Judaic, Christian, and Islamic Mythology in Lord Byron's Hebrew Melodies

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Abstract:
Although many Jewish readers and commentators have recognized Lord Byron's Hebrew Melodies as proto-Zionist songs since their composition to the music of the Jewish composer, Isaac Nathan in ١٨١٩, there are traces of Christian and Islamic mythology beside the Old Testament that Byron seemed to imitate in his "Songs of Zion". Some of Byron's lyrics stem from Biblical sources, others are not. His characters are derived from both the Old and New Testaments, and the atmosphere that he presents, in the Melodies, is realistically and authentically, as many of Byron's scholars have noticed, derivative from the 'Islamic Levant' that he sought for salvation after the failure of his relationship with his conventionally devoted wife, Annabella.
Then Ezekiel said:
"The philosophy of the East taught the first principles of human perception: some nations held one principle for the origin, and some another: we of Israel taught that the Poetic Genius (as you now call it) was the first principle and all the other mere derivative, which was the cause of our despising the Priests and Philosophers of other countries, and prophesying that all Gods would at last be proved to originate in ours and to be the tributaries of the Poetic Genius, it was this that our great poet, King David, desired so fervently and invokes so pathetically, saying by this he conquers enemies and governs kingdoms".

William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and Byron's *Hebrew Melodies* have been recognized by Jewish readers and commentators as proto-Zionist songs, advocating the Jewish national restoration a century before the Balfour Declaration. "Zionist poetry", says N. Sokolow, the author of *The History of Zionism* (*٩١٩١*, I, *٥٩*), "owes more to Byron than to any other Gentile poet". The *Hebrew Melodies*, adds Sokolow, adhere to "an intensity of grief and yearning ... a tenderness which make [Byron] comparable only to the sweet Hebrew muse" (Ibid.). Thus, the Melodies were translated into Hebrew and were set to music by Hebrew composers several times because they reflect, according to the Jews, a Zionist ideal or motto as exposed in the Holy Scriptures. The Jews who had been Zionists since the destruction of their Temple and during their exile had found strength in the promises of homecoming, which they read in the prophesying words of their prophets:
Then the Lord your God will have mercy on you. He will bring you back from the nations where he has scattered you, and he will make you prosperous again. Even if you are scattered to the farthest corners of the earth, the Lord your God will gather you together and bring you back, so that you may again take possession of the land where your ancestors once lived. And he will make you more prosperous and more numerous than your ancestors ever were.

(Deut. 30:3-5)

This sense of national restoration, which some Jewish readers felt implicit in Byron's Hebrew Melodies, "Christian readers have in general failed to observe it", claims Joseph Slater (1902, 89). Although Zionism was part of the political climate in which Byron lived, he did not "ever explicitly advocate the Restoration of the Jews" (Ibid., 91). He did not produce sacred Zionist songs; thus, during the period of composing his Hebrew Melodies, Byron wrote ironically to his fiancé, Annabella that his half-sister, Augusta said: "They will call me a Jew next" (Cited in Blackstone, 1976, 130). He wrote, in the same letter, that his trusted friend and banker, "Kinnaird … applied to me to write words for a musical composer who is going to publish the real and undisputed Hebrew Melodies, which are beautiful and to which David and the prophets actually sang the 'songs of Zion'" (Ibid., 119). Since romanticism adopted, according to Rene Wellek (1963, 163), "imagination for the view of poetry, nature for the view of the world, and symbol and myth for poetic style", Byron had built his Hebrew Melodies on Biblical mythology rather than adopting a proto-Zionist attitude. Moreover, some of Byron's
Hebrew Melodies stem from Scriptural sources and some are not; like "I Saw Thee Weep", which was written for Lady Frances Webster, or Byron's favorite lyric, "She Walks in Beauty", written for Mrs. Wilmost Horton as pure secular love-poems.

I.
She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes:
Thus mellow'd to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy say denies.

II.
One shade the more, one ray the less,
Had half impir'd the nameless grace
Which waves in every raven tress,
Or softly lightens o'er her face;
Where thoughts serenely sweet express
How pure, how dear their dwelling place.

