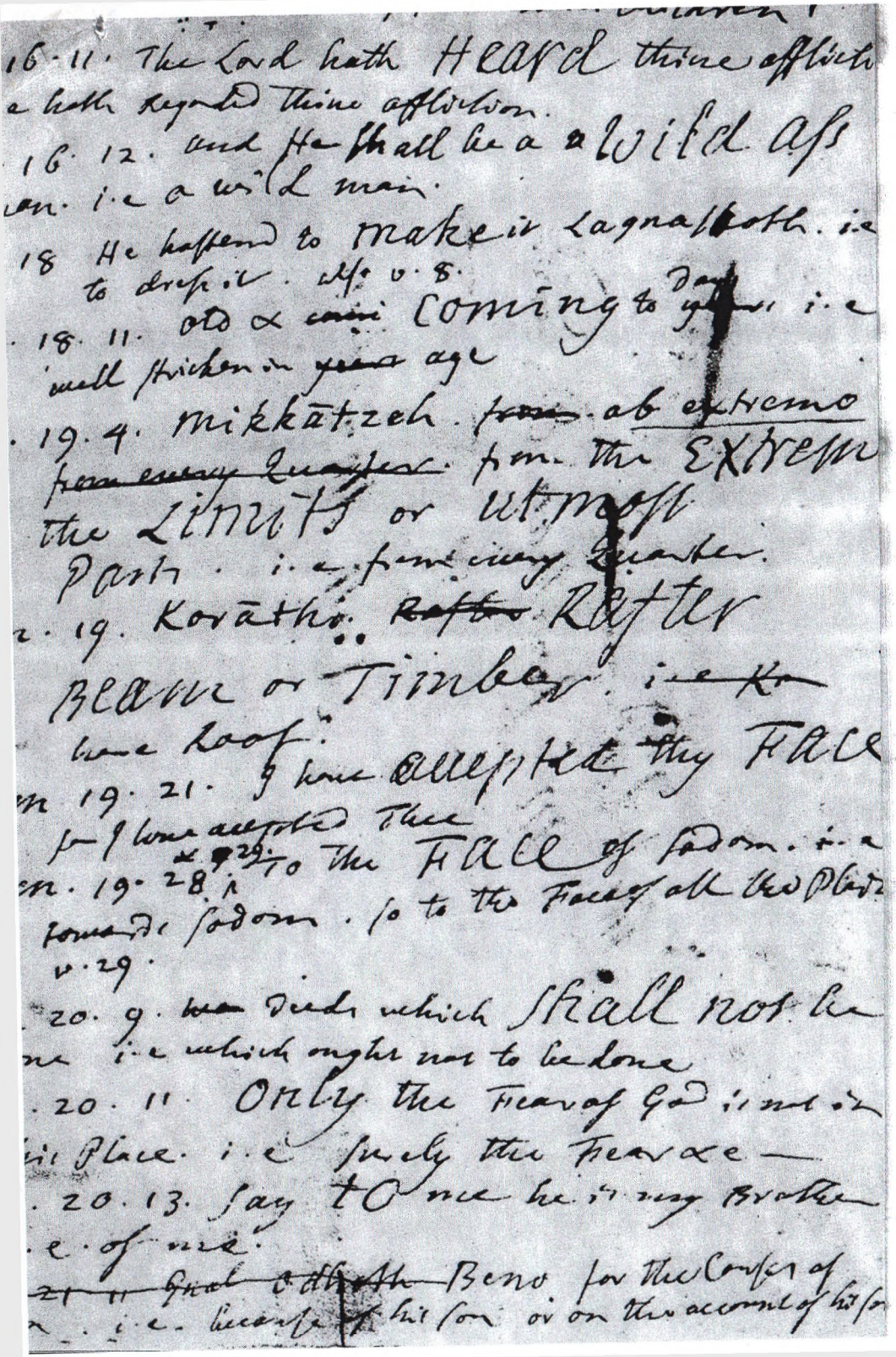

GOD'S SACRED TONGUE

Hebrew & the American Imagination

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PROLOGUE

On New Year's Day of 1812, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson resumed a correspondence, and a friendship, interrupted by eight years of personal and political antagonism. Their dramatic reconciliation was achieved through the efforts of their mutual friend Dr. Benjamin Rush, physician and fellow signer of the Declaration of Independence. In 1809 Rush had written to both men, telling of a dream in which the former presidents were reconciled. "I am sure an advance on your side will be cordial to the heart of Mr. Adams," Rush wrote to Jefferson. "Tottering over the grave he now leans wholly upon the shoulders of his old Revolutionary friends." Other mutual friends joined Rush's call for peace between the heroes of the Revolution, and eventually Adams and Jefferson wrote to each other. Both men saw this renewed exchange of ideas and views as an opportunity to explain the origins of American democracy to a new generation. Adams wrote to Jefferson, "You and I ought not to die before we have explained ourselves to each other." Adams was then seventy-six years old; Jefferson was sixty-eight. An eminent historian of the American Revolution noted, "This correspondence is generally regarded as the intellectual capstone to the achievements of the revolutionary generation and the most impressive correspondence in all of American history."[1]

Early in the renewed correspondence Adams raised questions about what we might today call the anthropology of the Native American tribes. How were the Indians organized? Did they have a system of government? And, most intriguing to Adams, "Have they any order of Priesthood among them, like the Druids, Bards, or minstrels of the Celtic Nations?" In response, Jefferson, long interested in the Native Americans of his native Virginia, provided Adams with a comprehensive review of Western theories of Native American origins. He lingered on the theories of James Adair, author of the 1775 book *The History of the American Indians*. In Jefferson's words, "Adair believed all the Indians of America to be descended from the Jews: the same laws, usages, rites and ceremonies, the same sacrifices, priests, prophets, fasts and festivals, almost the same religion." Rejecting this then widespread notion, Jefferson was nonetheless intrigued, as he was sure Adams would be, by Adair's theory of language—that the Indian dialects of North America were descended from "a common prototype," the Hebrew of the Bible. Observing that Indian ritual chants invoked God as "yohewah," later supporters of this "Jewish-Indian

