

## Judah Monis: “First” American Jewish Believer

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Who was the first Jewish believer in North America? It all depends on what one means by the word, “first.” In truth, only the Lord knows. Hugh J. Schonfield says, “When Christopher Columbus set out on his voyage that led to the discovery of the New World, there were ... Jewish Christians among the members of his own crew.”<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, he offers no documentation. Others have tried (unsuccessfully, in my opinion) to prove that Christopher Columbus, himself, was a Christian of Jewish descent.<sup>2</sup>

Arthur Hertzberg reports of a later period, when:

A family of Jewish extraction had come ... to North American shores, to join the Pilgrims. Moses Simonson landed in Plymouth Harbor in 1621, two years after the Mayflower; he and his family were reputed to be “from the Jewish settlement in Amsterdam.” The Simonsons had probably already turned Christian in Holland before joining the Pilgrims, or, at the very least, they converted in Plymouth. One of their daughters is known to have married a grandson of Miles Standish and John Alden.<sup>3</sup>

In the late 1690’s Cotton Mather (in Cambridge, Massachusetts) was finishing work on his *Magnalia Christi Americana*, an extensive account of the founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and an inspiring story about the Puritans. At the same time, he was also writing a manual on Jewish evangelism.<sup>4</sup> It consisted of a set of scriptural

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh J. Schonfield, *The History of Jewish Christianity* (London: Duckworth, 1936), 96.

<sup>2</sup> Cf., e.g., Jane Frances Amler, *Christopher Columbus’s Jewish Roots* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Hertzberg, “The New England Puritans and the Jews” in *Hebrew and the Bible in America, the First Two Centuries* (ed. Shalom Goldman; Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1993), 106.

<sup>4</sup> Cotton Mather, *The Faith of the Fathers. OR, The Articles of the True RELIGION, All of them Exhibited In the Express Words of the Old Testament. Partly, To Confirm those who do profess that RELIGION of God, and His MESSIAH. But Chiefly, To Engage the JEWISH NATION, unto the RELIGION of their Patriarchs; And Bring down the Hearts of the Fathers into the Children, and the*

texts from the Hebrew Scriptures, designed to establish the truth of the gospel and of Christian teaching.<sup>5</sup> Whether or not Mather's book had anything to do with it, Lee M. Friedman writes of "the Jew, Simon, who in [September 17] 1702 was baptized in Charlestown [also, Charlestowne], Massachusetts, and assumed the name of Barns to disappear in the surrounding community."<sup>6</sup> In this, he must have succeeded, for nothing more is known of him.

There was, however, a direct connection between Mather's book and the salvation of another Jewish man named Simon, who came to faith in Jesus (Hebrew, *Yeshua*) in South Carolina. Mather took great encouragement from the fact that his book had played a role in Simon's conversion.<sup>7</sup> It is of some interest that two Simons and a family of Simonsons are the first known Jewish believers in the New World.

Judah Monis may not have been the first Jewish Believer in North America, but he was the first about whom much is known. There is a fairly large number of books and articles which tell his story, yet strangely his name is largely unknown both to those involved in ministry to the Jewish people and by the Messianic Jewish community in North America.

Schonfield does not mention him in his *The History of Jewish Christianity*; neither does Monis appear in Gartenhaus' *Famous Hebrew Christians*.<sup>8</sup> He is overlooked

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*Disobedient unto the Wisdom of the Just, and so, To make Ready a People prepared for the Lord* (Boston in New-England: Printed by B. Green and J. Allen, 1699).

<sup>5</sup> Hertzberg, "New England Puritans," 107. Cf. also Hertzberg's *The Jews in America, Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter: A History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 39-40.

<sup>6</sup> Lee M. Friedman, "Joshua Montefiore of St. Albans, Vermont" in *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, vol. 40 (December 1950), 119. Cf. also George Foot Moore, "Judah Monis" in *The Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* (May, 1919), 20, n.2.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Hertzberg, *The Jews in America*, 40. Cf. also, Hertzberg's "New England Puritans," 107.

