
Byron and “Zionism”

Nabil I. Matar
Florida Institute of Technology

Since 1917, nearly every scholar who has evaluated Byron’s **Hebrew Melodies** has concluded that the poet subscribed to “Zionism” or “proto-Zionism”. Significantly, this critical trend began only after the Balfour Declaration: in 1919, Nahum Sokolow published his **History of Zionism** in which he sought to demonstrate that the Zionist ideal for the colonization of Palestine had long been voiced and supported by the greatest figures in literature and theology, including Lord Byron. Rhapsodically, Sokolow compared the **Hebrew Melodies** with Jehudah Halevi and declared that “Zionist poetry owes more to Byron than to any other Gentile poet”⁽¹⁾

In 1952, three years after the establishment of Israel in Arab Palestine, Joseph Slater examined Byron’s **Melodies** and attempted a detailed analysis of the poet’s “proto-Zionism”. Quoting Sokolow approvingly, Slater did not hesitate to confirm that Byron, like other English intellectuals a century before the Balfour Declaration, was “familiar with the ideas and emotions of Zionism”, and that his “involvement in the cause of Jewish nationalism «in **Hebrew Melodies**» had been a foreshadowing of his devotion to the liberty of Italy and Greece”⁽²⁾. This view was assumed by Thomas L. Ashton in his definitive edition of Byron’s **Hebrew Melodies** (1972), who maintained that “Byron’s espousal of Jewish **nationalism** was sincere” and that the poet enthusiastically “took up the **cause** of Jewish nationalism”⁽³⁾, his italics). Since then, nearly every study of Byron’s poems has adopted this position, including the introduction to the recent facsimile

(1) Nahum Sokolow, **History of Zionism** (London, 1919), vol. I, p.95.

(2) Joseph Slater, “Byron’s **Hebrew Melodies**”, **Studies in Philology**, 49 (1952): 75-94.

(3) Thomas L. Ashton, **Byron’s Hebrew Melodies** (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972), pp. 72-73.

edition of **Hebrew Melodies**⁽⁴⁾.

The purpose of this study will be to examine whether this interpretation of the **Hebrew Melodies** is feasible.

I

The above scholars were all aware that their application of the term “Zionism” to poetry written in 1815 was anachronistic. Zionism as a political movement calling for the establishment of a Jewish state belonged to the last decade of the 19th century. Consequently, the use of “Zionism” in the context of Byron could not but have arisen from a deliberately ideological reading of the poetry. Indeed, Sokolow assumed his position towards Byron as part of his propaganda for Zionism, and critics who followed in his footsteps may have been similarly motivated.

This bias in post-1917 criticism becomes apparent when the 1815 reviews of the **Hebrew Melodies** are surveyed. For not only do those contemporary criticisms not mention “Zionism” but they deflect from such an ideological interpretation and point in a completely opposite direction. Not a single critic, even among those who praised Byron, recognized the urgings of “Zionism” in the verse. Rather Byron was ridiculed for his Jewish themes and was degradingly compared with two previous English converts to Judaism, Edmund Curl and Lord George Gordon. In the **British Critic**, he was castigated for turning into “poet laureate to the synagogue”, and in the **British Review**, he was told that a “young Lord is seldom the better for meddling with Jews”⁽⁵⁾. Contemporary critics did not view Byron as an advocate of heroic “Zionism” but as a poet meddling unnecessarily in Jewish themes.

Furthermore, reviewers criticized Byron’s portrait of the Jews. Instead of depicting the Jews in sorrow for their Temple, complained the **British Review**, Byron had shown them lamenting for “Judah’s fair inhabitants and stately maids”; and instead of representing Jewish sadness for “their beloved Judah”, the

(4) See also Leslie Marchand, **Byron’s Poetry** (Boston, 1965), pp. 132-135; Barbara Tuchman, **Bible and Sword** (New York, 1956), pp. 72-73; Regina Sharif, **Non-Jewish Zionism** (London: Zed Press, 1983), pp. 34, 44; Frederick Burwick, “Identity and Tradition in the **Hebrew Melodies**”, in **English Romanticism**, ed. R. Breuer et al. (Essen: Die Blaue Eule, 1985), pp.123-137; **A Selection of Hebrew Melodies, Ancient and Modern**, ed. Frederick Bruwick and Paul Douglas (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1988).

(5) **British Critic**, 3 (June 1815): 602-603; and William Roberts in **British Review**, 4 (August 1815): 201.

poems resembled, argued one reader, “the love-letters which a man composes for his friend... very stiff, very unappropriate, and very unnatural”⁽⁶⁾.