That Adams and Jefferson were intrigued by this theory should not surprise us. In an age of revolutionary upheaval, questions concerning "origins" and the definition of national groups had become central. In an era of premodern Christian belief, public figures debated whether a providential scheme governed the relationship between ethnic groups. For American Protestants, both the Jews and the Native Americans were objects of fascination. A theory that made sense of the role the American colonies played in the fate of both peoples was especially intriguing. When combined with inquiries into the origins of language and questions of how the world's languages were related one to another, the theory was well-nigh irresistible. The Hebrew language, thought by many to be the world's first language, was viewed as the key that would unlock the mysteries of the origins and fates of nations and peoples.

God's Sacred Tongue tells the story of American engagement with the Hebrew language and the Hebrew Bible. Through biographical portraits of scholars, clergymen, explorers, and public figures, it ties the history of American Hebraism to questions of national self-concept, religious identity, and the place of the American Republic in world affairs. A biblical self-concept dominated much of early American thought. Manifest in the first two centuries of European colonization and settlement, this self-concept has again come to the forefront in the religious revivals of modern times. The notion that the United States is a nation with biblical roots, a nation chosen by God to play a major role in world affairs, is very much with us.

The study of Hebrew in Colonial America and in the early Republic was, for the most part, a Protestant endeavor. The few Jews resident in the thirteen colonies (estimates range from one thousand to fifteen hundred) used Hebrew for liturgical and other religious purposes, but theirs was a Hebrew quite different from the language studied in the early American colleges and in the homes of Christian ministers, professors, and legislators. Christian Hebraism focused on biblical interpretation, and it utilized teaching materials written by scholars who were often clergymen. Colonial American Jews, whether of Sephardic or Ashkenazic extraction, used and studied a rabbinic Hebrew that had a long history of continuous development. Their Protestant counterparts were students of what a modern scholar has dubbed "Divinity School Hebrew, the original language of the text sacred to Protestants, a text created by a 'primitive people,' Jews, who were of little contemporary relevance except for millennial groups." The pedigree of Divinity School Hebrew was then approximately two centuries old. Its origins lie in sixteenth-century German Humanism and in the related Reformation ideal of *sola scriptura*, the notion that the text of the Bible was the only source of revealed truth.[2]

rective to the prevailing notion that Christian study of the Hebrew language and Hebrew texts in both Europe and America implied sympathetic interest in Jews, be they individual Jews or members of an established Jewish community. To the contrary, some Christian Hebraists, though they demonstrated the "Christian truth" through their study of Hebrew, were most vocal and active in their anti-Judaism. In some cases this anti-Judaism took the form of missionary activity; in other cases Hebrew learning was used to expose the alleged "iniquities of the Jews."

