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Introduction

ON A TINY ISLAND at the edge of the West Indies, Alexander Hamilton began an unlikely journey. He overcame the perils of orphanhood and decamped from the tropics as a teenager to become a vital figure in the birth of the United States. From the battlefield and the bank to the courtroom and the cabinet, Hamilton shaped the republic to a degree that few others could boast. The remarkable events of his American years have long intrigued scholars and, more recently, theater audiences. While Hamilton biographers are exhaustive in their study of his adulthood, research into his obscure upbringing remains scarce. Yet his Caribbean past is not merely an exotic footnote to the high drama of his American life. Hamilton, like all people, was a product of his roots, and so his West Indian youth matters—not least because he was probably born and raised a Jew.

For more than two centuries, the scant treatment of Hamilton's boyhood has proceeded from a default assumption that he and his relatives were cradle-to-grave Christians. That assumption warps how historians approach his Caribbean background and leads to a double error. For one, they make a series of claims about Hamilton's origins that comport with the premise of his Christian identity but have little grounding in evidence. Moreover, archival sources that should prompt scholars to question this premise are mistakenly interpreted so as to preserve the presumption that he was Christian. By subjecting untested claims to scrutiny and reckoning anew with the historical record, this book concludes that Hamilton, in all likelihood, grew up as a member of the Jewish people.

To be sure, Hamilton did not maintain any identity as a Jew in America. Still, his early engagement with Judaism is hardly just a trivial curiosity. It provides critical context for understanding why the adult Hamilton, more than any other founding father, was connected to Jews and fond of their faith.[1] Many founders commended Jewry and Judaism in one breath only to condemn them in the next. In contrast, Hamilton's favorable relationships with Jews and reverential sentiments about the Jewish religion stand unblemished by bias.

The Hamiltonian-Jewish alliance, in turn, opens a unique window onto the early American republic writ large. A paradox vexed the nation from its inception. The United States was conceived in the name of equality yet defined by hereditary hierarchy—free over slave, white over Native, propertied over landless, man over woman, Christian over Jew. American Jewry challenged the country to confront this paradox directly. Having spilled blood and spent treasure in service of the Revolution, Jews began advocating for a status that Europe denied them for centuries and the Declaration of Independence championed: equality.

The rightful role of Jewry became a subject of fierce debate among Americans of the era. Many Gentiles had long resented Jewish participation in commerce and now balked at the prospect of full-fledged Jewish involvement in civic life. They responded with consternation as Jews grasped for access to the courthouse, ballot box, and elected office. That the Jewish population was miniscule—about one-tenth of a percent—yet prompted such outsized angst speaks to the depth of contemporary antisemitism. Against these reactionary forces, Alexander Hamilton sought an economic and legal order where his Jewish compatriots would stand equal to their Christian neighbors.

The successes Hamilton achieved to that end illustrate the democratic possibilities of the new nation. Just the same, the obstacles he encountered mark the limitations of an America still rife with inherited inequality. The following chapters are as much about the Jewish world of the early republic as they are about Hamilton—and it is the relationship between the two that shows us afresh how the aftermath of the Revolution was neither an undeviating march toward modern equality nor a pure perpetuation of traditional hierarchy. We instead find a young

country uneasily navigating the contested terrain between New World promises and Old World prejudices.

Any claim concerning Hamilton's Jewishness must begin with his mother, Rachel, given the matrilineal nature of Jewish identity. She was unquestionably from a Christian family in the British Caribbean. Rachel wedded a colonist in the Danish West Indies named Johan Levine. Although numerous scholars assume he was not Jewish, considerable evidence suggests otherwise, including the unambiguous declaration from Hamilton's own grandson that Johan was a "rich Danish Jew."[2]

There are compelling reasons to think Rachel converted to Judaism for marriage. When the couple had a son, Peter, they abstained from the standard Christian practice of infant baptism. Peter Levine would later be baptized as an adult under circumstances that indicate he was converting to Christianity and thus not a Christian in childhood. Hamilton scholars do not entertain the possibility that Peter had been Jewish and so remain baffled by his adult baptism.

Rachel fled her marriage and bore Alexander out of wedlock to a Christian, yet she chose to enroll Alexander in a Jewish school. His Jewish education is a well-established fact. Some biographers presume that Alexander attended a Jewish school because his illegitimacy must have precluded him from church schooling. Yet the church records do not support the supposition that out-of-wedlock birth posed an obstacle to church membership. And a host of communal, theological, and political factors give us ample cause to believe that the Jewish school would have accepted Alexander only if the local Jewish community considered him one of its own.