Critics also complained about the lack of any inherently “Hebrew” character to the **Melodies** except its title: “There is nothing in it of a Hebrew or even of an Oriental character”, declared the **Christian Observer**, adding that “I saw thee weep” was “an European, not a hebrew melody”⁽⁷⁾. “There is nothing”, repeated Josiah Condor, “beyond the titles and the occasional introduction of a name, to support the designation of Hebrew”⁽⁸⁾; “They are not clothed in the dress of Judaism”, wrote another critic, “so as to display the marked features of the Hebrew character”⁽⁹⁾.

Although the literary value of these contemporary opinions is not overtly significant, it is noteworthy that not a single reviewer recognized “Zionism” in the **Hebrew Melodies**. That post-1917 critics have underscored this strain suggests an intentional politicization of these poems- -a politicization that is explicitly propagandist in its purpose, and in the case of Slater, only possible through falsification of the evidence⁽¹⁰⁾. Slater discussed the “Zionism” of the poems, and cited the following statement from the 1815 **Christian Observer**: “The present state of the Jewish people -- expatriated -- dispersed, -- trodden down, -- contemned, - - afforded the noble author a very fine Subject”. Slater presented these words as evidence that during Byron’s life, the **Melodies** were seen to postulate “Jewish nationalism”. But, in order to make his point, Slater deliberately had to suppress the rest of the **Observer’s** statement in which Byron is chided for “ungracefully confound «ing» the present state of the Jews with the Babylonish captivity”. Thus contrary to what Slater adduced, the author in the **Observer** was criticizing Byron for failing to portray the Jews of the “present” day and for describing instead the Jews of the Babylonian past.

Clearly, the 1815 critics did not think that Byron was advocating “Jewish nationalism” in the **Hebrew Melodies**.

II

Rather than “Zionism”, a more appropriate term that could be used in this 1815 context is “Restorationism”. English literature and theology include many

(6) Roberts, **British Review**, 4 (August 1815): 206-207.

(7) **Christian observer**, 14 (August 1815): 543-44.

(8) Josiah Condor, **Eclectic Review**, 4 (July 1815): 95.

(9) Francis Hodgson, **Monthly Review**, 78 (September 1815): 42.

(10) Slater, “Byron’s Hebrew Melodies”, p. 89.

poems, sermons and novels describing the prophecy of the “Restoration” of the Jews to Palestine. It was a religious heresy stating that in order for the Jews to convert to Christianity, they would first (or subsequently) have to “restore” to Palestine.

This had been a popular topic since the 17th century, and during Byron’s years, was widely discussed⁽¹¹⁾. Indeed, by the end of the 18th century, and after nearly two hundred years of acrimonious controversy over this “Restoration”, two views on the matter prevailed:

a. Restoration - cum - Conversion. This was the dominant view - - that Jews would “restore” to Palestine in order to renounce their Judaism and convert to Christianity. This view was accepted by many writers including David Hartley, Richard Hurd, Joseph Priestly, and James Bicheno⁽¹²⁾.

b. Restoration - sans - Conversion. Up till the end of the 18th century, this was a non-existent proposition. But the 1790s witnessed the rise of a crazed man, Richard Brothers, “Prince of the Hebrews”, who advocated the Restoration of the Jews **qua** Jews to Palestine. Although his views were generally denounced by the English public, they coincided with the French invasion of Palestine and Napoleon’s alleged call in 1799 for the Jews to “restore”. As a result, a few English writers began to subscribe to this version of Restoration - - a restoration that aimed at preserving Jews and Judaism in order to hasten the Second Coming of the Messiah. Thomas Witherby is foremost in this category⁽¹³⁾.

Was Byron in the **Hebrew Melodies** a Restorationist?

In presenting Byron’s alleged “Zionism”, Slater referred to various 18th-century conversionist Restorationists in order to suggest analogies between them and the poet. This approach is fallacious because any equation between “Zionism”

(11) See my “The Controversy over the Restoration of the Jews: From 1754 until the London Society for Promoting Christianity Among the Jews” **Durham University Journal**, 82 (1990): 29-44.

(12) Slater mentions those writers. For a survey of this trend in England, see Mayir Vrete, “The Restoration of the Jews in English Protestant Thought, 1790-1840”, **Middle Eastern studies**, 8 (1972): 3-50.