As the chapters in Part I demonstrate, these Christian Hebraists were participating in a cultural conversation that extended beyond the confines of their small academic circle. Protestant thinkers in Europe, England, and the American colonies were engaged in varied attempts to understand the function of the Jews in history. In his 1983 book *Israel in the Mind of America*, *New York Times* journalist Peter Grose noted, "Between the early American Christian and the early American Jew there hung an awkward ambivalence." A century and a half earlier President John Adams's great-grandson Henry Adams highlighted these distinctions between American Christians and traditional Jews in the opening paragraph of his now classic *The Education of Henry Adams*. As an Adams born on Boston's Beacon Hill in 1838, Henry was christened by his uncle, the minister of the First Church "after the tenets of Boston Unitarianism. Had he been born in Jerusalem under the shadow of the Temple and circumcised in the Synagogue by his uncle the high priest, under the name of Israel Cohen, he would scarcely have been more distinctly branded."[3]

As Part II reminds us, later in the nineteenth century a new form of Christian engagement with Jewish issues and images appeared: support for the recently emerged Zionist movement. This support was especially strong among dispensationalists, those Protestants who subscribed to a messianic belief that linked the Second Coming to the fate of the Jews. Believers in the imminent "Great Tribulation" that would precede the final redemption, dispensationalists, believing that history was divided into eras or "dispensations," read biblical prophecies as references to the Jews of their own time. While many earlier Christian thinkers sought to sunder the ties between biblical Israel and the Jewish communities of their own time, these modern Protestant writers reaffirmed that connection. This reading dovetailed with Zionist thought, which emphasized the Jewish connection to the biblical historical and territorial past.

In the mid- to late nineteenth century only small and often marginalized groups of American Protestants held these millennialist beliefs. But by the end of the century their influence was felt among the evangelical churches. As

conservative camp within American Protestantism. It meshed well with the fundamentalist view, which criticized the prevailing cultural trend in society, and offered an alternative philosophy of history to the liberal post-millennialist notions that prevailed in American Christianity at the time."[4]

For some American Christian thinkers this new philosophy of history placed the fate of the Jews at center stage. The Millerites, mid-nineteenth-century Adventists who predicted the imminent return of Christ, predicted that the Second Coming would occur between Passover of 1843 and Passover of 1844. William Miller's response to the events of that year was a remarkable expression of Adventist interest in Jewish rituals and categories of thought. Miller had predicted the return of Christ at the end of April 1844. Thousands of people gathered outside of Philadelphia and other major cities to witness the Final Redemption. When the Second Coming did not arrive, Miller announced to the faithful that his calculations had failed to take into account the Jewish High Holy Days. Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), the most sacred day of the Jewish calendar, was the date of the redemption. That sacred day in 1844 would mark the culmination of the redemptive process. When that prophecy too failed, some of Miller's followers organized a voyage to Palestine, where they hoped to restore the Jews to their land.

In that same mid-century decade the Mormon Church was similarly engaged with questions of the Christian relationship to, and understanding of, Jewish history. Knowledge of Hebrew and Scripture would enable them to investigate further that relationship. Joseph Smith, the Mormon prophet, studied Hebrew with Joshua Seixas, a Jewish teacher from an esteemed New York rabbinical family. Smith's followers were among the first American Christians to call for the restoration of the Jews to the Holy Land. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries these Christian theological grapplings with Jewish history had political implications, as many dispensationalists, and other Christians, became ardent supporters of Zionism.

