

LORD BYRON'S MIDRASHIC LYRICS: PART II THE FALL OF JERUSALEM

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Saul the King, Samuel the Prophet, Eliphaz companion of Job, Jephthah's daughter, tragic figures all, stalked our discussion in Part I of this midrashic study of Byron's *Hebrew Melodies* (1815). The theme of Part II, "The Fall of Jerusalem," is nothing less than the tragedy of the entire Jewish people. The musician who composed the music for *Hebrew Melodies*, Isaac Nathan, reported:

[Byron] professed to me, that he had always considered the fall of Jerusalem as the most remarkable event in all history; "for" (in his own words) "who can behold the entire destruction of that mighty pile; the desolate wanderings of its inhabitants, and compare these positive occurrences with the distant prophecies which foreran them, and be an infidel?"¹

The two destructions of Jerusalem – by the Babylonians (586 BCE, the only one alluded to in the Bible) and by the Romans (70 CE) – coalesced in Byron's mind, with no thought of there being two Temples. Apparently, Nathan never clarified the matter for Byron. In the poems Byron wrote on the fall of Jerusalem, he traced the catastrophe from the shards of the walls of Jerusalem to the rivers of exile of the Hebrews, but he went further: he consistently wove into his lines the presence of God at the time of the destruction and the positive promise of His prophecy of redemption and restoration. Leslie Marchand, the authoritative biographer of George Gordon, Lord Byron, summarized his achievement thus:

Two themes . . . dominate the lyrics from the Old Testament sources: one is the deep pathos of the loss of Eden [no doubt Jerusalem is meant], the wail of a wandering and homeless people, and the other, the battle-cry of Jewish nationalism.²

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Some readers were reluctant to see in these poems the biblical promises to the children of Israel of a future redemption and ingathering of the people on the shores of the Jordan. In August 1815, when *Hebrew Melodies* was published, an anonymous reviewer in *The Christian Observer* went only so far as to comment: "The present state of the Jewish people – expatriated – dispersed – trodden down – contemned [*sic*], – afforded the noble poet a very fine subject; and he has not neglected to avail himself of it."³

Contemned? Byron, however, says not a sectarian word to justify the Roman conquest, or the continued exile of the Jews (unto his day), owing, no doubt, to their religious stubbornness.⁴ "Byron's espousal of Jewish nationalism was sincere," Ashton writes, based on Marchand's insights. He "easily identified himself with [contemporary] oppressed peoples reaching for freedom," like the Irish against the British and the Greeks against the Turks in his time. "The Greeks [Byron believed] have as small a chance of redemption from the Turks as the Jews have from mankind in general."⁵ (Byron went to Greece to support its cause, and there fell ill and died.) There lies the great difference in Byron's mind: These downtrodden peoples were looking for liberation from political oppressors; the Jews, however, were awaiting redemption – certainly not liberation – from God, Who was there at the beginning of their tribulations, and, Byron was convinced, will prevail at the end. This motif flows through his poems on the fall of Jerusalem.

THE POEMS

(I must interpolate here a point I made in Part I of this study: In the original publication of *Hebrew Melodies* [1815], no biblical sources accompanied the poems. The biblical texts printed below as headnotes to poems are assumptions – some by Thomas Ashton, a Byron scholar, in his variorum edition [see Note 1], others by myself, working back from the lines of the poem.)

"How the devil should I write about Jerusalem, never having been there?" wrote Lord Byron to his publisher in 1816 – which is a strange remark, since he had written about Jerusalem just a year before.⁶ As mentioned above, Byron's settings for these lyrics range from the scene itself of the destruction to the banks of the rivers of exile of the children of Israel. Jerusalem destroyed had become so clearly a dramatic vision in his poetic imagination that Byron was able to imagine himself as the last Jew in Jerusalem on the day of her

devastation, standing on a hill (Mount Scopus?) overlooking the ruined city, about to turn his back on her and join his brothers on the trek to exile:

"FROM THE LAST HILL THAT LOOKS ON THY ONCE HOLY DOME
ON THE DAY OF THE DESTRUCTION OF JERUSALEM BY TITUS"

And they burnt the house of God, and brake down the wall of Jerusalem, and burnt the palace thereof with fire, and destroyed all the goodly vessels thereof (II Chron. 36:19).