<sup>8</sup> Jacob Gartenhaus, *Famous Hebrew Christians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979).

by Bernstein in *Some Jewish Witnesses for Christ*,<sup>9</sup> he is not to be found in Ridley Herschell's *Jewish Witnesses that Jesus is the Christ*,<sup>10</sup> and Einspruch likewise is silent in his *When Jews Face Christ*.<sup>11</sup> Louis Meyer did not include him in his book, *Eminent Hebrew Christians of the Nineteenth Century*,<sup>12</sup> for the obvious reason that Monis lived in the eighteenth century. Meyer did write, and privately publish, a booklet on Monis,<sup>13</sup> but it was released more than a century ago and apparently did not enjoy wide distribution at the time. To make matters worse, Rabbi Judah Monis' name is sometimes mistakenly written, Rabbi Judah Morris,<sup>14</sup> as in A. E. Thompson's, *A Century of Jewish Missions*,<sup>15</sup> and McClintock and Strong's *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*.<sup>16</sup> Though much has been written about Monis, almost every assertion about his life is a matter of some dispute. In many cases, this is due to a scarcity of information; in others, it may reflect hostility against Jewish believers in Jesus.

### ***Family Origin and Birth***

Judah Monis was born on February 4, 1683. This is based on information that he provided in his epitaph, and there is no reason to challenge it. However, while the date of his birth may be clear, the place of his birth has been rather obscure. Many, perhaps on

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<sup>9</sup> A. Bernstein, *Some Jewish Witnesses for Christ* (London: Operative Jewish Converts' Institution, 1909).

<sup>10</sup> Ridley H. Herschell, *Jewish Witnesses That Jesus Is the Christ* (London: Aylott & Jones, 1848).

<sup>11</sup> Henry Einspruch, ed., *When Jews Face Christ* (New York: American Board of Missions to the Jews, 1932).

<sup>12</sup> Louis Meyer, *Eminent Hebrew Christians of the Nineteenth Century* (ed. David A. Rausch; New York: The Edward Mellen Press, 1983).

<sup>13</sup> Louis Meyer, "The First Jewish Christian in North America—Judah Monis" (Chicago: Privately published booklet, 1901).

<sup>14</sup> As in the volume of Collections of the New York Historical Society entitled "Burghers and Freemen of New York" (1885); cited by Moore, 6.

<sup>15</sup> A. E. Thompson, *A Century of Jewish Missions* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1902), 227.

<sup>16</sup> John McClintock and James Strong's, *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological and Ecclesiastical Literature* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1867-1887), 6:653.

the basis of a report in the *New Hampshire Gazette* published on May 4, 1764, claim a birthplace in northern Africa: Algiers,<sup>17</sup> Morocco, or “one of the Barbary states.”<sup>18</sup>

One source of the confusion and difficulty in establishing his family’s origin is the rarity of his name. Not only is Monis not a common Jewish name; it has even been suggested that Monis might be an anagram for ... Simon!<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, George Foot Moore has made a compelling case that “Monis was descended from a Portuguese Marano family which had emigrated from the [Iberian] Peninsula in the sixteenth century.”<sup>20</sup> Regarding his birthplace, Moore concludes, “Everything that is discoverable about Judah Monis points to Italy.”<sup>21</sup> To be even more specific, the most likely suggestion, based on the appearance of the family name in contemporary cemetery records, is that he was born in Venice.<sup>22</sup>

### ***Monis’ Life Prior to 1720***

On February 28, 1715, Judah Monis was admitted as a freeman in the mayor’s court of New York City.<sup>23</sup> He was thirty-two years of age. It is not known when he left his home in Italy, but we are told that he studied in the rabbinic academies of Leghorn

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<sup>17</sup> Louis Meyer, “The First Jewish Christian,” 3. Cf. also, Hannah Adams, *History of the Jews* (London: 1818), II: 211, as cited by Moore, 4. Many others cite Algiers as one of several possible birthplaces. Thaddeus Mason Harris, a friend of Monis’ successor, for example, made this claim, perhaps due to the article in the *New Hampshire Gazette* (cf. Lee Friedman, “A Contemporary Appraisal of Judah Monis, Harvard’s First Instructor in Hebrew,” *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, vol. 38, part 2 [1948], 147).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. George Alexander Kohut, “Judah Monis, MA, The First Instructor at Harvard University (1683-1764)” in *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures*, 14 (4):219, where he cites Benjamin Peirce.

<sup>19</sup> Moore, 4.