As *God's Sacred Tongue* demonstrates, we gain a richer understanding of Christian Zionism and of current American thinking on Israel by looking at the histories of both Christian Hebraism and evangelical thought. In the mid-nineteenth century Christian support for the idea of the restoration of the Jewish people to Palestine manifested itself in some thoroughly unexpected ways. Between 1850 and 1880 at least three groups of American Christians journeyed to the Holy Land with the intent of settling the land and physically preparing the way for the return of the Jews. The first group, led by Mrs. Clorinda Minor, a "prophetess" of the Adventist movement who had witnessed the great disappointment of 1843 and 1844, established colonies in Jaffa and Artas, a town

New Hampshire joined their "prophet" George Adams on a voyage to Jaffa. The colony failed when Adams succumbed to drink and "Oriental lassitude." Most of those who survived the Jaffa debacle slowly made their way back to the United States. In *The Innocents Abroad* Mark Twain recounts his encounter with the remnants of this sorry group. In 1881 a small group of Americans joined with European Christians to found the American Colony of Jerusalem. This was the longest-lasting and most successful of American Christian attempts to establish Palestine settlements. The leadership of the Zionist movement acknowledged their practical and ideological debts to these American Christian pioneers. As early as 1917 David Ben Gurion wrote of American settlement efforts and praised the settlers for introducing modern agricultural methods into that corner of the Ottoman Empire.[5]

As Part III of this book demonstrates, some of the most prominent American intellectuals of the twentieth century were deeply engaged in puzzling out the relationship between America's self-concept and the set of ideas and practices they recognized as Judaic. Support for Zionism was one way that this relationship manifested itself. Today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, American Christian support for Zionism is a political force to be reckoned with. Millions of church-going Americans regularly express support for the Jewish state and its policies. For the most part these Christian Zionists sympathize with the politics of the Israeli right and disdain the worldview of Israeli liberals. Since the late 1970s prominent evangelicals, among them Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, have formed a set of alliances with politicians of Israel's Likud Party. The prime ministers of that party—Menachem Begin, Yitzhak Shamir, Benjamin Netanyahu, and Ariel Sharon—have embraced evangelical support of Israel. In a December 2000 speech to a Christian Zionist conference in Jerusalem, Ariel Sharon told the fifteen hundred attendees, "We regard you to be one of our best friends in the world." Observers of the current political scene have noted that this synergy between the millennialist expectations of Christian Zionists and Israeli political needs is a potent force in the current administration's Middle East policy. Christian Zionism and Jewish Zionism have converged in a compelling and creative manner, and this convergence has had a profound influence on American life and on the lives of the citizens of the Middle East. The background to this development is to be found in the story of Christian Hebraism's encounter with the Jews.

