LORD BYRON'S MIDRASHIC LYRICS
PART I: SAUL AND OTHERS

DAN VOGEL

In England, in 1814, occurred what must be one of the most surprising events in the history of literary responses by a Gentile to the Jewish Testament.[1] In that year, George Gordon, Lord Byron – notorious roué, acclaimed Romantic poet of love poetry, of swashbuckling narrative poems, and biting satires – accepted the invitation of the Jewish musician Isaac Nathan to write biblically-inspired lyrics to his music to be published as "real old and undisputed Hebrew melodies."[2] In a letter he wrote at that time announcing his new project, Byron admitted, "It is odd enough that this should fall to my lot – who have been abused as an 'infidel' – . . .they will [now] call me a **Jew** next."[3] Destiny, it seems, prevailed. Byron was not content merely to versify the biblical passages that attracted him. None of these poems is a mere retelling of biblical tales, nor are they midrashim, smoothing perceived anomalies or filling in lacunae. Rather, he read them in English translation[4] with a poet's eyes and intensity. Byron's Hebrew melodies can best be called midrashic, offering a personal, emotional, poetic gloss that engenders in his reader a deepening understanding and expanding experience of reading the biblical text.

Of the 13 poems that can be said to be biblically inspired, none is from the Pentateuch; Byron found inspiration in the books of Samuel, Judges, Job, Kohelet [Ecclesiastes], Daniel, and Psalms. The cast of characters is almost exclusively Israelite. The only religious dogma is the omnipresence of God.

In this article, attention can be centered upon only a few of them. In order to illustrate Byron's midrashic insight, I have headed each poem with the specific biblical text from which he evidently derived his inspiration. (The biblical texts do not appear in the 1815 publication or subsequent printings of these songs.) There are no thematic categories or any discernible pattern in the order of the poems in the published versions, but I have divided those

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under our scrutiny into Part I: King Saul and others, and Part II: The Fall of Jerusalem.

KING SAUL

Lord Byron was the most popular poet of his time, the lion of the salons of aristocracy, beloved of women, but assailed and shaken by epithets like "infidel" and accusations of incest, to the point where he was soon to retreat from England to self-chosen exile. He saw in the fate of King Saul a reflection of himself (and a lesson for all readers). He told Isaac Nathan, "Saul, who was once gloriously surrounded by strength, power, and the approbation of his God . . . had sunk from this, [yet I] could not but uphold him originally a brave and estimable man,"[5] like himself, perhaps.

By I Samuel 28, King Saul, whom David had called *the Lord's anointed* (I Sam. 24:7), has been systematically brought to the depth of desperation and lack of self-confidence on the eve of an attack by the massed army of the Philistines. This victor in many earlier battles against these same enemies felt constrained now to seek advice. So *Saul enquired of the Lord,* [but] *the Lord answered him not, neither by dreams nor by Urim* [the High Priest's medium for augury], *nor by prophets* (I Sam. 28:6).[6] This King who had outlawed all necromancy in his kingdom had nowhere to go for advice but to the spirit of his old caustic mentor and critic Samuel, to be raised from the dead by the Witch of Endor. *Then said the woman* [of Endor to Saul], *'Whom shall I bring up to thee?' And he said, 'Bring me up Samuel' . . . . And Saul perceived that it was Samuel, and he stooped with his face to the ground, and bowed himself.*

With midrashic privilege, Byron fills out the scene and fashions it into a dramatic strategy to bring the King down to be a groveling supplicant in the eyes of our imagination.

> Earth yawn'd, he stood the center of the cloud:
> Light changed its hue, retiring from his shroud.
> Death stood all glassy in the fixed eye.
> His hand was withered, and his veins were dry; . . .
> From the lips that moved not and unbreathing frame,
> Like cavern'd winds the hollow accents came.
> Saul saw and fell to earth, as falls the oak,

At once, and blasted by the thunder-stroke.