His matriculation at the Jewish school also stands as the best evidence that Rachel had earlier converted to Judaism. Because Jewish identity passes through the mother, any recognition by the Jewish school of Alexander as a coreligionist means that it necessarily would have regarded Rachel in the same light. If we assume that she had no prior identity as a Jew, it is hard to make sense of why Rachel would, or

how she even could, choose to arrange a Jewish education for her son. Allow for the possibility of her Jewish identity, however, and such difficulties disappear. Two other long-known details about Rachel, which Hamilton biographers mention but treat with no particular significance, harmonize with the notion that she was Jewish. Rachel kept the surname "Levine" long after she severed ties to Johan—until her death, in fact. And upon her passing she was not buried in a church cemetery.

Hamilton was only thirteen when his mother succumbed to a fatal illness, and he stayed in the Caribbean until the age of eighteen. A recently unearthed legal case from those intervening years makes plain that he presented himself as Christian at seventeen—but it also suggests that his affiliation with Christianity had not been lifelong. When assessed for his competency to swear on the Bible as a witness, Hamilton described himself as Anglican. Yet the court prevented him from giving sworn testimony after Hamilton conceded that he had never before received communion. His failure to have participated in the sacrament of communion would be an oddity if he were raised Anglican but is far more explicable if he were a latecomer to the Christian faith.

Tellingly, Hamilton in his American years was both willing and able to conceal parts of his West Indian background. Newly uncovered records reveal that he fabricated his year of birth after leaving the islands. Hamilton maintained this myth for the duration of his adulthood without any Caribbean contemporary ever exposing him, rendering it all the more plausible that he could obscure a Jewish heritage with similar success.

The theory that Alexander Hamilton probably had a Jewish past may seem, on its face, provocative. But were the foregoing facts presented about the early life and family history of any ordinary Caribbean colonist rather than an American founder, it would be uncontentious to claim that the balance of evidence points to his status as a Jew. And if indeed the evidence of Hamilton's Jewish identity is not controversial, but the idea of it remains so, then perhaps the question of Jewish belonging in the United States is as fraught in our time as it was in his own.

This inquiry requires important caveats. Jewish identity has many dimensions—religious, cultural, legal, communal, and ethnic, among others. Often these dimensions overlap for a given individual; sometimes they conflict. The eighteenth-century Atlantic world featured a diverse array of people who were Jewish in some senses and not others, from crypto-Jews to Afro-Caribbean Jews to Gentiles who converted for marriage. An investigation into whether Hamilton was Jewish cannot, therefore, force him into either of two categories: Jew or non-Jew. It must instead center on the likelihood that he had a Jewish identity in any number of the term's multiple meanings for any period of his life.

Furthermore, the process of recreating the personal history of an inconspicuous adult from the West Indies of that time period is an admittedly thorny enterprise, much more so a child. Hurricanes and fires have degraded the historical record. Many of the documents that do survive have been partially eaten by termites. We are left with remnants of individual lives, scraps of evidence that must be read within the context of what is known about the region and era. A great deal of what might be said about most aspects of Hamilton's upbringing and kin are matters of probabilities rather than certainties. The case for his Jewish identity is no different.

If Hamilton were likely Jewish, then the question arises of how such a significant feature about a historical icon escaped notice for so long. It is, in fact, unsurprising that a principal part of his boyhood could have evaded his numerous biographers. After all, the adult Hamilton refrained from discussion of his youth with few exceptions. He was notoriously outspoken—often to a fault—about every vital matter in his American life, making his self-censorship around his Caribbean origins especially striking. Undoubtedly, Hamilton's illegitimate birth was a topic he preferred to avoid.[3] And the United States suffered from antisemitic biases; for a statesman whose acceptance into the highest echelons of national politics required at least a nominal pretense to a Christian identity, keeping quiet about any Jewish roots would have been highly prudent.

Hamilton scholars have largely followed the lead of their subject in glossing over his beginnings. Their interests lie in the spectacle of his American years. Excavating the details of Hamilton's West Indian past is not only a peripheral but relatively recent undertaking. Even a fact as basic as his mother's name remained unknown to historians until the twentieth century.[4] It should come as little wonder, then, that his religious upbringing is an underdeveloped field of study.

What's more, materials pertaining to Hamilton's origins are much less accessible, both linguistically and geographically, than those concerning his adulthood. The latter sources are overwhelmingly in English and either available in published form or conveniently located in archives in the United States. By contrast, documents germane to his Caribbean background appear in a variety of languages—Danish, Portuguese, French, Dutch, and German—and are scattered across West Indian islands as well as the European countries that colonized them. The arduous task of reconstructing Hamilton's elusive childhood is hardly worth the effort for his typical biographer whose native tongue is English and whose attention focuses on topics like the Federalist Papers or the Treasury Department.

