

Origins of the Semitic Studies Department, Melbourne University

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(Read before the Victorian Branch of the Society,
18th February, 1958)

The University of Melbourne was founded in July, 1854, and opened on 13th April, 1855, with chairs in Classics, Mathematics, Natural Sciences, and History and Law. Hugh Childers and Redmond Barry, the rival claimants for the honour of having founded the University,¹ were both men of ideals, and their supporters boasted that the new University would make Melbourne "the glory of the South and the civilizer of the East".²

In their plan the establishment of teaching facilities in Hebrew was one of the ultimate aims they set themselves. But two chief obstacles stood in the way.³

First, as Geoffrey Blainey states in *The University of Melbourne: A Centenary Portrait*:

The university council was torn between ideals and reality. Its ideal of a university was a home of liberal education where the powers and gifts of mind and soul were developed; but it had to face the fact that a materialistic colony wanted its university to inculcate the knowledge and skills of the useful professions. The university acknowledged the popular clamour by establishing its flimsy courses in law and engineering though it awarded no degrees in these courses and appointed no professors. It asked the government, furthermore, to finance chairs of agriculture, modern languages and medicine, even toying with the idea of creating a chair of Hebrew and Oriental Literature in order to facilitate commerce between Australia and Asia and to train legal interpreters for the 40,000 Chinamen on the goldfields. The government refused to grant the money for these professorships.⁴

The desire to facilitate commerce between Australia and Asia by means of a chair of Hebrew and Oriental Literature is ascribed to Redmond Barry.⁵ But what we know of the wide cultural interests of Barry⁶ makes it sound rather out of character for him to use this materialistic argument. We can only conclude that Barry, feeling sure the Government would not accept the proposal for cultural reasons alone, tried to cast his argument in a slightly more acceptable mould. In addition, attitudes towards the Chinamen on the goldfields were such that the Government would be more likely to wish to dispose of the Chinese altogether, rather than show any interest in providing them with interpreters.

The second obstacle in the way of founding a Hebrew chair was a problem of far-reaching public policy. Hebrew had been taught at Oxford and Cambridge since 1540, but though the founders of the Melbourne University hoped to foster piety and morality amongst the students, they were wary of attempting this through the teaching of Semitics, Bible and theology. There was no State Church, and the place of religion in education gave rise to frequent political controversy.⁷ To avoid suspicion of sectarianism and so as not to alienate the support of some of the denominations, the University provided that its professors could not be in holy orders nor lecture on religious topics inside or outside the University. This policy of extreme secularism was reflected in the lower stages of the education system when, in 1872, State education was set up on a free-compulsory-and-secular basis and became more secular than in most other parts of the British Empire.⁸

The residential colleges, when established in the University grounds in 1872 (Trinity), 1881 (Ormond), 1888 (Queen's) and 1918 (Newman) were governed by the Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist and Roman Catholic Churches respectively. Each had a theological hall or was associated with a separate theological college, and the Old Testament was a major study in each.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, religion was no longer such a live political issue in Victoria, and in some circles it was felt that the time was ripe to reopen the question of providing courses in Semitics at the University itself. Thus, in November, 1913, the Synod of the Anglican Archdiocese voted in favour of establishing a department of Semitic Languages.

As reported in Diocesan Synod proceedings for 1913 (kindly copied for me by the Registrar of the Diocese):

The Rev. Frank Lynch moved (on behalf of Dr. Leeper):—"That this Synod strongly commends to wealthy Victorians, as a worthy object of their liberality, the endowment in our national university of Professorships of Semitic languages and Hellenistic Greek, as being likely to increase generally in the community the interest in Biblical studies and to furnish greater facilities for prosecuting them in a thorough and systematic manner."

The Rev. M. J. R. Bennett seconded the motion, and emphasised the value to religion of these studies. Hebrew and Chaldee were necessary for the study of the Old Testament. Arabic was required for the criticism of the Q'uran. The Assyrian and Babylonian language revealed the history of times contemporary with the Old Testament. A mastery of Comparative Religion would be necessary for the coming clergyman, and the study of these languages would

tremendously help. Hellenistic Greek was necessary for the student of Greek as well as the Christian student.⁹

The Rev. C. G. Brazier felt the question was more one for the theological colleges than for the University itself, but an amendment which he moved gained no seconder, and the motion was carried.