We are sucked into the horror that confronts King Saul. Our imaginative attention is led down the ghastly form: "His hand . . . his veins . . . his foot . . ." dark, shrunken, shriveled. None of this is in the biblical text. Verse 14 of Chapter 28 simply says that the form is covered with a mantle. It is Byron's intention to fill out what the Bible is reticent about, and to use this description as a contrasting fore-image to Saul's act of falling to the earth before this frightening impossibility "as falls the oak." The fall of the mightiest of trees is the poet's analogical image of the fall even of kings – or of popular poets – before the fact of Death.[7]

Finally, from the lips of this ghastly vision emerges a hollow voice like a wind out of a cavern: *And Samuel said to Saul, 'Why hast thou disquieted me, to bring me up? . . . Tomorrow shalt thou and thy sons be with me . . . . Then Saul fell straightway all along on the earth, and was sore afraid, because of the words of Samuel: and there was no strength in him* (28:15,19,20). Samuel's monologue in Byron's second stanza of the poem is a dramatic expansion of the biblical account.

"Why is my sleep disquieted?
Who is he that calls the dead?
Is it thou, Oh, King? Behold
Bloodless are these limbs, and cold:
Such are mine, and such shall be
Thine, tomorrow, when with me –
Ere the coming day is done –
Such shalt thou be, such thy son.
Fare thee well, but for a day,
Then we mix our mouldering clay.
Thou, thy race lie pale and low,
Pierced by shafts of many a bow;
And the falchion [broad sword] by thy side,
To thy heart, thy hand shall guide:
Crownless, breathless, headless fall,
Son and sire, the house of Saul!"

Samuel never loved Saul; he may be bereft now of body but his gruff spirit has not changed. Byron has Samuel begin his monologue with the same type

of intimidating rhetorical question that he threw at Saul after the defeat of the Amalekites (Ch. 15). Saul had left Agag the Amalekite king alive (v. 9) together with the best of the sheep and lambs, but when Samuel came to him, Saul exulted, *'I have performed the commandment of the Lord'* (v. 13). To which Samuel sneered, *'What meaning then is the bleating of the sheep in my ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?'* (v. 14), knowing full well what they mean. And Samuel then berated Saul and let him know that the Lord repented of His choice of Saul, for he had not fulfilled His command to kill off all of Amalek. Saul is penitent: *'I have feared the people, and obeyed their voice . . . . I have transgressed . . . . I pray thee pardon my sin* (vv. 24-25), but there is no pardon forthcoming. For all its drama, Byron skips this part of the story – he is more interested in the climactic consequences of Saul's tragic flaw.

Out of the biblical passages, Byron extracted the heavy sense of a foreboding future. The reader of this article is urged to read that monologue aloud, in normal voice and pace, to reap the full benefit of Byron's midrashic contribution to the passages. He employs tricks of sound in his verse to embellish the portentousness of the tableau: Alliteration, repetition, symmetry, relentless regularity**,** especially in two lines of consummate irony –

"**F**are thee well, but **f**or a **day**
Then we **m**ix our **m**ouldering **clay**."

The poetic, dramatic veneering of biblical verses, the delineation of character, the manipulation of sound, all lead to the moralistic conclusion of the monologue; the result of human failure is inevitable, inexorable, inescapable. A broken man, Saul lies prostrate, *there was no strength in him,* the Bible tells us (28:20). With the motherly ministrations of the Witch of Endor and the fraternal urgings of his officers, Saul rises, eats, and simply leaves. The putative curtain falls.

The next time we read of Saul, he is on the battlefield (Ch. 31).

And the Philistines followed hard upon Saul and his sons; and the Philistines slew Jonathan, and Abinadab, and Malchi-shua, Saul's sons. Then said Saul to his armor-bearer, 'Draw thy sword and thrust me through therewith; lest these uncircumcised come and thrust me through, and abuse me.' But his armor-bearer would not, for he was sore afraid. Therefore, Saul took a sword and fell upon

> *it. And when his armor-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he likewise fell upon his sword and died with him* (31:2,4-5).

Saul had not succumbed to another fit of the madness that had troubled him earlier in life, nor did he allow himself to become enervated. Byron takes his cue from the Bible for setting the last act of the tragic drama of Saul on the battlefield. Byron had said to Isaac Nathan that he intended to "uphold [Saul] originally a brave and estimable man," and (here I conjecture) he called upon his memory of John Milton's tragic Samson, who died heroically; and Shakespeare's Macbeth, who also learned from doleful supernatural prophecy that he had no future, but refused to give up quietly and died a kingly death.