(13) Richard Brothers, **A Revealed Knowledge of the Prophecies and Times, Book the First** (1794); **A Revealed Knowledge, Book the Second** (1795); for the ridicule, see Henry Spencer, **Look Before you Leap, or, The Fate of the Jews** (1795); and David Levi, **Letters to Nathaniel Brassey Halhed, M.p. in Answer to the Testimonies of the authenticity of .pa the Prophecies of Richard Brothers, and his pretended Mission to Recall the Jews.** For the French Revolution and the Restoration, see Le Roy Edwin Froom, **The Prophetic Faith of our Fathers** (Washington, D.C., 1948), vol. II, pp. 752 ff.; Franz Kobler, **Napoleon and the Jews** (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), pp. 55-129; Thomas Witherby, **An Attempt to Remove Prejudices concerning the Jewish Nation** (1804).

and “Restorationism” is incorrect: the former is a Jewish movement, the latter a Christian heresy; the former advocates a preservation of Jewish religion and identity; the latter aims at converting the Jews out of Judaism into Christianity, ending thereby the Jewish dispensation. Furthermore, Slater was not able to identify any of the Restorationists as wielding direct influence on Byron; he speculated that the poet “could not have escaped «their» contact and influence”, while adding that Byron was not “of course, a disciple of Richard Brothers, nor did he ever explicitly advocate the Restoration of the Jews”⁽¹⁴⁾. Nevertheless, and inconsistently as that was, Slater went on to conclude that Byron supported “proto-Zionism”.

Byron’s **corpus** does not corroborate Slater’s speculation as there are no references in it to any of the Restorationists who were supposed to “influence” him - - Priestly, Hurd, Hartley and Bicheno. Furthermore, Byron was quite cynical about religious conversion and would have found the **Restoration - cum - Conversion** of the Jews a preposterous proposition. He was sufficiently familiar with Jewish religious culture to realize that British Jews were not eagerly awaiting their conversion to Christianity⁽¹⁵⁾. As regards **Restoration - sans - Conversion**, Byron discredited it by attacking both Richard Brothers and those who followed in his footsteps, including the eccentric Lady Hester Stanhope and Joanna Southcott⁽¹⁶⁾.

Further light on this issue can be shed by Byron’s own views on the Jews. In writings other than **Hebrew Melodies**, there is a persistent expression of anti-Jewishness, which, in the case of some of Byron’s letters and verse can be described as anti-semitic. The origin of this antipathy lies in Byron’s financial dealings with Jewish moneylenders: unable to pay his debts, Byron fulminated against the Jews and reflexively used the word “Jew” as a synonym for a rapacious usurer. The fact that there were thousands of poor Jews in London did not matter

(14) Slater, “Byron’s Hebrew Melodies”, p. 91.

(15) See for instance his gratitude to Isaac Nathan for the latter’s gift of *Motsas* in April 1816, **Byron’s Letters and Journals**, ed. Leslie A. Marchand (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), vol. IV, pp. 68-69. Furthermore, in his Parliamentary Speech on 21 April 1812, Byron defended the Irish Catholics and compared them with the Jews, **The Works of Lord Byron**, ed. Rowland E. Prothero (London: John Murray, 1903), vol. II, p. 438.

(16) For Byron’s ridicule of Brothers, see the letter of 13 September 1811 in **Byron’s letters and Journals**, ed. Marchand (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 1973), vol. I, p. 97; for the ridicule of Lady Stanhope, **Byron’s Letters and Journals**, ed. Marchand (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), vol. II, p. 21; for the ridicule of Southcott, **Byron’s Letters and Journals**, vol. IV, pp. 163-64, 170-73. See also the reference to both Brothers and Stanhope on 12 October 1817, **Byron’s Letters and Journals**, ed. Marchand (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), vol. V, p. 267.

to him. He generalized about disliking the Jews because he associated them with money and high interest rates:

She «Caroline» made me sign I know not what or how many bonds - - & now like a Jew she exacts usurious interest of and illegal transaction.

.....

There is six thousand charged on N«eswstead» to a Mr. Sawbridge - - a thousand - - to Mrs. B«yron» at Nott«ingha»m - - a Jew debt of which the interest must be more than the principal - - and of which H«anson» must get an amount from Thomas - - another Jew debt⁽¹⁷⁾.