<sup>20</sup> Moore, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Moore, 5.

<sup>22</sup> Moore, 4. For other sources bearing on this question, cf. also Clifford Shipton, *Biographical Sketches of Those Who Attended Harvard College in the Classes 1722-1725*, (Sibley’s Harvard Graduates 7; Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1945), 639, f.n. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Moore, 6.

and Amsterdam.<sup>24</sup> Louis Meyer says, “His education was the strict training of the pious Jew, in the ceremonial law and in the traditions of the fathers, so that he soon became ‘truly read and learned in the Jewish Cabbala and Rabbins, a Master and Critic in the Hebrew.’”<sup>25</sup> An article in the *New England Courant*<sup>26</sup> on the occasion of Monis’ baptism, says that he was a *mashkil venabon* and that he had served as a rabbi of synagogues in Jamaica and New York prior to his arrival in Boston. Likewise, Monis’ epitaph identifies him as a rabbi. Some would view his claim to the title of rabbi as a deception or a fraud. Rabbi Jacob R. Marcus writes, “Although he received a good Jewish education, it is doubtful that he was a rabbi....”<sup>27</sup>

Marcus’ skepticism forces me to digress. It reminds me of something Henry Einspruch recounted. Apparently, when Rabbi Isaac Myer Wise, the founder of Reform Judaism in America, learned of the election of Rabbi Jaeger to the congregation in Mobile, he wrote: “The election of Mr. Jaeger as Rabbi of the Congregation at Mobile, Alabama, of which we had no notice until now, is to be considered an important acquisition for the congregation, for Mr. Jaeger is an earnest and learned man, with a thinking, clear head. We congratulate the congregation.”<sup>28</sup> However, “two or three years later, when Rabbi Jaeger became a Christian, this same Rabbi Isaac Myer Wise experienced no qualms in unblushingly declaring that ‘Jaeger never was a Rabbi.’”<sup>29</sup>

What are the facts? George Foot Moore says, “The title, *maskil*, conferred on rabbinical students, was used chiefly in Italy ... to indicate a stage of proficiency inferior

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<sup>24</sup> *The New-England Courant*, No. 35, Monday, March 26 – Monday, April 2, 1722.

<sup>25</sup> Meyer, “The First Jewish Christian,” 3.

<sup>26</sup> *The New-England Courant*, No. 35.

<sup>27</sup> Jacob Marcus, *The Colonial American Jew, 1492-1776* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970), 1096.

<sup>28</sup> Einspruch, 12.

<sup>29</sup> Einspruch, 12.

to the rabbinical title, *hakam*.<sup>30</sup> Leah Borenstein writes in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*<sup>31</sup> that Spanish and Portuguese concepts of religious leadership and ordination (*semikhah*) differed from those of Ashkenazi Jews. Sephardim had been reluctant to ordain rabbis. She says that early sixteenth century Sephardim “claimed that no one could ordain once the Sanhedrin no longer existed.”<sup>32</sup> Later, a community leader would have been called a “teacher of the Torah” (*marbitz torah*) or a *hakham*, and would not have had ordination. He would have functioned, nonetheless, as an authoritative spiritual leader in his community. The title *hakham* was apparently used of a well-known rabbi, but a young rabbi would have been known as a *maskil*.<sup>33</sup> Although a few modern Jewish scholars, such as Rabbi Jacob Marcus, question Monis’ status, no question was registered among his contemporaries. It seems odd that no question about his status arose until two hundred and fifty years after his conversion!

Approximately fifty years prior to Monis’ arrival in Jamaica (1655), the British navy sailed into Kingston harbor, surrounding and defeating the Spanish Men of War, thus liberating the island’s Marranos from the Inquisition. “Many secret Jews were already living in Jamaica under Spanish rule. By the terms of surrender, all Spaniards were to leave Jamaica – except the Marranos. Once the British wrested control from Spain, island Jews openly professed their religion.”<sup>34</sup>

The major concentrations of the Jewish population of Jamaica were in Kingston, Port Royal, and Spanish Town, though there were “as many as twenty-one separate

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<sup>30</sup> Moore, 5.

<sup>31</sup> Leah Borenstein, “The Jewish Religious Leadership in the Muslim East,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 13:1448-1452.

<sup>32</sup> Borenstein, 1449.