III.
And on that cheek, and o'er that brow,
So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,
But tell of days in goodness spent,
A mind at peace with all below,
A heart whose love is innocent!
The Hebrew Melodies are partly inspired by the Old Testament, and partly by Byron's own imagination, fluctuating from London to Jerusalem and Babylon, and from reality to the world of vision. Definitely, there is no political intention behind them, and Byron's songs are Hebrew only because they are inspired by the Old Testament's Poets/Prophets. He repeatedly expressed his admiration of the Bible, not merely as a Holy Book that he imitated in his Melodies to strengthen his intimacy with his conventionally devoted bride, but as a literary composition, saying: "of the Scriptures themselves I have ever been a reader and admirer as compositions, particularly the Arab-Job-and parts of Isaiah – and the Song of Deborah" (Cited in Ashton, 1972, 66-7). Like most of the romantics, Byron, says J.R. Watson (1985, 8), "owed a debt to a long-standing prophetic idea, to the tradition of the inspired, nationally-conscious prophet-poet". He wants to be a part of the long prophetic code, "the successor of the ancient poets and prophets". The Old Testament Poets/Prophets are prototypes of an essential romantic tradition that provokes the poet as a visionary and the moment of inspiration as holy: "the working of the human spirit inspired by something greater than itself" (Ibid., 14). In this way, "prophecy and history, inspiration and fact, are united: the Sacred History becomes prophetic, the Sacred Prophecies historical" (Ibid., 15).

Byron's Cockney peer, P.B. Shelley believed that in the infancy of societies, all authors were poets. So did Wordsworth say:
The earliest poets of all nations generally wrote from passion excited by real events; they wrote naturally, and as men: feeling powerfully as they did, their language was daring, and figurative.

The "Preface" to the Lyrical Ballads
Returning to a Biblical heritage in the thorny 19th century with a "Mad, Bad, and dangerous" poet like Lord Byron, the brain "perplexes, and retards", as John Keats had said, but like the German sage, Goethe, the English romantics longed for a time when people "still from God did they receive / Heavenly lore in earthly speech, / Nor beat the brain to pass their reach" (The West-Eastern Divan, I, i). The audience of Byron's Hebrew Melodies were intended initially to be conventional pious listeners like Annabella and Isaac Nathan, the Jewish musical composer, but the poet never had a conventionally devoted mind. Rather, he was a fallen angel whose real love remained all his life John Edleston, the chorister and Augusta, the "unnamed sin" of his life. He tried his best to be redeemed during this particular period of his life (1814-1815), the time of his marriage, but he was not rescued and his savior, Annabella herself, could not shoulder this vast responsibility. Yet, one cannot deny the fact that, during the time of writing his Hebrew Melodies, Byron was in love, in harmony with humanity and religion, and he composed these poems to music turning the Bible from a Sacred Book into a romantic piece of composition. He expresses in his "If That High World", for example, a totally new un-Byronic atmosphere, speculating on the validity of Eternal Love:
I.
If that high world, which lies beyond
Our own, surviving Love endears;
If there the cherish'd heart be fond,
The eye the same, except in tears-
How welcome those untrodden spheres!
How sweet this very hour to die!
To soar from earth and find all fears
Lost in thy light – Eternity!

II.
It must be so: 'tis not for self
That we so tremble on the brink;
And striving to o'erleap the gulf,
Yet cling to Being's severing link.
Oh! in that future let us think
To hold each heart the heart that shares;
With them the immortal waters drink,
And soul in soul grow deathless theirs!

Moreover, in his Melodies, Byron becomes a Hebrew Orpheus, presenting weeping harpists and Psalmists to seek cathartic effects. His negative emotion (despair) is absorbed and purifies either by music, tears of the weepers, or their promised aspirations (occults).
I.
Oh! weep for those that wept by Babel's stream,
Whose shrines are desolate, whose land a dream;
Weep for the harp of Judah's broken shell;
Mourn – where their God hath dwelt the godless dwell!

II.
And where shall Israel lave her bleeding feet?
And when shall Zion's songs again seem sweet?
And Judah's melody once more rejoice
The hearts that leap'd before its heavenly voice?

III.
Tribes of the wandering foot and weary breast,
How shall ye flee away and be at rest!
The wild-dove hath her nest, the fox his cave,
Mankind their country – Israel but the grave!

In his "The Gulf and The Fountain: The Hebrew Melodies",
Bernard Blackstone eschews the triple effect of the Old Testament, the New Testament, and Islam on Byron's Hebrew Melodies. Like William Blake, says Blackstone (133-4), "Byron believed that 'all religions are one': the Father of Christianity and the Allah of the Muslims are one and the same. The monolithic simplicity of Islam appealed to Byron at this period of his life above the doctrinal and ritual complexities of Christianity". For the poet, the 'Galilee' of his Hebrew Melodies is an equivalent to the 'Levant' to which
Byron, a London-exile, had escaped. In "The Wild Gazelle", he presents an open-air scene from the Orient, saying:

I.
The wild gazelle on Judah's hills
Exulting yet may bound,
And drink from all the living rills
That gush on holy ground:
Its airy step and glorious eye
May glance in tameless transport by: -

II.
A step as fleet, an eye more bright,
Hath Judah witness'd there;
And o'er her scenes of lost delight
Inhabitants more fair.
The cedars wave on Lebanon,
But Judah's statelier maids are gone!