Where the biblical story has Saul talk privately to his armor-bearer, Byron changed this historical detail to compose a speech for this King, like Shakespeare's King Henry V, to deliver to his troops before the final battle: He comes to the battlefield where lie the shards of his hopes – there will be no final victory over his Philistine arch-enemies, no continuation of his rulership, no handing over of the kingdom to his son Jonathan.

> "Warriors and chiefs, should the shaft of the sword,
> Pierce me in leading the host of the Lord,
> Heed not the cor[p]se, though a king's, in your path:
> Bury your steel in the bosom of Gath!
>
> Thou who are bearing my buckler and bow,
> Should the soldiers of Saul look away from the foe,
> Stretch me that moment in blood at their feet!
> Mine be the doom which they dared not to meet.
>
> Farewell to others, but never we part,
> Heir to my royalty, son of my heart!
> Bright is the diadem, boundless the sway,
> Or kingly the death, which awaits us to-day!"

The concluding poem to Byron's tragedy of Saul asks us to share the catharsis of his tragedy. For Saul, his kingly death is his redemption,[8] for us it is the psycho-emotional cleansing that arises from viewing in our imagination the death of greatness. The care that Byron extended to getting his choice of words and phrases and the rhythm of lines just right to fulfill his intentions is

evidenced in Ashton's variorum edition of *Hebrew Melodies.*[9] Byron wanted Saul, like all tragic heroes, to live on as a symbol for all men to contemplate the wheel of life and to decide how to face its turning. Byron's midrashic reading imbued the notational history of Saul's life in the Book of I Samuel with a universality that relates to all readers.

ELIPHAZ

"The book [Job] contains an excellent moral lesson," declared Lord Byron to Mr. Nathan, "we will therefore not attempt to sap its credit or shake its authenticity."[10] All readers agree, and to cite the lesson, we all are likely to turn to the final chapters where God comes down to lecture Job and Job's philosophic friends on the principle of theodicy. Of these friends, it is Eliphaz who is named when the wrath of God is kindled against Job's interlocutors (42:7).

In one of his perorations, Eliphaz tells Job:

> *'Now a thing was secretly brought to me and mine ear received a little thereof. In thoughts from the visions of the night, when deep sleep falleth on men, Fear came upon me, and trembling, which made all my bones to shake. Then a spirit passed before my face; the hair on my flesh stood up. It stood still, but I could not discern the form thereof: an image was before my eyes, there was a silence, and I heard a voice, saying, "Shall mortal man be more just than God? Shall a man be more pure than his maker?"'* (Job 4:14-17).

Byron's poetic version, however, concentrates on a theme to which the Bible never refers:

From Job

> "A spirit passed before me: I beheld,
> The face of Immortality unveiled, Deep sleep came down on ev'ry eye save mine –
> And there it stood, all formless but divine:
> Along my bones the creeping flesh did quake; And as my damp hair stiffened, thus it spake."

"Immortality" is not mentioned in the biblical text. Where did Byron see Immortality in Eliphaz's dream that could result in a universal lesson?[11] To begin with, Eliphaz sounds like an egocentric, seeing himself as somehow a

chosen one; all men have drifted into sleep, he says in the poem, but he alone did not. It would seem that he was destined to experience this Divine visitation – a dream of being visited and spoken to by no less than a mysterious spirit called "Immortality" (capitalized!). There is another kind of Immortality that demands perhaps equal legitimate egocentricity. It is the Immortality left behind in poetry when the poet himself is "withered" like the prophet Samuel. Perhaps every poet must have the pride to deem himself so destined (we may recall that Byron wrote that it "fell to his lot" to compose these Hebrew melodies). Confronted by this truth, he is shaken physically, intellectually, philosophically, like Eliphaz, for this pride in self can become morally dangerous.

The Spectre Speaks

"Is man more just than God? Is man more pure,
Than he who deems even Seraphs insecure?
Creatures of clay – vain dwellers in the dust!
The moth survives you, and are ye [Job] more just?
Things of a day! you wither ere the night,
Heedless and blind to Wisdom's light!"