I

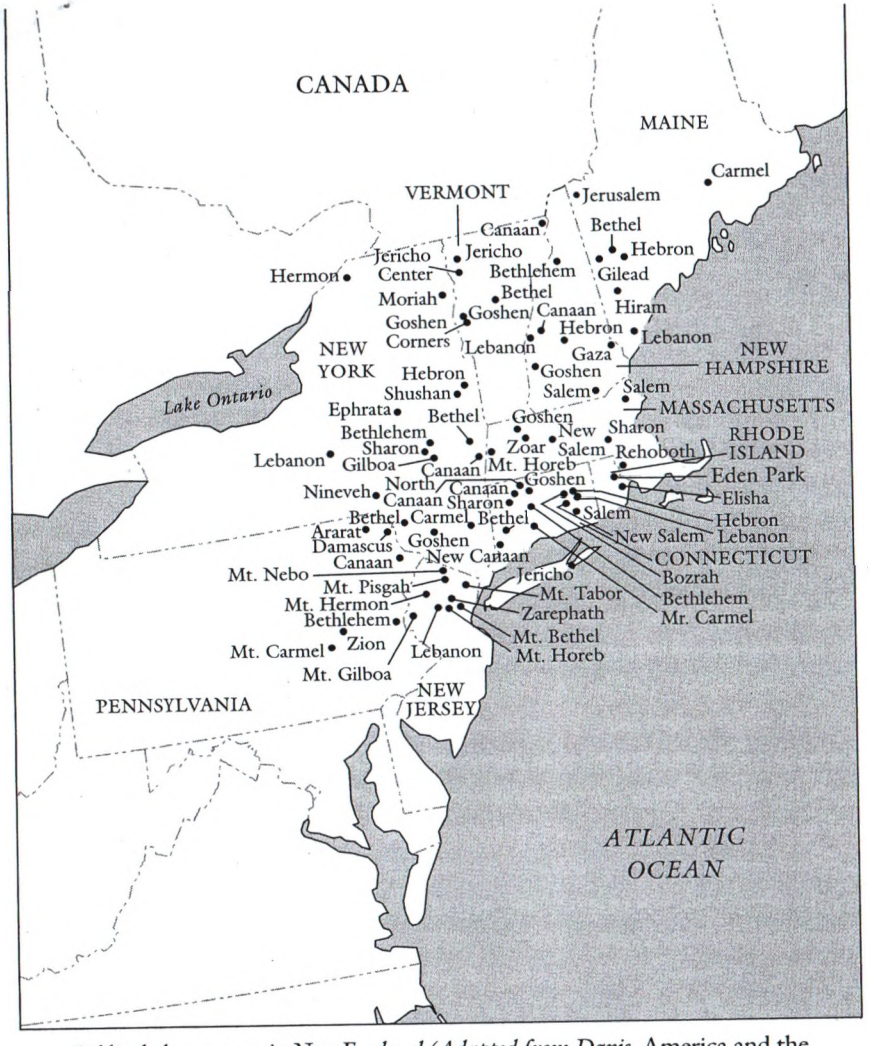
ZION ON AMERICAN SHORES

SEVENTEENTH AND EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES

If the first chapters of the Bible tell of the origins of all the peoples of the earth, how does one account for the native peoples of the Americas, peoples with no apparent relationship to other known human cultures? This question vexed many Europeans and early American settlers. Chapter 1 of this book looks back at premodern European notions of identity, language, and culture and traces the manner in which these ideas influenced the American colonies and the early Republic. The subsequent chapters tell of additional American attempts to study the Hebraic and Judaic traditions and understand the American experience through a biblical and rabbinic lens.

Against the Puritan Old Testament background of American religious life, New England intellectuals and scholars were eager to study the Bible, both in translation and in the Hebrew original. The Pilgrims' engagement with Hebrew and biblical studies began long before they reached New England. Some of them had studied Hebrew with Continental European scholars—especially in the Low Countries. Others embarked on the study of Hebrew and the Bible through the use of Buxtorf's dictionaries and other study aids.

Two Hebraists, William Bradford and William Brewster, arrived in the New World aboard the *Mayflower*. Bradford, author of colonial America's first narrative history, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, was governor of the Plymouth Colony. Many regarded his colleague William Brewster, who was both teacher and preacher at Plymouth, as spiritual leader of the Pilgrims. Both men, busy as they were in the early years of settlement, set time aside each day for the study of the Bible and the sacred tongue. In the original manuscript of *Of Plymouth Plantation*, written in 1650, Bradford included eight pages of Hebrew vocabulary notes.[1] These "Hebrew Exercises" included a list of more than one thousand Hebrew words and phrases and their English equivalents. The exercises are graced by Bradford's charming hymn of praise to the study of the Hebrew language:



Biblical place names in New England (Adapted from Davis, America and the Holy Land*; used by permission of the International Center for University Teaching of Jewish Civilization, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem)*

ancient language, and holy tongue, in which the law
and Oracles of God were write; and in which God
and angels spake to the holy patriarchs of old
time; and what names were given to things
from the creation. And though I can not
attaine to much herein, yet I am refresh-
ed to have seen some glimpse hereof
(as Moyses saw the land of Ca-
nan a farr of). My aime and
desire is, to see how the words
and phrases lye in the
holy texte: and to
discerne somewhat
of the same,
for my owne
contente.