<sup>33</sup> Borenstein, 1451.

<sup>34</sup> Harry A. Ezratty, *500 Years in the Jewish Caribbean: The Spanish and Portuguese Jews in the West Indies* (Baltimore: Omni Arts, Inc., 1997), 40.

communities flourishing throughout the island since 1655.<sup>35</sup> The total Jewish population was at least eight hundred by 1735.<sup>36</sup> The reasons for Monis going to Jamaica, and later to New York, are unknown. Likewise, we do not know when he arrived in Jamaica or for how long he served the Jewish community there.

He arrived in New York in 1715 and stayed for about three years. At that time there were established Jewish communities only in New York and in Charleston, South Carolina. An earlier Jewish community in Newport, Rhode Island, “evaporated after 1700 for unknown reasons, [and] was refounded in the 1750s....”<sup>37</sup> In New York, Monis apparently was the proprietor of a store, taught Hebrew, and served the Jewish community as a rabbi, *hazzan* (cantor), and a *schochet* (ritual slaughterer).<sup>38</sup> During this time, he was doubtless also learning English.

By the time Monis moved to the Boston area, most probably in 1718, there were “only a handful of Jews”<sup>39</sup> who had settled in Boston. Monis had apparently been working on a Hebrew grammar and corresponding with Christian clergymen regarding the study of Hebrew. Louis Meyer writes:

In Monis’ breast was a strong desire after a higher education, and as soon as he had mastered the English language sufficiently, he devoted his spare time to studies in the renowned Harvard College. In spite of his thirty-five years and of innumerable difficulties in the path of the poor foreigner, Monis succeeded well and received the degree of A.M. at Harvard in 1720.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ezratty, 40.

<sup>36</sup> Ezratty, 41.

<sup>37</sup> Hertzberg, *The Jews in America*, 43. For a dissenting account of Newport’s Jewish history see Morris A. Gutstein’s “The Jews of Newport, R.I. in Pre-Revolutionary Days” in *Touro Synagogue of Congregation Jeshuat Israel, Newport, Rhode Island* (Newport, RI: The Society of Friends of Touro Synagogue National Historic Shrine, Inc., 1948), 16-18.

<sup>38</sup> Ellen Smith, “Strangers and Sojourners: The Jews of Colonial Boston” in *The Jews of Boston: Essays on the Occasion of the Centenary (1895-1995) of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston* (eds. Jonathan D. Sarna and Ellen Smith; Boston: Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston, 1995), 31.

<sup>39</sup> Jonathan D. Sarna, “The Jews of Boston in Historical Perspective” in *The Jews of Boston*, 3.

<sup>40</sup> Meyer, “The First Christian Jew,” 3.

Monis wrote a letter, dated June 29, 1720, to the corporation of Harvard. He wrote that he had completed “an essay to facilitate ye instruction of youth in ye Hebrew language.” He was now submitting it for their “judicious perusal” and eventual approval. Interestingly, the letter states that his grammar had already received the approval of “some best and learned gentlemen of the Dissenters and of different churches.”<sup>41</sup> Monis’ letter is written in “the awkward style of the foreigner who, still thinking in his mother-tongue, translates his thoughts into English while he writes; and it is full of grammatical mistakes.”<sup>42</sup> During his period of study at Harvard, Monis evidently became acquainted with both Increase and Cotton Mather, as well as with a certain Mr. Leverett (a minister and President of the Harvard Corporation)<sup>43</sup> and with Benjamin Colman (who was also a minister as well as a member of the Harvard corporation).<sup>44</sup> It is inconceivable that he was not also familiar with Cotton Mather’s apology for Christian faith, which had been written especially for the Jewish people.<sup>45</sup>

### *Monis’ Conversion*

From 1720 to 1722, Monis operated a small store and taught Hebrew in an unofficial capacity at Harvard.<sup>46</sup> This period of time was doubtless a time of spiritual struggle for Monis. His relationships with Christian leaders were growing, as was the

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<sup>41</sup> As cited by Meyer, “The First Christian Jew,” 3.

<sup>42</sup> Meyer, “The First Christian Jew,” 3.

<sup>43</sup> Lee M. Friedman, “Judah Monis, First Instructor in Hebrew at Harvard University,” *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, vol. 22 (1914), 5.