When historians do write about Hamilton's youth and family of origin, they usually proceed in cursory fashion and recycle untested claims from other scholars. Many of these claims, which take as an article of faith the Christian identities of Hamilton and his relatives, do not withstand scrutiny. And so it is a litany of factors—Hamilton's secrecy, biographers' interests, lingual barriers, remote sources, and faulty assumptions—that have all coalesced to inadvertently obscure important facets of his past.

The adult Hamilton never presented himself as Jewish. Nor is there evidence that he covertly practiced Judaism in his maturity. We have, moreover, no indication that upon reaching America he divulged to anyone a prior identity as a Jew. Yet his links to Jewry did not end with his Caribbean boyhood.

Hamilton is best remembered for his financial wizardry, and Jews were pivotal players in his bid to turn the United States into a banking and commercial power. He also served as a distinguished lawyer in New York City, where he represented Jewish citizens in the courts. And at his alma mater, Columbia, Hamilton helped spearhead reforms that were friendly to Jews. He proved instrumental in placing the first Jew on the college board, abolishing mandatory forms of Christian worship for undergraduates, and repealing a religious test that had disqualified Jews and other non-Anglicans from the Columbia presidency.

Keenly aware of the recurrent persecution that Jews suffered, Hamilton viewed their survival since antiquity as beyond remarkable—God's hand was surely at work. He marveled that the "progress of the Jews . . . from their earliest history to the present time has been and is entirely out of the ordinary course of human affairs. Is it not then a fair conclusion that the cause also is an *extraordinary one*—in other words, that it is the effect of some great providential plan?"[5] Perhaps he saw some divine intervention at play in his own improbable rise from Caribbean obscurity to American founder.

Hamilton well understood that the historical train of abuses against Jews continued in the United States. After all, many of his adversaries weaponized antisemitism against his various endeavors throughout his career. During the ratification debates over the U.S. Constitution, Hamilton ranked among its premier defenders while a number of his antagonists denounced the Constitution because it would open federal office to Jewish candidates. The sweeping economic programs that he then advanced as treasury secretary were repeatedly maligned as nefarious plots to benefit Jews. And in a high-profile trial, Hamilton's Jewish witnesses in court were accused of dishonesty owing to an invidious myth that their religion encouraged them to lie under oath. That the forces of anti-Jewish bigotry assailed Hamilton's agenda so frequently is itself noteworthy testament to his alliance with Jewry. Arguably no other self-professed Christian in the early republic confronted more antisemitism.

Despite this fraught environment, Hamilton never wavered in his affection for the people and faith of Judaism. Indeed, the most impassioned

denunciation of antisemitism in the annals of any founder came from Hamilton amid the closing arguments of the aforementioned trial. After opposing counsel impugned his Jewish witnesses, Hamilton responded by exalting Jews as the Chosen People: "Has he forgotten, what this race once were, when, under the immediate government of God himself, they were selected as the witnesses of his miracles, and charged with the spirit of prophecy?" Hamilton then alluded to the Roman conquest of the Holy Land and resulting diaspora for Jews throughout the Roman Empire. He recounted how the Jewish people fractured into "remnants of scattered tribes . . . the degraded, persecuted, reviled subjects of Rome, in all her resistless power, and pride, and pagan pomp." The Jews were rendered "an isolated, tributary, friendless people." Hamilton would not abide his own legal system perpetuating this age-old animosity. By his lights, the Judaism of his witnesses was not a stigma to be borne but a religion to be honored. "Were not the witnesses of that pure and holy, happy and Heaven-approved faith?" he asked rhetorically. Invoking the allegorical figure Lady Justice, Hamilton declared that she protected Jews the same as she did all others: "Be the injured party . . . Jew, or Gentile, or Christian, or Pagan, Foreign or Native, she clothes him with her mantle, in whose presence all differences of faiths or births, of passions or of prejudices—all are called to acknowledge and revere her supremacy."[6] Here was a giant of the early republic demanding that Jews, the downtrodden of Europe for centuries, stand equal to Gentiles in an American courtroom. Hamilton's contemporaries remarked that no other trial in his illustrious legal career elicited from him a more emotional performance. Plainly, the case touched something deeply personal within him.