This early interest in the Bible and the sacred tongue was rapidly institutionalized. In its early years Harvard, America's first college, was more closely focused on the study of Hebrew and the Bible than any parallel institution in Europe. The "learned languages"—Latin, Greek, and Hebrew—were at the core of the curriculum. The model that influenced New England's clergy was the curriculum of Cambridge University, from which almost two-thirds of that clergy had graduated. Since 1549 Cambridge had required Hebrew training for all candidates for the Master of Arts degree. But at New England's "Cambridge," Hebrew had special pride of place. Harvard historian Samuel Eliot Morison has noted that in the early period "the most distinctive feature of the Harvard curriculum was the emphasis on Hebrew and kindred languages." Dunster and Chauncy, the college's first two presidents, were, according to Morison, both good Hebrew scholars who saw themselves as "primarily orientalists." In addition to Hebrew, they studied and taught Aramaic, Arabic, and Ethiopic. Chauncy, in fact, boasted that he knew more Arabic than any other person in the American colonies.[2] When he was appointed president of Harvard in 1654, Chauncy requested that a chapter of the Hebrew Bible be read, in Hebrew, at morning chapel services.

Chapter 2 of *God's Sacred Tongue* tells the story of Hebrew at Harvard through biographical portraits of the college's first Hebrew instructors and professors. Harvard, the first of the early American colleges, was founded in 1636 to ensure that learning continued when New England's clergy "lay in the

languages," and classical texts served as the core of the curriculum. With the classics, Christian theology, logic, and mathematics comprised the course of study. The study of the Hebrew language, though relegated to a lesser degree of importance than the core subjects, was too important to exclude from the curriculum of any new institution of higher learning. As late as the early nineteenth century, the founders of New York University, which was established in the early 1830s with the stated purpose of secularizing American higher education, felt it necessary to appoint a professor of Hebrew to the faculty. This was Professor George Bush, Protestant clergyman and ancestor of Presidents George Bush.

That the founders of Harvard emphasized Hebrew and cognate studies was in keeping with the standards and needs of their place and time. Many of New England's founders were enthusiastic and learned students of Holy Writ and its original languages—one of which, Hebrew (invariably studied in conjunction with Aramaic and Greek), was thought to be the original language of humanity, the "primitive language" with which God created the natural order and man named the animals. This idea of Hebraic originality was more than a scholarly abstraction. One eighteenth-century Harvard graduate, Jonathan Fisher of Blue Hills, Maine, was so inspired by this Hebraist understanding of Adam's naming of the animals that he carved the biblical Hebrew names of his farm animals over their pens. Fisher aspired to collect a "biblical zoo" of domesticated animals. He also published a charming book on biblical animals—each illustration accompanied by the animal's Hebrew name and by biblical quotations about that animal. Two hundred years later, in British Mandate Palestine, Jewish researchers emulated Fisher's efforts when they established Jerusalem's "biblical zoo." Although these researchers were likely unaware that a prototype of their zoo had been established in Maine two centuries earlier, this correspondence is an example of the many striking American–Holy Land correspondences that will figure largely in my later discussions of emerging American interest in the Middle East and in the fate of the Holy Land.

Because the aftermath of the English Civil War had caused a reaction against Puritan religiosity and scholarship, Cambridge University of the mid-eighteenth century was not as strong in biblical scholarship and Hebrew studies as it had been at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Many Puritan scholars emigrated from England to Holland and later to colonial New England, thereby strengthening Hebraic and biblical scholarship in the colonies and at the colonies' first college. England's loss was thus Harvard's gain. Those Puritan scholars who sojourned in Amsterdam before journeying to

the opportunity to observe Amsterdam's thriving Jewish community and on occasion to engage its learned rabbis in conversation. But these arcane matters were not of interest to the young students of America's Cambridge. They resented the imposition of yet another "dead tongue." Latin and Greek posed enough of a problem. The requirement that all entering students know Latin and learn Greek seems to have been honored only in the breach. That European visitors to the colonies were dismayed by the failings of American classical education is indicated by this amusing tale: In 1703 visitors from Europe tried to engage Harvard students in a conversation in Latin. "When they went into Harvard Hall they found ten scholars smoking tobacco in a room which smelled like a tavern. They tried Latin on these youths and were astonished at the sad result."[3]

At seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Harvard, all freshmen had to study Hebrew. As early as 1653, students began to complain about this requirement. The instructor in Hebrew, Michael Wigglesworth, author of *Day of Doom* and a figure who has been described by Perry Miller as "the embodiment of repulsive joylessness," wrote in his diary in 1653: "Aug. 29. My pupils all came to me this day to desire they might cease learning Hebrew: I withstood it with all the reason I could, yet all will not satisfy them. Thus I am requited for love; and thus little fruit of all my prayers and tears for their good." A little later he is heard contemplating resignation, in part because of "my pupils' forward negligence in the Hebrew."[4]

Yale, founded in 1701, offered Hebrew in its early years. The founders of the Collegiate School, from which Yale developed, stated that students would spend their first year in "practice of tongues," especially Hebrew. As I discuss in more depth in Chapter 3, Yale was to become a center of interest in Hebrew under President Ezra Stiles, who assumed leadership of the college in 1778. Stiles's study of the language deepened to include readings in rabbinic and kabbalistic literature; these endeavors led to his friendships with six European and Palestinian rabbis. This is not to say that he had an unprejudiced view of the Jews of his day; while admiring their culture, Stiles was suspicious of "Jewish designs" on the outcome of the American Revolution.

As Chapter 4 notes, among Yale's first students was Jonathan Edwards, a gifted young scholar from the nearby Connecticut town of Southington. First in his small college class, Edwards would later become the Yale College tutor, a position he left for the pastorate. While serving as a rural pastor, Edwards embarked on a remarkable career of self-education and self-mastery. His philosophical and theological writings enriched the American religious conversation, and their depth, style, and sophistication astounded his British and Con-

With the exception of the rare Jew who visited the Massachusetts Commonwealth and the even more rare convert from Judaism to Christianity, Puritan interest in Hebrew and the Bible had no relationship with the Jews as a living community. As historian Arthur Hertzberg has noted, "The Puritans of New England were obsessed by the Jewish Bible, but they were not hospitable to Jews, or to Judaism."[5] Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European Christian Hebraists often had contact with Jewish scholars. But after the establishment of Hebrew teaching at European universities and the wide dissemination of Christian Hebraist grammars, dictionaries, and translations, Christian scholars no longer felt the need to turn to Jews for biblical knowledge. By the early decades of the eighteenth century, Christian Hebraism had developed a scholarly tradition of its own, independent of Jewish scholars and scholarship. Doctrinal issues intruded here as well. Some churchmen warned their flock against the pernicious effects that contact with Jews could bring. Hebrew knowledge received from Jewish scholars was thought to be suspect or tainted. This suspicion was reinforced by the reluctance of many Jewish scholars to engage Christian scholars in dialogue. These Jewish scholars feared (with considerable justification) that "dialogues" which quickly deteriorated into angry polemics could harm Jewish communities. The unequal power relation between the church and the synagogue was clear: the synagogue had been "vanquished." But though vanquished, it had not disappeared, and the refusal of the synagogue to accept the teachings of the church could not be forgiven or forgotten. Though Christian Hebraists might in some cases consult rabbis, they nevertheless regarded their answers to exegetical questions with suspicion. If Jewish scholars did not concede a doctrinal point, punishment might ensue.

Knowledge of Hebrew was, in the hands of some Christian missionaries, a conversionist tool. An 1823 *Hebrew Grammar*, written by Joseph Frey, a convert to Christianity and missionary to the Jews of the United States, alerts Christian students of Hebrew to the dangers of mispronunciation: "If Christian preachers were sensible of the good or bad effects produced upon the minds of the Jews, according as they pronounce the Hebrew language correctly or incorrectly, they would think no time too long, and no pains too great, to acquire the correct and accurate pronunciation." As Chapter 5 shows, many European and American missionaries studied Hebrew in order to sharpen their polemical skills and convince Jewish audiences that their language could be used to buttress Christian claims.

For Jewish scholars and their communities, there was a different doctrinal question to consider—the legality of "teaching Torah to non-Jews." As

and oral, was given to the Jews and not to others. As part of their covenantal relationship with God the Jews were to study the law and observe it. But they were not to share it with others. Especially egregious to Jewish sensibilities were Gentile attempts to appropriate Jewish ritual. According to one Talmudic statement, "A non-Jew who observes the Sabbath is subject to capital punishment" (Sanhedrin 58b). Throughout Part II, I take up the question of Jewish-Christian scholarly cooperation in considerable detail.

