College orations in "the learned languages" had their origins in the European Humanist tradition. The heirs to that tradition, engaged in teaching at the emerging universities of late medieval Europe, would compose orations in Greek, Latin, and, occasionally, Hebrew.¹

In Colonial America, this tradition was instituted at Harvard as early as 1643. Hebrew orations became a feature of the commencement exercises of the 1680s. In 1682 President pro tempore Increase Mather "gave an oration in Hebrew in praise of academical learning." The previous year his son, Cotton Mather, had presented in his thesis the argument that "the Hebrew vowel signs were of divine origin."²

The pretense, widespread in Europe, that the assembled understood the orations was dispensed with in America by the early eighteenth century. In 1703 visitors from Europe tried to engage students at Harvard in a conversation in Latin. The consequences were disheartening to these visiting scholars who had been told of the fidelity of the "American Cambridge" to European educational traditions. "When they went into Harvard Hall they found ten scholars smoking tobacco in a room which smelt like a tavern. They tried Latin on these youths and were astonished at the sad result" (Oviatt, 1916, p. 424). We can safely assume that the students' knowledge of Greek and Hebrew was at a somewhat lower level.

I. THE DARTMOUTH HEBREW ORATION (1799)

At the time of Dartmouth's establishment in 1769, the Colonial American tradition of Hebrew instruction, and its concomitant tradition of

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¹ For a survey of Hebrew learning in the Christian West see Loewe (1971, pp. 10–70).
Hebrew oration, was on the wane. Instruction in Hebrew was soon to become optional at Harvard (1787) and not long after, at Yale (1789). Only one of the seven Hebrew orations delivered at Dartmouth commencement exercises during the tenure of Professor John Smith (1777–1809), Professor of Greek, Latin, Hebrew and “the Chaldee,” or Aramaic,
has been preserved in the college archives. Written in a clear Hebrew hand, it seems to have been penned by Smith himself. The Hebrew handwriting of the manuscript copy of his *Hebrew Grammar* (1803) bears a close resemblance to the text of the oration. This text, an exhortation to righteousness and piety, has, on the right margin of the Hebrew manuscript, the English inscription, “Jacob Patch, Dartmouth, July 16, 1799.” College records reveal that Patch, originally from Groton, Massachusetts, was a promising student who went on to a successful career in medicine in Camden, Maine (Chapman, 1867, pp. 97–98).

The New England press reported on the commencement activities which were held on August 28, 1799. *The Farmer’s Museum*, a newspaper issued every two weeks at Walpole, NH, devoted a column to the proceedings and noted the various languages used at the ceremonies. The morning’s festivities opened with a salutation in Latin, which was followed by orations in French and Greek. The afternoon’s program of speeches included two orations in English, one philosophical and the other literary, and it closed with “a Hebrew oration, by Mr. Jacob Patch.” The various degrees were then conferred and we are assured by the *Farmer’s Museum* that “the different exercises of the day were sensible and elegant; and every transaction decent and in order.” In the translation that follows, words within parentheses are transitions inherent but not directly stated in the Hebrew text.  

Execute Justice:

Let every wise man direct his deeds to the straight and honest path. Wicked men who wish to take the twisted paths say there is a way within them. He will say: any man (can) make the law if He had not given the form (of the law). And from then on an error establishes itself in the heart of the one who espouses it (the belief that any man can make the law).

That same curse of wickedness (shall dwell) in the neighbors of the one who errs. Therefore (the wise man) shall not observe it, for from looking into it he shall be turned away from his vigor. But when we do justice we shall be exalted and grow in wisdom and knowledge. We shall calculate our punishment and reward, and our blemishes, and we shall despise their burden.

Believe (in good), but do not believe in those who speak evil. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. This is the law, this is the commandment, and these are the deeds which give strength to a fellow man. To this the eternal nation will give their testimony. Many chose to follow their passions much more than their wisdom. The animal impulses reign over all;

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3. I wish to thank the Dartmouth College Library for their assistance and permission to publish this document.
it rules their deeds more than wisdom does. “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.”