<sup>44</sup> Friedman, “Judah Monis,” 2.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. note 4, above.

<sup>46</sup> In his epitaph, Monis includes this two-year period as a part of his tenure at Harvard. While the arrangement was doubtless not official, in Monis’ mind, he was already fully involved in his life’s work at this time.

prospect of placing his trust in Jesus as his Messiah and Redeemer. Listen as Meyer relates the story:

A sudden change came over the Jewish Rabbi, for the Holy Spirit illumined the writings of the prophets from which he was teaching so diligently; the truth was made known to him, and he saw the prophecies fulfilled in Jesus. It was a short, but sharp struggle; then he decided to follow his Saviour outside the camp!<sup>47</sup>

Meyer's characterization of Monis' faith coming suddenly may not be entirely accurate, for Increase Mather wrote, a little over one month after Monis' baptism:

There is no cause to fear that Mr. Monis will Renounce<sup>48</sup> his Christianity, since he did embrace it Voluntarily and Gradually, and with much Consideration, and from Scriptures in the Old-Testament. GOD Grant that he (who is the first Jew that ever I knew Converted in New-England) may prove a Blessing unto many, and especially to some of his own Nation: Which is the Prayer and hearty Desire of, Increase Mather.<sup>49</sup>

On March 27, 1722, at College Hall in Cambridge, an illustrious congregation assembled to witness Monis' baptism. Cotton Mather's father, Increase Mather, was to have preached the sermon on this occasion, but he had become ill, so the invitation was extended to Benjamin Colman.<sup>50</sup> Colman's sermon was based on John 5:46 ("If you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote about Me"), and it was entitled, "Moses, a Witness to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ."<sup>51</sup> At the conclusion of Colman's sermon, Monis was baptized. He then immediately ascended the platform and

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<sup>47</sup> Meyer, "The First Christian Jew," 3.

<sup>48</sup> The original capitalization has been preserved here.

<sup>49</sup> Increase Mather, "The Preface to the Reader", iv, in Colman, Benj. *A Discourse Had in the College-Hall At Cambridge, March 27. 1722. Before the Baptism of R. Judah Monis. To which are added Three Discourses Written by Mr. Monis himself, The Truth, The whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth. One of which was deliver'd by him at his Baptism* (Boston: Printed for Daniel Henchman, and sold at his Shop over against the old Brick Church in Cornhill, 1722).

<sup>50</sup> Friedman, "Judah Monis," 3.

<sup>51</sup> Colman, 1.

delivered a lecture in which he addressed his “Brethren According to the Flesh.” He began:<sup>52</sup>

Dear and Beloved Brethren, I Do expect the News of my Embracing the Christian Religion that came to your Ears Some time ago, has been Somewhat Surprizing to you all; and I am afraid you did not think it to be the best you ever have heard; If So, I am very Sorry for it, and hope in the God of Love and Mercy, that He will keep me in my belief, with that Love towards you in particular, and to all Mankind in general, and more especially to those that belong to the household of Faith, as his holy Word has directed me: and have mercy upon you, and in due time take the Vail from before the eyes of your Understanding, that So you may See the veracity of his Christ.<sup>53</sup>

The sincerity of Monis’ conversion is contested by more recent Jewish authors. Their skepticism, if not scorn, is based on three lines of evidence: 1) his marriage, 2) his Sabbath observance, and 3) his teaching position at Harvard. On January 18, 1724, he married Abigail Marrett (also spelled Marret) of Cambridge.<sup>54</sup> Since this was two years following his conversion, the likelihood that romance played a role is slim indeed. He was a faithful husband until her death, thirty-seven years later, and he was faithful to his profession of faith until his own death forty years later.

Monis continued to observe the Sabbath on Saturday, though the sources do not specify the manner in which he observed it.<sup>55</sup> George Kohut argues that “his observance of the Jewish Sabbath is proof enough of his adherence to the ancestral creed, and that,

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<sup>52</sup> The original spelling (and misspelling) has been preserved.

<sup>53</sup> Judah Monis, “The Truth, Being a DISCOURSE Which the Author Delivered at his BAPTISM, Containing Nine Principal Arguments the Modern Jewish Rabbins do make to prove, the MESSIAH is yet to Come: With the Answers to each, not only according to the Orthodox Opinion, but even with the Authority of their own Authentick Rabbins of Old. And Likewise, With the Confession of his Faith, At the Latter End” in Colman, 1.

