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Hebrew in the Universities¹

Pablo Kirtchuk

Hebrew has been studied in the most important Universities ever since the Renaissance, though the process leading to its institutionalization had begun already in the Middle Age. In those universities as well as in more recent ones it is still studied as a language of culture, prestige and research. In addition, many other offer courses of Contemporary Hebrew without necessarily disposing of dedicated departments.

By the middle of the XIII century, Roger Bacon of Oxford (c. 1240-90) advocated the study of Hebrew for other than missionary purposes, and though he had an imperfect command of the language he wrote a grammar of it. Cambridge sees its first important Hebraist with Henry de Costes, appointed reader in 1326, who had probably learned under Nicholas de Lyra in Paris and was interested in the literal meaning of Scripture. One of his successors was Richard Brinkley (1480-1518). Immanuel Tremellius (1510-80), a Swiss Protestant, taught Hebrew in Cambridge whence, upon Queen Mary's accession, he fled to Heidelberg, where he published some scholarly books including a Latin translation to *Targum Jonathan* of the twelve minor prophets; an *Aramaic and Syriac Grammar*, and his *magnum opus*, a Latin translation of the Hebrew Bible. To acquire official status, however, Hebrew studies in England had to wait until the first third of the XVI century, when they were promoted by Richard Fox, who founded Corpus Christi College in Oxford, and by John Fisher, founder of St John's in Cambridge. He had learnt the language from Robert Wakefield, the first English hebraist worthy of the name, who had taught in some of the most famous universities: Paris, Louvain and Tübingen. At the dissolution of the Monasteries he obtained a Hebrew dictionary compiled by Laurence Holbeach (d. c. 1420) on the basis of work begun by a former prior, Gregor of Huntingdon (d. c. 1290). In 1524, Fisher delivered an oration in praise of Semitic studies under the title *Oratio de laudibus et utilitate trium linguarum, Arabicae, Chaldaicae et Hebraicae*, and six years later he produced the *Syntagma de hebraeorum codicum incorruptione*. In addition to promoting their study he proved their kinship on grammatical criteria, and showed some Latin and Greek words to be borrowings from Hebrew. The statutes of Oxford and Cambridge gave an important place to the study of Hebrew in the curriculum, beside that of Greek and Latin, and in 1535 Melancthon's works replaced those of Duns Scotus as part of the syllabus for divinity students at both universities. Permanent Chairs of Hebrew were created at Oxford and Cambridge as a result of Henry VIII's split with the Catholic Church, which brought the universities increasingly under royal control. In 1536 an act of parliament was approved leading eventually to the creation of those Chairs, and Hebrew was taught on the pattern of the trilingual Colleges at Alcalá and Louvain. Thomas More himself was aware of the importance of Hebrew and he encouraged all students of both the Hebrew Bible and the Gospel to go *ad purissimas fontes*, i.e. to the Hebrew and Greek originals.

The *Collège de France*, founded by king François I in 1530 for the promotion of the Humanities, became the leading institution in Europe as far as the teaching of Hebrew was concerned. It boasted no less than three teachers of Hebrew: François Vatable (d.

¹ This article is based to a fair extent on Kirtchuk 2002 (see *Bibliography*).

1547), Agathias Guidacerius (1477-1540) and Paul Paradis (d. 1549). One of their immediate successors, Quanquarbre, published in 1554 *De grammatica Hebraeorum opus*. It is probably there that Calvin studied Hebrew during his stay in Paris (1530-3) under the influence of his cousin Robert Olivetan, the first reformer to publish a translation of the Hebrew Bible into French. In 1751, a Chair of Hebrew was created in the Sorbonne by the Duc d'Orléans, 'for the purpose of reviving Oriental learning in the University of Paris and explaining the Hebrew Scriptures'. In this Parisian atmosphere of intellectual freedom and cultural opportunities was educated the Scottish Hebraist Alexander Geddes, a great and open-minded scholar. In 1533 Calvin fled to Basle and continued his training there with Münster and another renowned Hebraist, Simon Grynaeus. During his exile from Geneva (1538-41), Calvin spent most of his time in Strasbourg where Hebrew was taught by Wolfgang Capito and Martin Bucer. A third hebraist was Gregor Caselius. The city of Strasbourg adopted a University program designed by I. Sturm (1507-89), a graduate of the trilingual school in Louvain. Greek and Latin were obligatory and Hebrew was an option eventually chosen by many students. In 1559, Calvin provided his hometown Geneva with a school and an Academy, whose principal was Theodor Beza, a promoter of Hebrew whose *Icones*, pen-portraits of famous scholars, which he dedicated in 1580 to James VI of Scotland, included six Christian Hebraists, the brightest of whom was famous Johannes Reuchlin. The Chair of Hebrew at Calvin's Academy was filled by A. Chevalier, who gave eight hours of instruction per week, five of which were devoted to Hebrew grammar. The Academy's library possessed number of valuable Hebrew books, including three copies of Daniel Bomberg's rabbinic Bible edited in Venice. Eventually, this Academy became the leading institution in Europe for the study of Hebrew during the whole of the XVII century and it drew students from all around the continent. A renowned Huguenot Hebraist in this context was the poet Agrippa d'Aubigné (1552-1630), who could read Biblical and post-Biblical Hebrew 'without points' (= vowel signs).