This call to lead the good life and avoid the pitfalls of the “twisted paths” lacks compositional unity. It is a pastiche of short phrases written in emulation of the style of Proverbs; many of its Hebrew words are “Hebraized” Aramaic words. Professor Smith’s knowledge of the vocabulary and grammar of Biblical Aramaic was quite thorough. His Aramaic grammar, written in the 1770s, remained unpublished, though its counterpart, the Hebrew Grammar Without Points, was issued at Boston in 1803. Despite the grammatical erudition displayed in both books, the author demonstrated little knowledge of Hebrew syntax, and the oration reads as a collection of short phrases. The text is replete with allusions to New Testament quotations, most notably in lines 12–14 (of the Hebrew text), a direct evocation of Matthew 7:12 (“Do unto others as you would wish them do unto you”), which in turn echoes Hillel’s oft-cited dictum, “What is detestful to you do not do to your fellow-man” (Shabbat 31a). The oration closes with the penultimate verse of Ecclesiastes.

II. THE COLUMBIA HEBREW ORATION, 1800

The Hebrew oration delivered at Columbia College in 1800 is a markedly different document. Its style is that of Rabbinic Hebrew. And though it is riddled with errors, its author, Gershom Mendes Seixas, was able to construct an almost seamless narrative in a style approximately that of the

4. I am indebted to K. Spanier of the New School for Social Research for her help with the translation and her suggestion that many of the obscure words in the text were Aramaic words that Smith had “Hebraized.”

5. My thanks to C. Stinson of Dartmouth College who provided these citations and placed them within the context of Christian Hebraism.
Rabbinic Responsa. The oration provides a thumbnail sketch of American Jewish history up to 1800. For its author was the one Jewish figure in America who thought most about the meaning of the American Revolution and its relationship to Jewish ideas of exile and redemption. Seixas, cantor of New York City's Shearith Israel Congregation, was a trustee of Columbia College from 1784–1814. He entrusted the delivery of the oration titled “Historical traits of the Jews, from their first settlement in North America” to Sampson Simson, a Jewish student whose family had long been associated with the Shearith Israel Congregation and who was among the fifteen graduates of the college that day admitted to the degree of Bachelor of Arts. Simson’s grandfather, Joseph Simson, was an English Jew who arrived in New York in 1718. According to J. R. Marcus, “he was, it would seem, an excellent Hebraist, and his own generation referred to him as ‘Rabbi.’” Ezra Stiles, President of Yale from 1778 to 1795, visited Simson at his home in Wilton, Connecticut, and records in his diary that he corresponded with Simson in Hebrew.6

The text of the Columbia oration is preserved in Seixas’ hand in the Lyons Collection at the American Jewish Historical Society. An English translation was published in 1920 with notes by J. J. Lyons. The Hebrew text with an introduction by Isidore S. Meyers was published in 1947.7

The Hebrew text and its translation follow:

Sampson Simson’s Hebrew Oration, 1800


The United States of America

Although not accustomed to speak in public, I rise with perfect confidence that you will kindly consent to listen to me and I earnestly crave your indulgence for any error I may commit in the course of my address. And if I have found grace in your eyes I shall speak concerning my brethren residing in this land. It is now more than 150 years, since Israelites first came to this country, at the time when this province was under the dominion of Holland, but until now no one of them or their children has on a similar occasion been permitted thus to address a word in public, and I am a descendant of one of those who were among the first settlers here. It is known to you, that at the time when this province, then called New Amsterdam, was exchanged for the colony of Surinam, all the inhabitants remaining here came under the dominion of England. Among them were the Jews who until then could only congregate for worship in private rooms in their own dwellings until the year 5490 [1730] (according as we reckon in this city of New York). It was then that our regular Synagogue was built, where we have been serving Almighty God unmolested for upwards of seventy years. During this long period the Jews have not been as numerous as the other sects, for only few in number they came hither; but now, behold the Lord was enlarged and increased in this and in all the other provinces of these United States the descendants of those few families that came from Holland in the year 5420 [1660], one hundred and forty years ago. Among these was one man with his wife, one son and four daughters. The father and son died soon after they had reached this place, leaving the wife with her four daughters and behold they have exalted themselves in this city, and from them sprang forth many of the Congregation now known as “Shearith Israel.” Afterwards, in the year 1696, there came from France some families by the way of England, who brought with them letters of denization from...
the king, constituting them freemen throughout all the provinces under his
dominion. And in the year 1776 at the time when the people of this country
stood up like one man in the cause of liberty and independence every Isra­
elite that was among them rose up likewise and united in their efforts to
promote the country's peace & prosperity. And even now we endeavor to
sustain the government of these provinces, free of any allegiance to any
other whatsoever, monarchial or republican, and we exclaim in the lan­
guage of King David, "Rid us, (O Lord!) from the hand of the children of
the stranger, whose mouth speaketh vanity and whose right hand is the right
hand of falsehood."