The burden of the second stanza is to convey the moral lesson – even for poets – in the face of human imperfection and overweening pride. The stanza is in essence a poetic paraphrase of Job 4:7-21, in which Eliphaz reaches for Immortality so intensely that he dreams of it. He is a proper alter ego for Byron. Thinking of his own work in 1814 and examining his own life, Byron preaches here to himself.

The reach for Immortality is ironically for most men inevitably only an earthly temporary phenomenon – Immortality offered the poet his indelible words and lines. A poet can merely dream of it. The only reward worth his earthly effort is the judgment of God, not of men, and manifested not Now, but beyond him, in Time. Men are creatures of clay, subject to death and the withering to which even the prophet Samuel was condemned: *Is man more just than God* that his skills, perceptions, opinions, writings should prevail over those that God gave us?

Thus, even Eliphaz must admit that men *die, even without wisdom* (4:21), a statement which Byron poetized even more dramatically and strikingly, "Heedless and blind to Wisdom's wasted light." However paradoxically, the poet is condemned by his very nature to strive for Immortality. The moral

lesson Job learns is ironically the easier one; all men must admit their limitation. Eliphaz talks to the poet, condemned to necessary egocentricity to outwit limitation.

That both themes can appear in the Book of Job underlines the paradox, for they are concomitant lessons of the moral sentiment felt by Job, *a perfect man,* who accepts his limitation and will say no more. The poet, however, must learn to live with the imperfection of self, yet he must refuse to be enervated by it. The midrashic universality of Eliphaz's little homily lies in the fact that all poets are men, but fated to be more so.

JEPHTHAH'S DAUGHTER

In the story of Jephthah and his anonymous daughter, Byron left the realm of dreams to confront a difficult reality:

> *And Jephthah vowed a vow unto the Lord, and said, 'If thou shalt without fail to deliver the children of Ammon into mine hands, Then it shall be, that whatever come forth out of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the Lord's and I will offer it up as a burnt offering . . . .'*
>
> *And she said unto her father* [when he returned home and she learned of his vow], *'Let this thing be done for me: but let me alone two months, that I may go up and down the mountains, and bewail my virginity, I and my fellows . . . . ' And it came to pass at the end of two months, that she returned unto her father . . .* (Jud. 11:30-31, 37-39).

And she says not another word. That silence was left to Lord Byron to fill. Classical midrashim on Jephthah's vow were concerned with the halakhic aspects of the making of the vow and canceling it, and with the seeming violation of the total biblical prohibition of human sacrifice.[12] Some scoured the biblical text to insist that Jephthah did not sacrifice his daughter but confined her in some kind of convent. Byron, who knew nothing about these midrashim, took the report in the Book of Judges at its literal word: Jephthah's daughter was sacrificed. Here was no conflict involving a king and a prophet, no philosophical or moral conundrums to poetize. It was the character and response to her fate of a clearly vibrant girl that most deeply affected Byron. Here was an emotional and dramatic conflict to be penetrated and presented,

whose sole midrashic purpose was to create from biblical hints an impressive character, though she is not even given a name by which to be remembered:

JEPHTHAH'S DAUGHTER

I

"Since our Country – our God – Oh my Sire –
Demand that thy daughter expire,
Since thy triumph was brought by thy vow –
Strike the bosom that's bared for thee now!

II

And the voice of my mourning is o'er –
And the mountains behold me no more:
If the hand that I love lay me low,
There cannot be pain in the blow!

III

And of this – Oh! my Father! – be sure
That the blood of thy child is as pure –
As the blessing I beg 'ere it flow –
And the last thought that soothes me below.

IV

Though the Virgins of Salem lament,
Be the judge and hero unbent!
I have won the great battle for thee,
And my Father and Country are free!

V

When this blood of thy giving hath gush'd –
When the voice that thou lovest is hush'd –
Let my Memory still be thy pride,
And forget not, I smiled as I died!"

The dramatic monologue that Byron wrote is the unreported results of her meditations in the mountains, that she expressed to her father upon her return. A dramatic monologue carries certain conventional requisites of the genre: Only the character speaks – no one else, not even the poet. The lines are spoken privately to a listener, in a tone appropriate for the situation. The reader is an invisible eavesdropper. Through the monologue, the character unwittingly reveals himself (in this case, herself) to the reader by the selection of words, tone, and music of the lines.