Hamilton's affinity for Jewry undermines the conventional depiction of him, advanced first by rivals and then by scholars, as an aspiring aristocrat with a measure of disdain for those on the periphery.[7] True, he was no populist firebrand. But neither does Hamilton deserve condemnation as an elitist. To reflexively dismiss him as a lackey of the moneyed classes is to overlook how the urban marketplace was more meritocratic than other realms of American life. An enterprising Jew—all too often closed off from the world of law, politics, and colleges—could far more

readily access the commercial and financial spheres that Hamilton invigorated. And while many Jewish merchants and brokers in Hamilton's orbit did enjoy a degree of economic security, they were hardly invulnerable to antisemitism. His ties to a Jewish community that was subjected to cultural and legal discrimination call into question the antidemocratic caricature that his foes imagined him to be. It is not without irony that other founding fathers, despite sometimes peddling prejudice against Jews, were far less likely than Hamilton to have charges of elitism leveled against them in their day and afterward.

By fighting for an America where Jew and Gentile would partake alike in civic and economic affairs, Hamilton began to make real the principle of equality in whose name the Revolution had been waged. But the antisemitic resistance that he faced underscores the limits of a hierarchical society still marred by religious intolerance. The experience of American Jewry is certainly not the only one by which to measure the feats and failures of the founding era. Nevertheless, the Hamiltonian-Jewish connections offer us an enriched perspective on the early republic, one that suggests the egalitarian rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence was not an empty promise, even if progress was halting.

Hamilton's appreciation for both Judaism and Jews also has implications for understanding church-state relations. Scholars often presume that historical figures who promoted the separation of church and state were the most compassionate toward minority religions and, correspondingly, that those who saw a role for faith in civic life must have had the least sympathy for religious dissenters. Hamilton's approach complicates these assumptions. In word and deed, he exhibited great esteem for the Jewish faith and its followers. Hamilton *also* argued for a harmony between devotional and civic ends, contending that religion could help nurture the new American republic. Consider, conversely, Thomas Jefferson. He stood as the foremost proponent of the separation of church and state; Jefferson himself coined the phrase. Yet he was blunt in his contempt for Judaism. Jefferson maligned the Hebrew Bible as "defective," the ethics of biblical Judaism as "repulsive," and the Jewish conception of God as "degrading."[8] Hamilton and Jefferson, in opposite ways,

illustrate the same point: there was no necessary relationship between respect for Judaism and the principle of separation in their age.

This book does not read the adult Hamilton's veneration of Jewry and Judaism backward as all the more proof of a Jewish identity earlier in his life. Rather, Hamilton's Caribbean roots can help us more fully make sense of his subsequent support for Jews and their faith. It is a fundamental truism that we are all shaped by our childhoods. To be sure, a measure of humility is in order when a historian draws connections between a subject's youth and maturity; no biographer can insist with exacting precision how a given element of a figure's upbringing informed decisions made decades afterward. But so too is it folly to think, for instance, that Hamilton's exposure to the brutalities of bondage in the West Indies had no bearing upon his later attitude toward slavery.[9] We would be equally misguided in assuming that his clerkship in adolescence at an import-export firm—which afforded him a real-time education in credit, currency, and trade—was wholly unrelated to his financial acumen as treasury secretary.[10] And surely it is no mere happenstance that among the founders, Hamilton was the only one to attend a Jewish school as a boy and then cultivated the greatest involvement with Jews as an adult.

That Jewry and Judaism are the central themes of this book is *not* meant to imply that they were the central pillars of Hamilton's American years. It would be inaccurate to depict him as engaged in a daily toil on behalf of Jews or perpetually preoccupied with the Jewish religion. Hamilton's affiliations and influences were numerous; other important strands in his story have received extensive treatment elsewhere. This volume seeks to add the relevance of Judaism and its people to our understanding of Hamilton.

Among Hamilton's beloved hobbies in New York was the theater, so it is altogether fitting that the Broadway stage has made him the country's

favorite founder. His pride of place in American culture at this moment indicates that his story is highly resonant. And yet Hamilton is a profoundly enigmatic character. Here was the treasurer who saved the nation's finances but died in debt, the strikingly decisive leader forever haunted by insecurities, the champion of the rule of law who met his demise in an illicit duel. For all the attention thrust on Hamilton, he eludes us still.

His youth remains the most esoteric of the many mysteries surrounding his life. Hamilton spilled gallons of ink on seemingly every topic but maintained a singular silence about his Caribbean origins. Even with his own children, he was largely mute on the subject. And yet, tantalizingly, he broke from his usual secrecy to share with them a warm memory from boyhood—his time at the Jewish school. If Alexander Hamilton left this clue about his cryptic past, then it is the intent of the pages that follow to explore what larger truths it may suggest.

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Note: Page numbers in *italics* indicate figures.