The local newspapers reported on the Columbia festivities. After the cus­
tomary salutary address in Latin three orations in English on current
affairs were offered. Sampson Simson's Hebrew oration followed. The
Republican Watch-Tower of New York concluded its report of the days
activities with the observation that "the friends of classical learning wit­
nessed, with more than usual pleasure, the display of Grecian, Roman,
and Hebrew literature on this occasion." The report noted that "the busi­
ness of the day was opened with prayers, by Dr. Kemp, senior professor,
the president, Dr. Johnson, having resigned." 8

Though not noted at the time, it was ironic that Columbia's president
was not present at the ceremony. He might have been among the few to
understand the Hebrew oration. For William Samuel Johnson, president
of Columbia College (formerly Kings College) from 1788 to early 1800,
had studied Hebrew as a child as a student of his father Samuel Johnson,
first president of Kings College. The elder Johnson, an enthusiastic and
learned Hebraist was educated at Yale, later serving there as tutor in
Greek and Hebrew. His significant accomplishments in the establishment
of Columbia were enhanced by his intellectual achievements, of which he
valued most the publication of his Hebrew Grammar in London in 1767.
It was the elder Johnson's adherence to the principles of the "Old Learn­
ing" with its emphasis on the "learned languages," that brought him into
open conflict with the trustees of Columbia and eventually led to his res­
ignation. Samuel Johnson attempted to pass on his Hebrew learning to
both of his sons and he was to boast that Samuel Jr. was proficient in
Hebrew at the age of five. 9

The Seixas and Simson families would later have further roles in the
development of Hebrew learning in America. James Seixas taught
Hebrew at Oberlin College in the 1830s. His career provides a curious

footnote in the development of Mormonism and its relationship to Hebrew. Seixas, a convert to Christianity, was called by Joseph Smith to Nauvoo, Illinois where a “Hebrew School” was organized for the hierarchy of the emerging church. Orson Hyde, one of the early founders of the church, and the man Smith sent to Jerusalem in 1841 to bless the city and pray for the “ingathering of the exiles,” wrote a testimony to Seixas' efforts as Hebrew teacher.\textsuperscript{10}

The Columbia oration, written in the tradition of the Rabbinic Responsa has been described by J. R. Marcus as “the first evidence of a communal self consciousness among American Jews” (1968, p. 231). The orator, Sampson Simson, after completing his studies at Columbia, went on to study law with Aaron Burr and became a prominent attorney. He was instrumental in the foundation of the Jewish Theological and Scientific Institution and took a lively interest in the first stirring of agricultural settlement in mid-nineteenth century Palestine.

The 1800 oration was written in Rabbinic Hebrew. It was strikingly different from the Hebrew taught by Christian Hebraists in American colleges, the tradition exemplified by the Dartmouth oration of 1799. By the 1830s we can see the growth of a revived tradition of American Hebrew scholarship. This was the result of the scientific study of Hebrew philology in Germany. Through the efforts of Moses Stuart, Professor of Hebrew at Andover Theological Seminary, and the author of an important Hebrew Grammar (1831), a new Hebrew learning, more precise and scientific, was transmitted to the American academy. Support for this revival of Hebrew learning, and for its being based on scientific grounds, was to arrive in America in the person of Isaac Nordheimer. Trained as a Talmudist by Rabbi Moses Schreiber of Pressburg and as a Semitist at the University of Munich, Nordheimer, who taught at New York University and Union Theological Seminary, represented a unique combination of the best of both traditional Jewish learning and the German philological tradition.\textsuperscript{11} His tragic death at thirty-three in 1842 was a significant blow to the revival of Hebrew learning in America. And it was not until the 1880’s, when German Jewish scholars emigrated to the United States and entered the ranks of American university professors, that a revival of Hebrew learning was to take place.