<sup>54</sup> Josiah C. Kent, *Northborough History* (Newton, MA: Garden City Press, 1921), 287.

<sup>55</sup> C.f., e.g., Hannah Adams, as cited by many later scholars, including Anita Libman Lebeson in her *Jewish Pioneers in America, 1492-1848* (New York: Brentano’s Publishers, 1931), 199.

like the Marranos of Spain, Portugal, and South America, he remained loyal to Israel at heart, whilst apparently devoted to Christianity.”<sup>56</sup>

Monis not only observed the Sabbath, however, but was an active participant in church services on Sunday. If Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, observed the Sabbath (cf. Acts 13:14; 17:2; and 18:4), certainly the other Apostles did as well. Yet they also gathered together “on the Lord’s Day” (Rev. 1:10) – the “first day of the week” (John 20:19; Acts 20:7; and 1 Cor. 16:2).<sup>57</sup> They apparently saw no irreconcilable difference between their Jewishness and their faith in Israel’s Messiah. Neither did Judah Monis.

By far, the most prominent ground for skepticism regarding the sincerity of Monis’ conversion is the fact that faith in Christ was a prerequisite for teaching at Harvard College. Typical is the remark of Solomon Grayzel, who says that Monis “became a convert to Christianity presumably in order to obtain this position.”<sup>58</sup> Yet for the thirty-eight years that he was a member of the faculty, he was paid a meager, and at times, inadequate salary. He taught an unpopular subject, yet maintained his profession of faith until his death in retirement. Arthur Hertzberg concludes:

Monis seems to have been sincere in his conversion, even though Cotton Mather’s father, Increase, was guardedly dubious in the introduction that he wrote to the printed version of Monis’s *Three Discourses*. Increase Mather’s doubts were disproved by Monis’s later life.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> George Alexander Kohut, “Judah Monis, M.A., the First Instructor [of Hebrew?] at Harvard University (1683-1764)” in *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures*, 14:4 (1898), 218.

<sup>57</sup> For the relationship between “the first day of the week” and “the Lord’s Day,” see Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:2,9; Luke 24:1; and John 20:1.

<sup>58</sup> Solomon Grayzel, *A History of the Jews: From the Babylonian Exile to the Present* (New York: Meridian, 1968), 480.

<sup>59</sup> Arthur Hertzberg. *The Jews in America*, 42.

Indeed, even Grayzel acknowledges that the sole object of Harvard at that time was “training for Christian ministry.”<sup>60</sup> Were he not to have been sincere, what possible motive could he have had for aspiring to teach at Harvard?

In summary, whatever doubts may have existed at the time of his baptism were completely removed by his lifetime of faithfulness. Shortly after his baptism, he had said, “My embracing Christianity was because I was fully perswaded [*sic*] that it is the only religion wherein I thought I could be saved, and not because I had self ends.”<sup>61</sup>

### *Monis at Harvard*

Clifford Shipton maintains that Monis’ master’s degree was awarded, not in 1720 as most believe, but in 1723.<sup>62</sup> He argues his position on the following bases: First, Monis’s name was placed “at the foot of the Class of 1720, the members of which took the MA in 1723.” Second, “his name does not appear in the catalogue of 1721.” Third, Monis’s M.A. degree “is not mentioned in the newspaper notices or on the title pages of his books printed in 1722.”<sup>63</sup> Additional evidence for this position may be found in the fact that his degree is listed on publications after 1723.

In response, it should be noted that Monis’ name is indisputably listed with the class of 1720. No one, to my knowledge, contends that Monis received a bachelor’s degree from Harvard in 1720. Had he been granted his M.A. in 1720, it would be natural for his name to have been listed with the class of 1720, yet following the names of those who were graduated with undergraduate degrees. Thus, it would be understandable that his name would be placed at the foot of the class of 1720 and not be listed with the class

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<sup>60</sup> Grayzel, 481.

<sup>61</sup> Monis, in his “Dedication” to “The Truth,” ii.

<sup>62</sup> Shipton, 642.

<sup>63</sup> The following quotations are taken from Shipton, 642, f.n. 12.

of 1721. That his degree is not otherwise publicized until 1723 seems to be an argument from silence.