How can we understand the relationship between Hebraism and higher education, a relationship that is a recurring theme throughout this and later parts of this book? During the first two centuries of American life Hebrew learning played a role beyond the philological. It also had a philosophical aspect. For beyond training students in the use of the Hebrew language, biblical and rabbinic institutions and structures of education served as models for the founders of American colleges. Cotton Mather, in *Magnalia Christi Americana or The Ecclesiastical History of New England*, dubbed Harvard the first of our "*midrashot*," borrowing from the rabbinic tradition the appellation of the Talmudic study hall. Eliezer Wheelock, founder of Dartmouth College in 1769, spoke of his new school as an institution built on the model of the prophet Elijah's "School of the Prophets." With this comparison, Wheelock was evoking biblical models and the legacy of Yale and Harvard. More than a century earlier Harvard's President Chauncy used similar language when he referred to Harvard students as "sons of the Prophets." For these American college founders the very idea of the university was linked to Hebraic origins.

The final chapter of Part I, Chapter 6, focuses on the use of Hebrew in the American Jewish communities of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Hebrew was, of course, used in prayer and in the liturgical readings of scripture. New York's Shearith Israel congregation organized a Hebrew school for its children in the 1730s; schools in other cities sprang up over the following century. But Jewish higher learning and the production of Judaic scholarship would not flourish on American shores until the twentieth century. The prehistory of the American Jewish success story can tell us much about later unexpected developments.

It would be an error, however, to consider New England Hebraism a direct antecedent of later American Jewish success in cultural and intellectual spheres. Twentieth-century attempts to tie the Hebraism of the New England Puritans to issues of American Jewish identity have little validity. For example, Yale's Hebrew-language insignia, now emblazoned on notebooks, coffee cups, and tee-shirts (and adopted by the Yale Hillel), was chosen by early eighteenth-century Hebraists who had no knowledge of—or interest in—Jews. As the

the oracle worn by the High Priest of Israel on his bejeweled breastplate. That at the end of the second Christian millennium fully one-third of Yale's undergraduates are Jews would have surprised its early eighteenth-century founders. What early Puritan Hebraists like Ezra Stiles would have thought of the 1997 case of the "Yale Five" (five Orthodox Jews who sued Yale, contending that the college rule that all freshmen live in mixed-sex dorms violated their religious freedom) is an intriguing question for speculation.

1

LOST TRIBES AND FOUND PEOPLES

Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europeans understood exploration and discovery in the New World in biblical and Hebraic terms. This is, in effect, the earliest chapter in our history of American Hebraism, a Hebraism shaped within the context of the European history of ideas. For the Americas were thought to hold "Hebrew secrets." With the news of the European discoveries of the Americas, Christians and Jews sought ways to contextualize these astounding discoveries. Not surprisingly, a biblical worldview provided the context to explain the wonders of this New World. While Christians could accept that continents might remain unknown or forgotten for long periods of time, the enigma of unknown or forgotten peoples was more difficult to fathom. Had the Bible not accounted for the origin and spread of all of humankind? Genesis, Chapter 10, represents the three sons of Noah as the ancestors of all who live on the earth. For centuries the common Western understanding of the origins of the earth's diverse and far-flung peoples was that Europeans were descendants of Japeth, Africans descendants of Ham, and Middle Easterners the children of Shem or Sem. (Hence the designation "Semitic"—first applied to a group of Middle Eastern languages, later specifically to Jews.) The peoples of the Far East were variously assigned to one of the three sons.

But what of the peoples of the New World? To which son of Noah were they to be attributed? As historian of ideas Anthony Grafton noted: "The discovery of human beings in the Americas, after all, posed a hard question to scholars who believed that the world had a seamless and coherent history: where did they come from? Neither the Greeks, the Romans, nor the Jews had known of their existence. How, then, could Greco-Roman and Hebrew texts be complete and authoritative?"[1]

A ready-made solution to the enigma of the Native Americans was to link them to a people of biblical times who had long been lost to history: the "Ten