\textsuperscript{10} On Orson Hyde in Jerusalem see Malachy (1971, p. 1154).
\textsuperscript{11} On both Stuart and Nordheimer see Chomsky (1958, pp. 123–145).
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EDITORIAL APPENDIX

In the "Dartmouth oration," Prof. Goldman has drawn our attention to an unpublished document that casts light upon the status of Hebrew in the early years of the American Republic. In addition to his placing this text in the context of other work in Hebrew at that time, we wish to underscore certain peculiarities in this text.

The text published here is written in an awkward hand that does not write consistently: letters shrink and expand from word to word and spacing is erratic between letters and words. One word is hyphenated because of inadequate space at the end of the line (bynwyjym 1.17–18), while four other words are cramped and even distorted in order to accommodate them at the end of a line (ındanwym 1.3, wmkthpwyk 1.8, ħbr 1.15, ćlyym 1.19). The writer has left out some letters, only to insert them later when the error was detected (waw in ħnwj 1.4 and perhaps the yod and mem in ħwmryrj 1.3). Letters with distinctive final forms are not consistently rendered (medial kaf closes mwlk 1.19; medial nun closes wmn in line 6). The final sentence of the oration is excerpted without change from Qohelet 12:13.

The inconsistent treatment of the text is also reflected in the punctuation employed: the pre-Masoretic sentence closure of two dots appears ten times while the atnach, used to mark a major pause within sentences, appears only 5 times. The impossible situation where two atnach's appear within a single unit is found in lines 16 and 18. Presumably an atnach should appear in lines 5, 6, 8, 10, 13.

Apart from w̄wth (1.7), the particle ęt (w̄t in 1.11) appears fourteen times marking a definite direct object (its appearance in 1.2 may represent the homonymous preposition). The author however, does not like to insert the definite article, doing so only twice (1.5 htbnjt, 1.20 ętjym, the latter being a biblical excerpt). When the noun marked by ęt has a suffix pronoun, usually no article occurs (1.2 ęlylwjyk, 1.11 ħšbwynw, 1.17 ępyym, 1.21 mswtwy) but in one case it does appear where it is incorrect (1.11 hmgnwyynw). The syntax of a verse such as Jer 22:3, "Do justice" (ćasū mишpāt), whose sentiment also informs the entire text, is echoed throughout, for the abstract noun appears without the article (ll.1, 4, 9 mишp)). But in four other cases the arti-

1. Lines 1, 4, 5, 7, 9, 12, 13, 15, 19, 21.
2. Lines 2, 14, 16, 18, 20.
The definite article also appears where it should not (before the first member of a construct chain hm\textsuperscript{3}wyy hywt 1.18).

Perhaps the single most characteristic feature of this composition is its exploitation of obscure and rare words. The writer deliberately avoids common words in order to achieve the appearance of erudition and competence. Unfortunately this results only in a text which is stilted and often opaque. Due to the unintelligibility of a number of phrases, we here offer another alternative translation annotated to underscore the difficulties.

Execute Justice!

Every wise man is established\textsuperscript{3}, along with his deeds, in a sure (and) straight line, while\textsuperscript{4} fools wish to walk in meandering paths, saying,\textsuperscript{5} “Freedom is in them!”\textsuperscript{6} Let every man say, “Execute justice!”

If he does not set the example, from that point on\textsuperscript{7} error is established in the heart, feigning sanctity in it,\textsuperscript{8} while that same curse\textsuperscript{9} of folly is established\textsuperscript{10} in the mind\textsuperscript{11} of the one who errs. Therefore let him not gaze upon it so that he neither sees it nor is turned away from his vigor.\textsuperscript{12}

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3. There is no need for a jussive here (cf. Prov 12:3). The form is niphal (cf. tkwn tw’h in 1.6) even though the hiphil might make better sense: “The wise man establishes (yäkin) his deeds. . . .”