One suspects more behind this discussion than dispassionate historical scholarship, however. Some, with an animus against Jesus-believing Jews, have been tempted to push the granting of his degree forward to 1723 in order to make it *follow* his baptism, and thus – since at that time (according these polemicists), he ceased to be a Jew – he would not have been the first Jew to obtain an academic degree in North America, or the first Jew to obtain an academic degree from Harvard, or the first Jew on the faculty at Harvard.

In the author’s opinion, historical revision in this case seems both unwarranted and tendentious. While Shipton’s arguments do not appear to be compelling, those who (just as Monis himself) see no contradiction between Jewishness and faith in Jesus may certainly approach the question of the year in which his degree was granted with greater objectivity.

Judah Monis was first a tutor of Hebrew for two years at Harvard (while the college was without a professor of Hebrew on the faculty), and then taught Hebrew on the faculty of Harvard College for thirty-eight years. He began well. Even though Hebrew was not a popular subject, his teaching was apparently very effective. His lengthy tenure at Harvard would certainly support such a claim, and there is direct testimony to that effect, as well. The records of the Harvard Corporation for April 1723 report that the overseers were “greatly satisfied w<sup>th</sup> his assiduity and faithfulness in his instruction, ye surprising effects of them having been laid before the corporation.”<sup>64</sup> One of Monis’ students was Henry Commings, who later ministered in the town of Billerica.

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<sup>64</sup> Corporation Records, April, 1723, as cited in Friedman, “Judah Monis,” 8-9.

Of Commings (and Monis), it was said, “he was considered a fine Hebrew scholar, having been taught while in college by a Jew who took unmeasured pains with a small class to perfect them in the language he loved, and took great pride in their success.”<sup>65</sup>

Other accounts of his effectiveness have not been as positive. There are reports that his students avoided his classroom, wrote nasty annotations into the margins of their grammar books, broke into his cellar, were constantly mocking and intimidating their instructor, and even throwing bricks, sticks, and ashes at his classroom door. A friend of Stephen Sewall, Monis’ successor at Harvard, writes that although Monis had a competent understanding of Hebrew, “He was not happy in enabling others to understand. He retained, moreover, a great fondness for rabbinical lore, and his criticisms were so abstruse, and his conversation and manners so uncourteous that he did not conciliate the respect of his pupils, and attendance on his teaching was deemed a disgusting requisition.”<sup>66</sup>

How can these seemingly contradictory evaluations be reconciled? In the introduction to his *Hebrew and the Bible in America*, Shalom Goldman writes, “The ‘decline’ of Hebrew at Harvard College is often attributed to Judah Monis’s antiquated teaching methods and his unattractive personality. In his contribution to this volume, Thomas Jay Siegel, a historian of Harvard College, corrects this impression.”<sup>67</sup> Indeed, Siegel argues that major changes in the philosophy and practice of education in general were taking place during Monis’ tenure. He contends that the frustration of some of the students and the abuse they heaped upon Monis were more properly the result of his

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<sup>65</sup> *History of the Town of Billerica*, as cited by Kent, 286.

<sup>66</sup> Friedman, “A Contemporary Appraisal,” 147.

<sup>67</sup> Goldman, “Introduction,” in *Hebrew and the Bible in America*, xxi.

methods. The new approach would have been more popular with the students, but it also would have been more secular.<sup>68</sup>

### *Monis' Latter Years*

Monis retired from Harvard following the death of his wife on October 21, 1760. Since he was childless and did not have any other relatives in Boston, the seventy-seven-year-old Jewish Christian moved to Northborough, just west of Boston, to take up residence with his wife's sister and her husband, the Rev. John Martyn. Martyn had been a former student of Monis, and was, no doubt, gratified that Monis was treated with respect and honor. Kent writes, "At the time of his coming to Northborough Mr. Monis was a venerable man, full of years and honor. It was because of these facts and because they felt honored by the presence of such a distinguished man in their midst that the precinct did what it could to honor him."<sup>69</sup> As an expression of their respect, he was given a prominent seat in the church.