The proposal was supported by Moses Moses in an editorial in the *Jewish Herald*.¹⁰

The endowment by the Jews of Victoria of a chair of Hebrew in the University of Melbourne—or, failing that, substantial assistance on their part in establishing such a professorship—would be an altogether honourable testimony both of their public spirit as citizens and of the sincerity of their attachment to the spiritual treasures handed down by their ancestors and revered by the whole civilized world as a mighty factor in the development and progress of humanity.

Nothing concrete was achieved at this stage: one of several reasons may be that a University course in Hebrew had to be preceded logically by the introduction of Hebrew as a subject for the Public Examinations. As retailed by Rabbi J. Danglow in the *Journal* of this Society,¹¹ in 1921 S. J. Slutzkin offered the University £1,000 if Hebrew were adopted as a subject for these examinations. Sir John Monash was then Vice-Chancellor, and he wrote to Rabbi Danglow informing him of the Council's approval. However, the matter had to be referred to the Schools Board and the Faculty of Arts for detailed consideration, and it was not until 1924 that the first examinations could be arranged. In subsequent years small numbers of Jewish students, trained mainly in the classes of the United Jewish Education Board and the St. Kilda Hebrew School, sat for the Hebrew examinations in Intermediate, Leaving and Leaving Honours (as Matriculation was then known), with the examiners usually being the local Jewish ministers.

The proposals to establish a full department at the University itself were not forgotten, however, and interest was renewed as the Jewish and general community became aware of the ability of Dr. Maurice David Goldman, who had reached Australia as a refugee from Germany in 1938.

Goldman was born at Kolo, Poland, in January, 1898. After a brief period as a medical student at Warsaw, he entered Berlin University to study Semitic Languages and gained his Doctorate of Philosophy at the age of 24. From 1932 until 1938, he was lecturer in Hebrew and Aramaic at the Jewish Teachers' Seminary, Berlin, and from 1935 to 1938 also lectured in Islam, Arab history and Ethiopic at

the Rabbinical Academy of Berlin. He published in Germany a Hebrew translation and commentary on the Ethiopic Book of Jubilees, and also a five-volume outline of Hebrew, entitled *Hebraisch*.¹²



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Dr. Goldman taught at the Temple Beth Israel, the Caulfield Jewish School and the Bialik Hebrew School, but although he had a fine insight into the child mind, his real sphere was the higher academic one, and he went to see Professor A. R. Chisholm, who was then Dean of the Faculty of Arts at the University. Professor Chisholm has stated that "Half an hour's conversation made it clear to me that it would be a disaster for the University to miss the chance of getting a scholar of Goldman's eminence".¹³ Goldman was given a post in the Censorship Office, and in 1942 was appointed Guest Lecturer in Hebrew and Arabic at the University. Dr. Goldman's courses were not degree

subjects: students attended only for interest's sake and could gain no credit in them towards the requirements of their degrees. However, even though the number of students was, therefore, small, these courses brought Semitic culture to the notice of University, Jewish and other circles.

At a discussion in 1942 at the home of Mr. Benzion Patkin, suggestions were made that the Jewish community should be approached to establish a chair and department of Semitic Studies, and eighteen months later, on 23rd September, 1943, Arthur S. Rose convened a meeting at his home of prominent academic figures and members of the Jewish community. Mr. Alec Masel was in the chair, and a committee, which included Professor Chisholm, Dr. Greta Hort, and the Rev. A. Fraser, Chaplain to the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church, was elected to further the proposal.¹⁴ Professor Chisholm explained:

From the academic point of view it is impossible to study languages seriously without studying Mediterranean civilization, and this must inevitably include the Semitic civilizations. Western culture owes an incalculable debt to the Semitic world, to both the Hebraic and Arabic branches. Anyone with culture in the English-speaking world has been brought up, either consciously or unconsciously, on the Old Testament, and thus cannot have a detached interest in the Semitic world.