(10-12)

Displaced and alienated in his country and among his people, as most of his major poems tell, he selected the 'Islamic Levant' as "the homeland of his choice" (Ibid., 137). Annabella was totally convinced after their separation that Byron "'turned Mussulman' …, had renounced the faith and the moral code of his country" (Ibid.). She considers his apostasy as 'a crime', but for Byron "the pull to the East was almost irresistible", although "it meant a complete break with the traditions of his house and his class and his race" (Ibid.). His intimate treatment of the East had encouraged some of Byron's scholars to challenge Edward Said's "sweeping negative view of Western
representations of the Orient" (Franklin, 2002, 113). They negated the "colonialising context" of Byron's negative cultural stereotypes of the East, as Ali Pasha in Childe Harold Pilgrimage. However, Byron resorted to the Islamic East, as can be seen in his Turkish Tales, because it supplied catharsis to his tormented soul. In "My Soul is Dark" (from I Samuel 16:4-23), he says:

My soul is dark – Oh! quickly string
The harp I yet can brook to hear;
And let thy gentle fingers fling
Its melting murmurs o'er mine ear.
If in this heart a hope be dear,
That sound shall charm it forth again:
If in these eyes there lurk a tear,
'T will flow, and cease to burn my brain.
(1-8)

He appeals to the cathartic effects of David's music, and "under the image of music, Byron asks for Annabella's understanding and sympathy" (Blackstone, 131). She must understand him, forgive his sinful past, and cure his anguished conscience. If she does this, Byron can be saved and end his exile. His hope for salvation was not fulfilled by Annabella, she could not "save him from himself", she saw her husband as a guilty man, an exile on earth and an outcast in heaven. In his love-lyric "Sun of the Sleepless", he describes his "melancholy star", Annabella herself, as "distinct, but distant – clear – but, oh how cold". In "Were My Bosom as False as Thou Deem'st It to Be",
there is an implicit Byron-Annabella dialogue in which he reaches an ultimate conclusion to his relationship with his new wife and the Calvinistic unforgiving frame of mind that she represents, saying:

I.
Were my bosom as false as thou deem'st it to be,
I need not have wander'd from far Galilee;
It was but abjuring my creed to efface
The curse which, thou say'st, is the crime of my race.

II.
If the bad never triumph, then God is with thee!
If the slave only sin, thou art spotless and free!
If the Exile on earth is an Outcast on high,
Live on in thy faith, but in mine I will die.

III.
I have lost for that faith more than thou canst bestow,
As the God who permits thee to prosper doth know;
In his hand is my heart and my hope – and in thine
The land and the life which for him I resign.

(1-21)

At the end of the poem he regards himself as a cursed man, a wandering Jew. His tone in this short lyric is not less Byronic than his tone in poems like Childe Harold Pilgrimage or Don Juan. He makes at last his decision that Annabella should live on in her faith, and he will live and die following his flexible spiritual creed, which he thought could be 'the Islamic way of life'; "What in Western eyes are the crimes of the Byrons (Mad
Jack, Byron, Augusta) would have been readily accepted in the tolerant moral code of Islam" (Ibid., ١٣٢٣-٣).

As Annabella failed to save the poet from his agonies, and his honeymoon (treaclemoon) was over, the Hebrew Melodies begin to express the tone of lamenting captives in foreign lands and fallen kings who aspire to compensation. These themes match the typical Byronic mentality, which searches for salvation, but descends instead into the infernal abyss. "The Songs of Zion" echo his present and past life with a sense of regretting Adam, a lost paradise. "The Hebrew Melodies", says Thomas L. Ashton (١٩٧٨, ٧٩), "are dominated by melancholy and defiance. ... Byron's response to life at the time of their writing". All the monarchs of the Hebrew Melodies, except David, fall. The myth of fall becomes an archetype for Byron to describe his personal fate. This echoes Leigh Hunt's saying that Byron "furnish[es] others out of himself" (Ibid., ٧٨٠), or, according to Harold Bloom (٧٠٠٩, xii), Byron's "invariable motive was self-dramatization". The Byronic self is mimicked in the fallen figures of his Hebrew Melodies. Without making himself directly the subject of his poems, says Kurt Heinzelman (١٩٨٨, ٢٢٤), "Byron's collected 'Hebrew' lyrics could implicitly constitute a narrative of his own poetic career up to that time – as if poetry, mediated by real music, might seem to collaborate with history". Thus, Saul sees Samuel who rose from the grave to freeze "the blood of monarchs with prophecies", Belshazzar sees the vision of the handwriting on the wall, which "comes as he drinks his heathen wine from the sacred cups of Judah", the host of Sennacherib is destroyed by the "angel of death", Herod is haunted by the ghost of the ideal
Mariamne, and Eliphaz the Temanite is chilled by the "Spirit" who appeared for him. Byron's tyrants are Hebrews and Assyrians, they stemmed from both the Old and New Testaments. "They are destroyed", according to Ashton (٠٧٦), "by the specter o their own radical selfishness. In a world of death, selfish pride … is a sin, because it is an enemy of the love upon which Byron's heavenly 'high world' rests".