Monis' retirement, however, was short-lived. He died on April 25, 1764, and was buried in the churchyard of the First Parish Church.<sup>70</sup> One historian, Hannah Adams, says that while Monis was on his deathbed, a clergyman told him, "Now, Good Father, you will go to Abraham's bosom." She recounts that he replied, "No, he was but a Jew, I will go to Christ, for he is my only hope."<sup>71</sup> Monis' epitaph is of interest, although in

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<sup>68</sup> Thomas J. Siegel, "Professor Stephen Sewall and the Transformation of Hebrew at Harvard," in *Hebrew and the Bible in America*, 228-233.

<sup>69</sup> Kent, 287-288.

<sup>70</sup> Southern Baptists should note that this is the same church from which Luther Rice would be sent as a missionary to India, less than fifty years later. The Baptist Convention of New England offices are located on the Rice property, across the street from the churchyard with Monis' tombstone.

<sup>71</sup> As cited by Friedman, "Judah Monis," 20.

published sources it has never been transcribed completely and accurately. It reads as follows:<sup>72</sup>

### RESURGAM

<p>Here lies buried the Remains of RABBI IUDAH MONIS, M.A. late HEBREW Instructor at HARVARD College in Cambridge in which Office He continued 40 Years. He was by Birth and Religion a jew but embrac·d the Christian Faith &amp; was publickly baptiz·d at Cambridge AD 1722 and departed this Life April 25, 1764, Aged 81 years 2 months and 21 days A native branch of Jacob see! Which, once from off its olive brok, Regrafted, from the living tree Of the reviving sap partook From teeming Zion's fertile womb, As dewy drops in early morn, Or rising bodies from the tomb, At once be Isr'els nation born!</p>	<p>Rom. XI. 17-24.  Isai. LXVI. 8. Psal. CX. 3. Iohn V. 28, 29 Isai. LXVI. 8.</p>
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“*Resurgam*,” meaning, “I shall rise again,” is carved above a representation of a skull and crossed bones. Below this affirmation of faith, there follow a nine-line biographical summary and an eight-line poem, with Scripture references to the right. The poem may likewise be divided into two stanzas – the first, a spiritual autobiography, and the last a prayer for Israel’s rebirth.

This striking epitaph bears mute testimony to the hope and faith of a Jew in his Messiah. What is particularly noteworthy in this final legacy of America’s “first” Jewish believer in Jesus is that he held as tightly to his Jewishness as to his faith in Jesus.

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<sup>72</sup> The author inspected the tombstone on December 14, 2000. Professor Gradwohl, of Iowa State University, accurately transcribed and provided full analysis of the inscription in an unpublished paper, presented at the Cemeteries and Gravemarkers Section of the American Culture Association, San Diego, California, March 31-April 3, 1999.

Although some may perceive this as enigmatic, and evidence of Monis' "conflicted" *persona* to others, it is perfectly consistent with Scripture. In fact, in Romans 11, Paul used his own Jewish faith in Messiah as the ground for confidence that God had not cast off the Jewish people and as the basis of his hope that a remnant of Israel would be saved throughout history.<sup>73</sup>

Monis twice cited Isa. 66:8; but for his detractors he could have referred to Isa. 66:5: "Hear the word of the LORD, you who tremble at His word: 'Your brothers who hate you ... exclude you for My name's sake, ... but they will be put to shame.'" Yet, there is every reason to believe that the hopes and prayers for his brethren that he expressed at his baptism continued to the end of his life:

[I] hope in the God of Love and Mercy, that He will keep me in my belief, with that Love towards you in particular, and to all Mankind in general, and more especially to those that belong to the household of Faith, as his holy Word has directed me: and have mercy upon you, and in due time take the Vail from before the eyes of your Understanding, that So you may See the veracity of his Christ.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> In light of the strong assurance of God's Word that there would always be a remnant of Jews who would believe in Jesus, the failure to mention the contributions Jewish believers (following the period of the New Testament) in courses on Church History truly is enigmatic.

<sup>74</sup> Judah Monis, "The Truth," 1.

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NOTE: Additional materials relating to Judah Monis may be found:

1. In the holdings of the American Jewish Historical Society (including a photocopy of an English translation of a Hebrew letter written by Monis to Robert Wodrow, of Scotland, stating his admiration for Wodrow's writings), and
2. In the archives of Harvard University, HUG1580.xx (includes 3 containers of manuscripts).