Byron's anti-semitic outbursts span his entire career, from a letter of 1806 until *Don Juan* which he finished just before his death⁽¹⁸⁾. This wideranging evidence, which was cursorily mentioned by Slater, and is completely ignored by other critics, does not support a portrait of Byron as sympathetic to Jewish liberty. Indeed, and particularly concerning liberty, Byron viewed the wealthy Jews as responsible for its defeat in Europe. He attacked the Rothschilds because they had financed the despotic governments of Columbia, Russia and Naples, and had cared even less about the welfare of the English:

On Shylock's shore behold them stand afresh,

To cut from Nation's hearts their "pound of flesh"⁽¹⁹⁾. For Byron, the new force that "direct«ed» the world" of the 19th century was "gold, not steel", and it was in the hands of "Two Jews" of the Rothschild family who were using it against nationalist movements. In all his references to Jews in **The Age of Bronze** and **Don Juan**, Byron reiterated his entrenched antipathy.

Despite such evidence in Byron's verse and private correspondence, critics have insisted on discovering "Zionism" in the **Hebrew Melodies**. Because the poems appeared in 1815, a period of relative tolerance to Jews in European history, critics have presented verses from the **Melodies** as demonstration of Byron's sympathetic feelings. From this sympathy, critics have concluded that poems like "Were My Bosom as False as Thou Deemst It to Be", "The Wild Gazelle", "Oh, Weep for Those", "On Jordan's Banks", and "On the Day of the

(17) **Byron's Letters and Journals**, ed. Marchand (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), vol. III, pp. 31, 172.

(18) **Byron's Letters and Journals**, vol. I, p. 91; *Don Juan*: IV, cxvi; v, lxii; XI, lxii, XI, lxxv; XIII, lxxix; XIII, c.

(19) **The Age of Bronze** in **The Works of Lord Byron**, ed. Ernest Harley Coleridge (New York, 1966), vol. v: lines 702-704.

Destruction of Jerusalem”. reveal Byron’s “Zionism”. For Slater, the last poem was “a sort of battle hymn of Zion”⁽²⁰⁾.

But do these poems present “Zionism”? If “Zionism” means an establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine, as it was defined by Sokolow, then not a single poem in the **Melodies** voices such a ideal on the part of Byron. Consider “The Wild Gazelle”. The poem is a lament by “Israel’s scatter’d race” who remember the exulting gazelle “on Judah’s hills”, those hills now devoid of “Judah’s statelier maids”. The fourth and last stanza describes the hapless fate which awaits the Jews:

But we must wander witheringly,
In other lands to die,
And where our father’s ashes be,
Our own may never lie.

The wanderers know that they will never see “Judah” again and will die far from the land. The sorrow in the poem stems from their foreboding realization of eternal homelessness, of the total impossibility of “Zionism”.

“Oh! Weep for Those”, which comes immediately after, is also a lament, not by the Jews but for them. The setting is the Babylonian exile, and the reader is asked to “weep for those” who have continued since the fall of Jerusalem as “tribes of the wandering foot”. The poem is a series of exclamations and rhetorical questions all resounding with the hopelessness of the Jews’ exile:

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? The answer is, as in the previous poem, never. Thus the weeping.

This despair is reiterated throughout the **Melodies**. Indeed, in one of the last poems, “On the Day of the Destruction of Jerusalem by Titus”, the narrator who has watched the fall of the city anticipated an endless wandering for his people: “scatter’d and scorn’d” they shall remain, although he is proud that the true worship of God will not be changed by their suffering. The poem ends with religious assurance, and that in spite of military defeat and exile.

Similar despair permeates the other 13 poems with Jewish themes. All of them - - whether they deal with historical personalities like Saul, Herod, and Belshazzar, or with historical events like the Babylonian exile and the Assyrian attack, or

(20) Slater, “Byron’s Hebrew Melodies”, p. 90

which lamentations for “Judah” - - all are sorrowful. The strain of suffering informs every expression, even when in “Jephtha’s Daughter” the protagonist “smiled” as she died, or when Judaic faith proclaimed its victorious endurance, as in “Were My Bosom As False As Thou Deem’st It To Be”. In this poem, the protagonist explains that he has been exiled and has “wander’d from far Galilee” because of his faith; and for that faith he has joyously resigned both his land and life. There is also a strain of doom: in “Saul”, the macabre ghost of the Witch of Endor announces “Crownless, breathless, headless fall/ Son and Sire, the house of Saul”, and “Herod’s Lament for Mariamne” ends with anticipation of tortures “which unconsumed are still consuming”.