The meter here is most often the "running rhythm" used for an active, martial poem.[13] Here there is something of the same breathlessness, but in a quiet, calm persuasiveness. The rhymes are simple, and there is power in the very simplicity, the power of seemingly self-evident responsibility.

From the first, she perceives herself as the heroine of the affair. There is more to heroism than prowess and victory on the battlefield. She has duties to her country, to her father, to God Himself. She has reconciled herself to the fulfillment of all her responsibilities in one act, tragic though it be. She has no recriminations for her father who made the vow, or for God, Who exacts terrible consequences. She has the strength to assure her father "that the blood of thy child is pure," not sullied by hidden regrets. She has no laments, it is the Virgins of Salem who lament, not she. And yet this brief reference in the Bible's report that she wanted time to "bewail my virginity" suggests Byron's sense of waste that overhangs the story; that a young woman of such qualities will never fulfill her potentialities of character and purpose in life. He is appalled by the necessity for the sacrifice.

But what he has fashioned for us out of the few hints in the Book of Judges is an unforgettable character who teaches us to "smile as I died," to consummate what is ultimately the will of God. Readers of this poem will not read again the Bible's story coldly or analytically; instead they will view it with a more human and emotional underlining. In that sense, Byron's poem fulfills a midrashic intent.

SUMMARY

Byron chose characters and incidents in the historical and wisdom sections of the Bible to dramatize the inescapable presence of God and Necessity in the affairs of men. For him, this was a quasi-religious task that he was some-

how chosen to perform. It does not really matter whether he practiced what his *Hebrew Melodies* preached: We have the experience of reading his preachings and the wonder of his transforming of biblical characters midrashically into earthily real personalities that serve as universal examples for his readers' contemplation.

NOTES

1. The term Old Testament implies acceptance that there is a new one; the term: Hebrew Testament may imply that Byron's response is based on knowledge of the Bible's original language, which he did not have. The term Jewish Bible used here seems most appropriate.
2. Byron to Annabella Milbanke, October 20, 1814. In Leslie Marchand, ed., *Byron's Letters and Journals* (London: John Murray, 1975) Vol. 4, p. 220. However, musicologists have detected that Nathan's music echoed the Ashkenazic tunes of the London Great Synagogue and East European folk tunes.
3. Ibid.
4. In view of his early Calvinist upbringing it might be surmised that he may have read the Geneva Bible of 1574, rather than the 1611 King James Version. Nevertheless, this article quotes the latter, a more popular and prevalent version in Byron's time.
5. Thomas L. Ashton, "Byron's Lyrics for David's Harp," *Studies in English Literature,* 12:4 (Autumn, 1972) p. 675.
6. Eliyhu Yadid, *Shaul, Bakhir haShem* [Hebrew]. (Jerusalem: Ari, 2004) p. 153.
7. On Byron's universality in *Hebrew Melodies,* see the variorum ed., Thomas L. Ashton, ed., *Byron's Hebrew Melodies* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972) p. 77 and elsewhere.
8. Ashton, "Byron's Lyrics," p. 673.
9. Pp. 171 ff., 183 ff.
10. Ashton, *Hebrew Melodies*, p. 145 note.
11. My interpretation gives some legitimacy to the search for Immortality. For somewhat different interpretations of Eliphaz, see Frederick Burwick and Paul Douglas eds. of a facsimile ed. of *A Selection of Hebrew Melodies, Ancient and Modern* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 1988) p. 22, and Ashton, *Hebrew Melodies*, p. 82, as well as his article "Byron's Lyrics," *passim.* One might interpret the term "Immortality" as a descriptive synonym for "God." Such a notion is suggested by the line "I beheld / the face of Immortality,:" making Eliphaz more prophetic even than Moses, who was told that he could not see "the face" of God and live (Ex. 33.20).
12. See Lippman Bodoff, "The Tragedy of Jephthah," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* XXVIII:4 (October-December, 2000) pp. 251-255.
13. In contrast, see Byron's "The Destruction of Sennacherib," to be discussed in Part II of this study, the first two lines of which read: "The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold/ And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold . . . ."

I wish to thank R' Mordechai Silverstein, scholar of Midrash, and R' Pinchas Kahn for reading this article and giving me their impressions.