Professor Chisholm stated that it was not sufficient to provide lectures for interest's sake alone: students had to be given the incentive to take courses in Semitics through their being given credit in the Arts course, and he added:

The University is a poor institution, and it is an expensive matter to endow a new department. But if its endowment were guaranteed it would only be a question of whether it would be acceptable to the University. I feel fairly confident that it would have a good reception in the Arts Faculty. A good deal depends on the attitude of the Dean and I am very glad that I, as a Professor of Language, happen to be Dean.

Commending the scheme, the *Jewish Herald* felt that the department would prove a great stimulus to Jewish education, and suggested that its establishment be made the occasion for overhauling the Jewish educational system in order to equip students adequately to take Hebrew at the University.¹⁵ The convener of the project, Arthur Rose, wrote in support of the *Jewish Herald's* editorial,¹⁶ and henceforth the movement did coincide with and in part spurred on a number of moves for educational reform,¹⁷ which were led, among others, by Mr. B. Patkin, then chairman of the Education Committee of the Victorian

Jewish Advisory Board (now the Victorian Jewish Board of Deputies). The existing facilities for education were publicised, new centres were opened by the United Jewish Education Board and other bodies, a teachers' course was commenced, and even a short-lived teachers' union was founded by a group of strictly orthodox rabbis and teachers.

In October, 1944, it was announced that an anonymous donor had endowed a Chair of Semitic Studies at the University.¹⁸ The anonymous donor was Abraham Hyam Sicree, of the A.B.Y. Manufacturing Co., and the means by which the endowment was made are described by Professor Chisholm in these words:

One day a rather shy Jewish businessman, Mr. Abraham Sicree, called at my room in the Old Arts building and asked me if I thought the Council would accept the offer of a chair to be subsidised by him for five years. I was overwhelmed, but when I assured him that I would move heaven and earth to have the offer accepted, he was overcome with gratitude! Such is the modesty of really generous men.¹⁹

The movement had received some support from the general press and public, and leading non-Jewish figures like Professor Chisholm, Dr. Hort and some Church and academic figures had been untiring in their efforts. In a letter in which Professor Chisholm elaborates for me some points relative to the movement, he writes:

One salient point that emerged at the "Chair" meetings was that there *could* be a danger of the Chair's being used for putting the Arab point of view, to the detriment of Israel. In answer to this I pointed out that the field where we would have to seek a professor would almost inevitably be a Jewish one, even if the curriculum was to include Arabic (Dr. Goldman's name was not mentioned, of course, as I knew that the University would insist on *making* an appointment: it never creates a chair for an individual, however brilliant). By making these remarks I lost, as I anticipated, the support of some of my Lebanese and Syrian friends, but I knew that our main hopes had to be centred in the Jewish community, which was much more active, numerous and enthusiastic.

The cause of the Semitics Department became Professor Chisholm's own cause. It formed his topic when he addressed the first official luncheon of the Y.M.H.A.,²⁰ he wrote about it regularly in the Jewish press, and he pleaded for the support of the department in many circles. Applications for the post of professor were called for from all over the world, and while these were receiving consideration, in March, 1945, Sir Charles Lowe, as Chancellor of the University, made public in a Conferring of Degrees

address that the hitherto unknown donor of the chair was Abraham Sicree, who wished the chair to be known as the Lazarus and Abraham Sicree Chair.²¹

On 10th May, 1945, the University announced the appointment of Dr. Goldman as the Lazarus and Abraham Sicree Professor. Making the announcement public, *The Argus* stated:²²

Semitic languages provide a logical background for the study of Indo-European languages. Philological studies in Melbourne have been based almost exclusively on European languages, without any outside standard of comparison such as will now be provided by the study of Semitic languages which stand near enough to the European tongues to give the comparison a clear meaning. This widening of the linguistic schools in the Faculty of Arts gives the University an opportunity of moving towards a real School of Linguistics such as those that have made London and Paris famous.