If the critics who labelled these poems as “Zionist” understood by “Zionism” the nationalist hopes of the Jews, then certainly Byron was not a “Zionist”. The portrait of the Jews is sympathetic but it is a portrait of a politically defeated people. Their faith in the deity remains unshaken, but the Jews of the poems have no illusion that their “wandering” will ever take them to “Zion”, nor that the end which awaits them is anything but a “foreign” grave. That is why, every lamentation poem in the **Melodies** includes the words “scatter’d” or “wandering”: the Jews are sorrowing because they know that there will never be “Restoration”.

Such imagery contradicts the “Zionist” ideal of Jewish nationalism. Clearly, Byron was not exploring this theme in the poems, nor was he drawing on the English heritage of Restorationism. Rather, he had turned to another source of Jewish imagery - - the legend of the Wandering Jew. It is indeed surprising that none of the critics who associated Byron with an anachronistic “Zionism” deemed the legend worthy of investigation - - a legend that was particularly popular among the romantics and in the late 18th century. The Jewish poems in the **Hebrew Melodies** would be more accurately understood if related to this legend⁽²¹⁾.

There were many versions of the legend available to Byron: Bishop Percy’s **Reliques of Ancient English Poetry** (1765), Matthew Lewis’s **The Monk** (1795), Wordsworth’s “Song of the Wandering Jew” (1800), Shelley’s **The Wandering Jew** (written in 1810 but published in 1829), **Queen Mab** (1813) and **Hellas** (1821). Byron was familiar with the Jewish portrait in the first two sources:

(21) For general studies on this legend, see Moncure Daniel Conway, **The Wandering Jew** (New York: Henry Hold and Co., 1881); Joseph Gaer, **The Legend of the Wandering Jew** (New York: Mentor Books, 1961), Eino Railo, **The Haunted Castle** (New York: Gordon Press, 1974), pp. 197-217; G.K. Anderson, “Popular Survivals of the Wandering Jew in England”, in **The Wandering Jew**, ed. Galit Hasan-Rokem and Alan Dundee (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 76-104.

Percy's ballad described the Jew's wandering "up and downe the worlde . . . without returning backe again/ unto his dwelling place". And even when he did, he was unable to stay and "wandered thence with woe". The same portrait appears in **The Monk** where the "stranger" laments his fate as one "constantly in movement" and "restlessness"⁽²²⁾.

Byron's description of the Jews in **Hebrew Melodies** derives from this extremely common imagery of an eternally wandering Jew. The lamentations of the "scatter'd" Jews which are captured in "The wild Gazelle" and "On Jordan's Banks" and elsewhere in the **Melodies** are a conscious echo of the legendary Jew's sorrows: and those sorrows stemmed from the realization both by the "Wandering Jew" and by Byron himself that there could never be a "Restoration" to "Jordan's Banks", and that "Jewish nationalism" would never be fulfilled. By drawing his inspiration from the Wandering Jew, Byron had set himself apart from the nationalist ideal of the Jews and of the English Restorationists.

Like other poets who employed the legend of the "Wandering Jew", Byron injected it with his own interpretation. While in Percy and Lewis, the Jew was a sinner in the eyes of God and the world, in Byron there is no reference to this motif; while in Shelley he is the voice of defiant atheism (especially in **Queen Mab**, VII lines 83-275), in the **Melodies**, he is the model of suffering faith; while in every version of the legend, the Jew is deathless because of a Cain-like curse upon him, in Byron, such a punishment is absent - - a significant absence since the punishment served to magnify the crime of the Jew against the Messiah; while in Wordsworth's poem there is exuberance about **wanderlust**, in Byron there is despondence at the prospect of eternal homelessness.

III

Byron did not prophetically anticipate the "Zionism" of Theodor Herzl. Rather, he was using in the **Hebrew Melodies** the image of the Wandering Jew with which he was quite familiar, and which was popular in the literature of Romanticism. Such an image informed Byron's poetic expression and inspired between 1814-1815 those intense moments which Isaac Nathan described as the poet's "sympathy for the Jews"⁽²³⁾. But these emotional moments did not push Byron's imagination beyond the legend of the eternal wanderer nor did they lead to the "Zionist" ideal.

(22) Thomas Percy, **Reliques of Ancient English Poetry**, ed. J. V. Prichard (London: George Bell and Sons, 1893), vol. II, p. 23, lines 47, 45; Matthew Lewis, **The Monk** (London: New English Library, 1973), p. 134. For Byron and Lewis, see Byron, **Works**, ed. Prothero, pp. 314-319.

(23) Isaac Nathan, **Fugitive Pieces and Reminiscences of Lord Byron** (London, 1829), p. 24.