4. The initial waw in wdpşw reflects a common adversative consecution characteristic of the book of Proverbs (e.g. Prov 12:1; 27:6; 28:1, 29:15 passim), as does the alternation of tenses (e.g. Prov 13:17, 18, 24; 28:1; 29:7, 15).

5. If Patch was following biblical idioms, one might expect l’mr if direct discourse is to follow, but there are infrequent precedents for the participle of l’mr (e.g. Jer 43:2, Ezek 22:28). The use of the particle kl to mark direct discourse has been effectively challenged in this century, but in the eighteenth century when Patch was writing, its correspondence with the Greek hoti recitativum was perceived as patently obvious.

6. drr represents a defective orthography for drwr. The antecedent of the plural feminine pronoun bhn can only be rhrw.t.

7. Patch’s inconsistent spacing and use of final letter-forms makes it easy to read the two words wmn ־z as one wmn ־z.

8. This reflects the dimension of pretense associated with the hithpael (GKC §54d).


10. Supplying the verb on the basis of elliptical parallelism.

11. The biblical hapax in Job 38:36 is often given this meaning, but it is by no means certain. Nevertheless, Patch clearly is using it in this sense as a counterpart to “heart.”

12. min + infinitive negates a dependent verbal clause (e.g. Isa 5:6, Ex 14:5). Presumably the two waws are functioning like kai . . . kai . . . in Greek.
But when we do justice we shall be exalted in discernment and knowledge, and we shall test our armaments and shields, and we shall despise deception. To believe, or not to believe, anything that is said is grievous. Do unto others as you want them to do to you. This is [the] law; this is [the] manner of all deeds that gladdens [one's] companion. Let people give expression for ever. But many go after their passions more than [they follow] their discernment, and the animal lusts reign over all men in their deeds more than their knowledge reigns over them.

End of discussion! All has been heard! Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.

13. The hithpael of g'kh is attested only in post-biblical Hebrew.
14. Patch employs a rare biblical word twice (deca in 1.10, 19) when a very common alternative was at hand (da'at or de'r'ah).
15. Patch is employing the waw-consecutive with the perfect wspronw in this metaphor. Its meaning here corresponds to Judg 7:4, also in a military context. For the significance of h'sbwn see 2 Chr 26:15. "Shield" mgn appears in the Bible as both masculine and feminine, with both plural forms attested (mgnym and mgnt).
16. See Prov 26:26 for maššāţôn "deception."
17. Patch employs here, as in line 3 (hlwk), the infinitive without an initial lamed, as often in the Bible (cf. 1 Sam 15:22).
18. Although the text seems to read l'lh'myn, sense can be made only by recognizing the writer's inconsistent spacing of letters for what should be l'lh'myn.
19. This is clearly the intent, although the impossible Hebrew does not say this.
20. Not only are demonstrative pronouns employing the base hallaz- or hallez-rare in the Bible, but this particular form appears only once (Ezek 36:25). This is the only form Patch uses (twice in this line) apart from the closing quotation from Qohelet where the common zh appears.
21. Is the omission to be attributed simply to the writer's characteristic avoidance of the definite article?
22. The hiphil of this root appears to be Patch's creation, denominative from such formations as 'asrē "blessed," or 'asēr "happiness." The subject of the masculine singular participle can only be mspt.
23. In contrast to readily available and common terms for "word," Patch has chosen a form that is quite peripheral in biblical and post-biblical Hebrew. A feminine plural form dabrot appears once in Deut 33:3 and a construct form dibrat is found five times in the Bible. It is unlikely that the final heh of this word is a feminine pronominal suffix for its antecedent would be obscure.
24. Although the phrase hlk ̄l means "go upon," and the juxtaposition of ̄l with ̄r is senseless, Patch's intent is clear.
25. The usage of hrbh is perplexing, but its appearance later in this sentence clarifies Patch's intention, obscured by the lack of a verb that is here supplied in parenthesis.
26. The word for "lusts" appears only once in the Bible (ma'āwwyē Ps 140:9).
27. An infrequent biblical word for mortals (e.g. Deut 2:34, Job 11:3).