When the role of Annabella was marginalized in Byron's life a short time after their marriage, the Saul-David relationship in the Hebrew Melodies could be equated with Byron-Edleston, or even Byron-Augusta. Edleston was the choirboy that Byron loved when he was in Trinity College, but the boy died suddenly. He experienced with the young boy "intense feelings of protective and idealized love but also sexual guilt" (Franklin, ٧٣). The poet laments his death in one of the Hebrew Melodies, "Oh! Snatch'd Away in Beauty's Bloom", which is an elegy, foreshadowing Tennyson's In Memoriam (١٨٥٠).

I.
Oh! snatch'd away in beauty's bloom,
On thee shall press no ponderous tomb;
But on thy turf shall roses rear
Their leaves, the earliest of the year;
And the wild cypress wave in tender gloom:

II.
And oft by yon blue gushing stream
Shall Sorrow lean her drooping head,
And feed deep thought with many a dream,
And lingering pause and lightly tread;
Fond wretch! As if her step disturb'd the dead!

III.
Away! We know that tears are vain,
That death nor heeds nor hears distress:
Will this unteach us to complain?
Or make one mourner weep the less?
And thou – who tell'st me to forget,
Thy looks are wan, thine eyes are wet.

Similar to Tennyson also, Byron laments his friend as a husband lamenting his wife, addressing him as a feminine, in "Herod's Lament for Mariamne":

Oh, Mariamne! Now for thee
The heart for which thou bled'st is bleeding;
Revenge is lost in agony,
And wild remorse to rage succeeding.
Oh, Mariamne! Where art thou?
Thou canst not hear my bitter pleading:
Ah! Could'st thou – thou would'st pardon now,
Thou Heaven were to my prayers unheeding.

He presents Judea's greatest criminal in a moment of agony and pain, which requires understanding if not sympathy, but he knows that he will go unsaved: "Thou art cold, my murder'd love! / And this dark heart is vainly craving / For her who soars alone above, / And leaves my soul unworthy saving" (13-16). This torment "is not consumed, but still consuming" the mourner, or Byron himself. He realizes that in a mutable world there is no victor, and all is vanity;
thus, the leader of the "Satanic School", as Robert Southey had called him, presents in one of his Melodies a typical Christian preaching poem, "All is Vanity, Saith the Preacher", saying:

I.
Fame, wisdom, love, and power were mine,
And health and youth possess'd me;
My goblets blush'd from every vine,
And lovely forms caress'd me;
I sunn'd my heart in beauty's eyes,
And felt my soul grew tender;
All earth can give, or mortal prize,
Was mine of regal splendor.

II.
I strive to number o'er what days
Remembrance can discover,
Which all that life or earth displays
Would lure me to live over.
There rose no day, there roll'd no hour
Of pleasure unembitter'd;
And not a trapping deck'd my power
That gall'd no while it glitter'd.

III.
The serpent of the field, by art
And spells, is won from harming;
But that which coils around the heart,
Oh! who hath power of charming?
It will not list to wisdom's lore,
Nor music's voice can lure it;
But there it stings evermore
The soul that must endure it.
The Judaic, Christian, and Islamic mythos of Byron's Hebrew Melodies reach their climax in the philosophic lyric, "When Coldness Wraps This Suffering Clay", which presents the post-mortal existence of neo-Platonic mysticism: "A thought unseen, but seeing all", which "leaves its darken'd dust behind". It meets the essential prerequisites of the three monotheistic religions; thus, immortality becomes predominant in the Hereafter, saying:

Above or Love, Hope, Hate, or Fear,
It lives all passionless and pure:
An age shall fleet like earthly year;
Its years as moments shall endure.
Away, away, without a wing,
O'er all, through all, its thought shall fly,
A nameless and eternal thing,
Forgetting what it was to die.

Consequently, the Hebrew Melodies are as Byronic as any other major poem in which Byron used poetry to mediate his personal life. These thirty poems that Byron wrote during a very critical period of his life convey his use of religious mythology in the portrayal of his autobiographical poetry.
Bibliography


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من حياة الشاعر وهي فترة زواجه القصير الأمد عبرت بشكل واضح عن روحية البطل البويروني الذي اعتدنا مشاهدته في قصائد مثل (رحلة الفارس هارولد) و (دون جوان) فلم تكن قصائد دينية بالمعنى المألوف بل أعلن فيها الشاعر صراحة برأته من المجتمع الانكليزي التقليدي والديانة الكالفينية الغير متسامحة التي تنتمي لها زوجته.