Yet it is in Alcalá de Henares, Spain, with the foundation in 1498 by Francisco Ximénez de Cisneros of the Colegio de San Ildefonso, that the first attempt was made towards the patterns of trilingual instruction, which eventually spread around the continent. In 1508 the first professor of Hebrew, Alonso de Zamora, was appointed. He was a recognized authority in all things Hebrew and made the University of Alcalá an acknowledged centre in the field. Benito Arias Montano (1527-98), an outstanding figure of Hebrew scholarship in the Christian world, studied there. Alonso de Zamora's articles on grammar and lexicography appended to the polyglot Bible whose edition he supervised proved that he was an accomplished Hebraist, whose intellectual honesty led him to prefer the Bible translation of Pagninus (1470-1536) to Jérôme's Vulgate.

The University of Louvain, Flanders, inaugurated its 'Collegium Trilinguae' in 1520, under the guidance of Jérôme Busleiden. The first Hebrew teacher was Mathaeus Adrianus, one of the first Christian scholars to draw up a systematic course of instruction in Hebrew, and Louvain was the example of what could be actually achieved in order to give Hebraic studies the high place they deserve.

In the Netherlands, Hebrew was included in the syllabus of theology students at the University of Leyde from its foundation in 1575, when the Chair was conferred to Johann Drusius, whose edition of Martinius's Grammar was the first Hebrew book to be published in the country. Three other outstanding Dutch Hebraists of the time were

Thomas Erpenius (1584-1624), Sixtinus Amama (1593-1629) and Constantijn L'Empereur (1591-1648). Incidentally, the *Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae* by Baruch Spinoza (1632-77) appeared in the Netherlands at that period.

On the Mayflower there were two Hebraists of competence, William Bradford and William Brewster. The Puritans of New England were avid students of the Hebrew Bible, and the most famous of their scholars, Cotton Mather, used many Hebrew words and phrases in his prolific writings. This enthusiasm led to the inclusion of the language in the curricula of the ten American Colleges founded before 1776. At Harvard, where the first two presidents, Dunster and Chauncey were scholars of Hebrew, all students had to study the language ever since its foundation in 1636. A converted Jew, Judah Monis, appointed lecturer of Hebrew in 1722, published in Boston in 1735 a *Grammar of the Hebrew Tongue*, considered the first of its kind meant for instruction at an American university. Hebrew ceased to be an obligatory subject at Harvard in 1787. Yale, founded in 1701, offered Hebrew in its early years. It was to become a center of interest in Hebrew under the presidency of Ezra Stiles, who assumed the Chair in 1777, but it was no longer a required subject after 1789. A group of Yale graduates founded Dartmouth College in 1769, where Hebrew was given a special prominence until 1828; it was re-established in the high position it deserves in the 1980s.

However, the study of Hebrew as it exists presently at universities in Europe and beyond reflects Ernest Renan's (France, 1823-1892) scientific position, which maintained that the language can and indeed should be studied as such, independently from any theological consideration. In 1855, he published his *Histoire générale et système comparé des langues sémitiques*. Thereafter he was appointed Professor at the Collège de France and promptly removed since in his opening lesson he dare call Jesus *an admirable man*. Both facts are significant. on one hand the man who, despite his Christian education, rejects the apparently indissoluble link between Hebrew and the dogma; on the other hand, the Establishment, which finds this impossible to accept. Even in our day the Chair at the College de France is common to Hebrew and Aramaic, as is its *vis-à-vis* at another prestigious Parisian High Education institution, L'Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes. Eventually, however, Renan triumphed: he was rehabilitated and appointed director of the same University, and his compatriot Paul Jotun (1871-1940) published in 1923 his *Grammaire de l'Hébreu Biblique*, a masterpiece of linguistic thought, not in the least influenced by religious considerations despite the author's being a clergyman. Seventy years after it appeared, it was deemed relevant enough as to be published in an augmented English version made by T. Muraoka (Leyde University, 1991-6).

