

Glimpses Into American Jewish History

James Logan - Gentile American Hebrew Scholar

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*Note: Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from **The History of the Jews of Philadelphia from Colonial Times to the Age of Jackson** by Edwin Wolf and Maxwell Whiteman, The Jewish Publication Society, 1957, pages 16 - 18.*

Introduction

Readers may find it surprising to learn that a number of early American colonists were very familiar with the Hebrew language.

The story of Hebrew culture in Massachusetts begins with the very foundation of the Plymouth colony, for the first Hebraists to settle in New England came over in the *Mayflower*. Governor Bradford (1590-1657), one of the *Mayflower* Pilgrims, was a man whose ability, character, and comparative culture raised him above his fellow settlers. Particularly his knowledge of languages is praised by Cotton Mather in the *Magnalia*: “for he was conversant with Dutch, French, Latin, and Greek, but the Hebrew [tongue] he most of all studied, because he said he would see with his own eyes the ancient oracles of God in their native beauty.”

Bradford was not the only Hebraist on the *Mayflower*; Elder William Brewster also had some knowledge of the sacred tongue.¹

Colonel William Byrd II (1644 – 1744) was a wealthy Virginia planter who began his daily diary entry with, “I rose at 7 o'clock and read a chapter in Hebrew and 200 verses in Horner's *Odyssey*.”

These men and many others felt that the only way to properly understand *Tenach* was to be able to read it in the original Hebrew.

And like Jews throughout the Diaspora, New England's laity and clergy established schools that would perpetuate traditions of Hebrew learning. All ten of the colleges founded on American soil before the Revolution offered instruction in “Hebrew and the shemitish [pertaining to Shem] languages.” Harvard, the first college established in the American colonies, was founded and led by clergymen—scholars whose own academic interests were centered on Hebrew language and textual study. These clergymen endeavored to perpetuate their

intellectual legacy in what Cotton Mather dubbed “New England's Beit Midrash.”²

One Christian who devoted much time to the study of the Hebrew language, Jewish history, and Jewish rites and customs was James Logan. Indeed, one cannot help but marvel at his Hebraic accomplishments, given that almost all of them were the result of self-study.

Sketch of the Life of James Logan

James Logan, son of Quakers Patrick and Isabel Logan, was born in Lurgan, Ireland in 1674 or 1675. He was obviously a genius, because by the age of 13 he had mastered Latin and Greek as well as some Hebrew. At age 16 he acquired considerable knowledge of mathematics simply by reading some books. In 1689 the Logan family moved to Bristol, England, where, in 1693, James replaced his father as schoolmaster. While teaching others, he improved his knowledge of Greek and Hebrew and also managed to find time to learn French, Italian and some Spanish.

In 1699 Logan came to the colony of Pennsylvania aboard the *Canterbury* with William Penn, serving as Penn's secretary.

One of the most capable men in the Province [of Pennsylvania], Logan was also Penn's most faithful friend and personal agent. He was soon appointed Secretary of the Province, and served in that key post from 1701 to 1717. At first a clerk to the Governor's Council, within a year he was made a voting member. Between 1736 and 1738, he served, in the absence of a governor, as chief executive of the Province. He was elected Mayor of Philadelphia, commissioned as a judge of the Court of Common Pleas, and in 1731 appointed chief-justice of the Supreme Court. Logan was a busy executive and administrator. He made a fortune in land investment and in trade with the Indians.

In addition to these accomplishments, Logan's insatiable intellectual curiosity led him to a wide range of scholarly achievements. He wrote numerous scholarly papers published by the American Philosophical Society and European journals. His study of natural science led him to write a pioneering work on the fertilization of corn. He tutored the American botanist John Bartram (1699 – 1777), considered the father of American botany, in Latin and introduced him to the work of the Swedish botanist, physician, and zoologist Carl (Carolus) Linnaeus (1707 – 1778). Linnaeus laid the foundations for binomial nomenclature (the formal scheme for naming species).

Logan was a mentor of Benjamin Franklin, who published Logan's translation of Cicero's essay “Cato Maior de Senectute.” His charges to juries were held in such high repute by Franklin that Franklin published one of them.

He was an astronomer who bought an unfinished work of Halley and worked out the incompletetables himself. He was a mathematician who ordered Newton's

Principia when it was a novelty, and made his own notes and corrections. And he was a linguist. Latin and Greek of course he had acquired in grammar school, and he kept them up so that he was able to write both languages with astonishing fluency. French and Spanish he picked up from reading with the help of grammars and dictionaries.

Hebraic Studies

As mentioned earlier, James Logan had mastered the rudiments of the Hebrew language by the age of 13. Why he began to study Hebrew in depth while in Pennsylvania is not known, but it was presumably so that he could study Tenach in the original. For a man with Logan's intellectual curiosity, this was must have provided a fascinating challenge. However, there was no one in Philadelphia who could teach him the advanced knowledge of the Hebrew language which he sought.

So Logan began studying Hebrew seriously. He bought himself the dictionaries, grammars and syntaxes of Buxtorf, Leusden, Robertson and others, and pored over them, studying the alphabet, learning how to read and write the letters, acquiring a vocabulary and the syntax, and finally learning how to read and write in sentences.

He bought himself Hebrew Bibles and Hebrew prayer books, and read them and made notes in them. When he was more fluent, he added a *Shulhan Arukh* and the great six volume edition of the Mishna with the Maimonides and Bertinoro commentaries. In fact, Logan gathered together in Philadelphia in the first half of the eighteenth century one of the largest collections of Hebraica which existed in frontier America. It was certainly the best collection that a private person owned outside academic halls, and remained so for many years.

James Logan really did master the Hebrew language. He compiled a little notebook containing important Biblical vocabulary written in beautifully formed Hebrew letters. Next to each entry was its location in the text as well as its Latin meaning and its Hebrew root.

There is no doubt that the Hebrew language was one of his real interests. In 1724, he wrote to his friend Thomas Story in England that his daughter Sally was industrious with the needle, "but is this moment at the table with me (being first day [Sunday] afternoon and her mother abroad) reading the 34th Psalm in Hebrew, the letters of which she learned very perfectly in less than 2 hours time, an experiment I made of her capacity only for my Diversion, tho' I never design to give her that or any other learned Language unless the French be accounted such."

James Logan died on October 31, 1751.

¹ **Hebrew Learning Among the Puritans of New England Prior to 1700** by Rev. D. De Sola Pool, PhD, *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society (1893-1961)*; 1911; 20, AJHS Journal. This article is available online at <http://www.ajhs.org/scholarship/adaje.cfm>

² **God's Sacred Tongue** by Shalom I. Goldman, The University of North Carolina Press, 2004, ISBN 978-0-8078-2835-9, page 29. Available at <http://uncpress.unc.edu/browse/page/372>