On 1st July, 1945, Professor Goldman took up duties, and later that month courses in Hebrew Part I and Arabic Part I were announced for 1946, subject to formal ratification by the University Council.²³ In October, Professor Goldman went abroad for about three months to visit Israel and study latest developments in teaching methods, as well as to establish links with overseas schools of Semitics.²⁴

As finally developed, the curriculum of the department was as follows:

For students in Pass courses, there were Hebrew Parts I, II and III, and Arabic Parts I, II and III. In Hebrew Part I, the course comprised Biblical prose, texts, Hebrew accidence and syntax, modern Hebrew prose, simple conversation and essays, as well as Biblical history to the Babylonian captivity (or an outline of Biblical literature) and lectures in archaeology. Students of Hebrew Part II would take Biblical poetry, post-exilic Hebrew, Mishnah, contemporary Hebrew literature, and Jewish history from the destruction of the first Temple to the end of the Gaonate. Additional subjects for Part III were mediaeval Hebrew literature, the Gaonate and Spanish epochs, and essays in Hebrew.

The Honours courses provided supplementary lectures in Aramaic Parts I and II, on Mediaeval, Enlightenment and Renaissance literature in Part III, and modern literature and history from 1942 in Part IV. In their third year, Honours students would also take Syriac, and in their fourth year Ethiopic and Comparative Grammar of the Semitic Languages.²⁵

Professor Goldman was one of 20 new professors appointed in the post-war decade; of these, eight were in the Faculty of Arts, redressing the long neglect of the humanities.²⁶ What Redmond Barry had hardly dared to express had materialised: a channel had been established for intellectual contact with non-European cultures.

It is not part of my task here to pursue the subject further than this point, nor to evaluate the work of the Semitic Studies department in subsequent years. After the expiration of the five years for which the chair had been endowed by Abraham Sicree,²⁷ the Professorial Board recommended, and the University Council agreed, that the department should continue as an integral part of the Faculty of Arts and as a responsibility of the University.²⁸ On 15th September, 1957, Professor Goldman died, and his death evoked many expressions of deep regret and many fine obituary tributes from within Australia and far outside it. At present, Mr. N. Milne is Acting Head of the department, and applications have been called for the position of Professor.

(Since this paper was delivered, Rev. Dr. John Bowman, formerly of Leeds, has been appointed to the Chair and is expected to arrive in August, 1959.—ED.)

NOTES

1. See G. Blainey & N. Olver, *The University of Melbourne: A Centenary Portrait*, Melb., 1956; G. Blainey, *A Centenary History of the University of Melbourne*, Melb., 1957; also E. Scott, *History of the University of Melbourne*, Melb., 1934.
2. Cited Blainey & Olver, p. 1.
3. In addition, it was felt that a University course in Hebrew could achieve little unless adequate facilities were available to gain an elementary knowledge of the language.
4. Blainey & Olver, pp. 5-6.
5. Blainey, *Centenary History*, p. 22.
6. He was a member of the Supreme Court of Victoria and a founder of the Public Library of Victoria.
7. See the standard works on Victorian history.
8. Blainey & Olver, pp. 11-13.
9. I have slightly condensed this report.
10. *The Jewish Herald*, 7th November, 1913, p. 400.
11. Vol. IV, No. 4, pp. 173-4.
12. See *Melbourne University Gazette*, vol. XIII, No. 3 (November, 1957), pp. 43-4; *B'nai B'rith Bulletin*, Sydney, December, 1957; *Babel* (Mod. Lang. Teachers' Assoc. of Vic.), No. 6, November, 1957; *The Australian Jewish News*, 20th September, 1957, p. 36; *The Australian Jewish Herald*, 20th September, 1957, p. 4; etc.
13. *Babel*, *op cit.*, p. i.
14. *The Australian Jewish Herald*, 29th July, 1943, p. 2.
15. *Ibid.*, 20th October, 1943, p. 4.
16. *Ibid.*, 29th October, 1943, p. 3.
17. See issues of the Jewish Press of 1943 and subsequent years.
18. *The Australian Jewish News*, 29th March, 1945, p. 7.
19. *Babel*, *op cit.*
20. *The Australian Jewish Herald*, 27th October, 1944, p. 2.
21. *Ibid.*, 29th March, 1945, p. 4; *The Australian Jewish News*, same date, p. 7.