At North American universities the study of Hebrew is nowadays organized according to seven different models (Band 1993): (1) Divinity School Hebrew (DSH), which is Protestant-theologically oriented; (2) Semitic Philology Hebrew (SPH), whose roots harken back to 19th century Germany where the commanding figure was W. Gesenius (1786-1842) author of both a Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon (1810-12) of the Hebrew Bible as well as a Grammar (1813), an English version of the Lexicon by Brown, Driver & Briggs appeared in 1907 and one of the Grammar, by A.E. Cowley (1910) ;. H. Ewald (1803-1875) had published one in 1838 and E. König (1846-1936) published his in 1881. By the end of the 19th century the SPH model was well established in Harvard, Columbia, Penn State, Johns Hopkins, Chicago, and Berkeley; (3) American Wissenschaft Hebrew, (AWH) which follows the tradition of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, and whose most

outstanding representatives were S. Baron and H. Wolfsohn; (4) *Tarbut* Ivrit Hebrew (TIH), named after the *Tarbut* movement, which regarded Hebrew chiefly as a Modern language; TIH promoters were chiefly Jews driven to America by Hitler who were attached to Jewish culture but not particularly to Judaism as such; (5) Area Studies Hebrew (ASH), which follows the great amount of research made by H. Rosén and his students on all stages of Hebrew as an object of modern linguistic investigation; (6) Jewish Studies Hebrew (JSH) which offers a holistic view of the language with a rather theoretical focus; since many students are admitted into Jewish Studies without being required to actually learn Hebrew in any of its forms, and finally (7) Israeli Hebrew (IH) which only teaches the language as it is spoken today, with no attention whatsoever to earlier layers – while of course, Israeli Hebrew, unlike most other languages, did not develop from older layers but is a projection thereof and to this extent, paradoxically as it may seem, in order to master thoroughly Israeli Hebrew one cannot but have at least a glimpse at earlier stages.

Hebrew is offered by most of the important Universities across Europe, including Eastern Europe and Russia, where it is taught and investigated in world famous institutions such as St Petersburg's Oriental Institute, the Academy of Sciences in Moscow and the University of Novosibirsk among others. France has departments of Hebrew at the Universities of Paris 3, Paris 4, Paris 8, l'Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales, Strasbourg 2, Lyon 3, Aix-Marseille and Lille 3. In Australia it is taught and investigated mainly at Monash University in Melbourne, but also at La Trobe (Victoria) among others. In North America, it is taught in 606 colleges and universities. In Latin America, it is taught mainly at the main universities (Argentina: Buenos Aires and Córdoba; Brazil: Sao Paulo, Campinas and Rio de Janeiro, Chile: Santiago).

In the Arab world, Hebrew is taught in several universities of Morocco, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Irak, among others, mainly in the context of Ancient History.

An Israeli organization is dedicated to assist European universities in appointing Readers (or Lectors) of Contemporary Hebrew. In France, for example, such positions exist at the above mentioned universities as well as at Lyon 2, Montpellier, Bordeaux and Toulouse. Such positions exist outside of Europe too, *e.g.* in Japan They are devoted to the teaching of Contemporary Hebrew and are usually filled by Israeli Ph.D. students.

In Israel itself, where it is the main language and one of the three official ones along with Arabic and English, there are departments of Hebrew language at the 5 universities (Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa, Beer Sheva and Bar Ilan); even the Haifa Technion has a small section devoted to Hebrew, the Weizmann institute being the only Scientific Institution without any trace of Hebrew presence (even most of its publications and courses are in English). The thirty-odd colleges also teach Hebrew language to Hebrew teachers in the making. The departments of Hebrew Language in Israeli Universities count philologists and linguists who do teaching and research on Hebrew in several contexts: Semitic linguistics, so-called Jewish languages, General linguistics, Typology, Synchrony, Diachrony as well as specialists in specific fields such as Phonetics, Semantics, Morphology, Syntax, Pragmatics, Discourse, Language contact and Language acquisition. Tel Aviv University leads the constitution of a Corpus of Contemporary Hebrew, Ben Gurion University in Beer Sheva leads one on Biblical Hebrew lexicography, and the Hebrew Language Academy, which along with its official status as a regulating and normalizing institution concerning Israeli Hebrew carries out

investigation as well, is embarked in the most ambitious endeavor of the *Historical Dictionary*, an on-line ever increasing publication of huge dimensions that will eventually be the most complete source of lexico-semantic, grammatical and textual information on Hebrew words and roots through the ages.

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