The Lord hath purposed to destroy the wall of the daughter of Zion: He hath stretched out a line, He hath not withdrawn His hand from destroying: therefore He made the rampart and the wall to lament; they languished together (Lam. 2:8).⁷

I

From the last hill that looks on thy once holy dome,
I beheld thee, Oh Sion! when rendered [yielded] to Rome:
'Twas thy last sun went down, and the flames of thy fall
Flash'd back on the last glance I gave to thy wall.

II

I look'd for thy temple, I look'd for my home,
And forgot for a moment my bondage to come;
I beheld but the death-fire that fed on thy fane [temple],
And the fast-fetter'd hands that made vengeance in vain.

III

Oh many an eve, the high spot whence I gazed
Had reflected the last beam of day as it blazed;
While I stood on the height, and beheld the decline
Of the rays from the mountain that shone on thy shrine.

IV

And now on that mountain I stood on that day,
 But I marked not the twilight beam melting away;
 Oh! would that the lightning had glared in its stead,
 And the thunderbolt burst on the conqueror's head!

V.

But the Gods of the Pagan shall never profane
 The shrine where Jehovah disdain'd not to reign;
 And scattered and scorn'd as thy people may be,
 Our worship, oh Father! is only for thee.

The poem begins in despair but ends in confidence, like Jeremiah's *Lamentations*. The very first stanza reveals, to begin with, the depth of despair: three times in four lines Byron echoes the finality of it all with the word *last*. Jeremiah gave Byron images of the hill on which the last Jew in Jerusalem stands, and the wall he looked down upon for the last time. Chronicles and Josephus speak of the fire to which Byron added the image of the last setting of the sun over the city as the symbol that will dominate the rest of the poem. Byron's midrashic urge fashioned a tableau of a lonely man of faith counterpointing the flames of the destruction of the Holy City with the rays of the setting sun, symbols of the immediacy of hopelessness.

The sense of personal loss and frustration is communicated immediately in the first line of stanza II. The line is in perfect symmetry: five words on each side of the comma (caesura), the phrase "I look'd" repeated, "thy temple" balanced by "my home." But here we have a deliberate ambiguity: Did the speaker look for two abodes – God's Temple and his own domestic domicile? Or is the Temple his spiritual home? That thought gives him a pang of nostalgia. The "but" of negation in the third line of the stanza reminds him of the imminent horror of exile, signified in the verse by the sense of inevitability in alliteration: "death-fire that fed on thy fane . . . fast-fettered hands that made vengeance in vain."

Waves of nostalgia still afflict him, the last Jew in Jerusalem. He recalls the calm evenings when the setting sun was the "high spot" of the day, but now, on that "dire" last day, the rays are "declining," the "twilight" "melting away"

together with life in Jerusalem. His frustration gives way to desperate bits of prayer that the sun's rays will be turned into flashes of lightening and thunderbolts – hopes that he knows will not be answered. And now Byron brings him up by another negative: "But." The pagan victors may walk on the shards of the Temple, but their gods will never profane it. This was the true God's house, but this God is not confined by stones. He is carried to far different places in the worship by His Jews, stateless, homeless, scorned. We can imagine that with this declaration, the speaker turns to stride into exile, his despair tempered by confidence in the Almighty.

Byron's concept of the geography of the Holy Land and its neighboring Sinai desert seems more romantic than accurate. He imagines that the first stop on the way to a Babylonian or Assyrian exile was the fabled Jordan River, and it gave the poet an opportunity to aggrandize the river as a poetic symbol of what the Jews lost on that dreadful day in Jerusalem.

ON JORDAN'S BANKS

It is good that a man should hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the LORD . . . For the LORD will not cast off forever (Lam. 2:8, 3:26, 31).

I

On Jordan's banks the Arab's camels stray,
 On Sion's hill the False One's votaries pray,
 The Baal-adorer bows on Sinai's steep –
 Yet there – even there – Oh God! thy thunders sleep.

II

There – where thy finger scorch'd the tablet stone.
 There – where thy Shadow to thy people shone!
 Thy Glory shrouded in its garb of fire: –
 Thyself – none living see and not expire! –

III

Oh! in the lightning – let thy glance appear!
 Sweep from his shiver'd hand the oppressor's spear:
 How long by tyrants shall thy land be trod!
 How long thy temple worshipless! Oh God?

The first line tells us that Byron did not see Titus and his Roman hordes as the only enemies of the Jews. He envisions predatory Arabs coming out of the desert on their camels, descending upon *Judenrein* Zion. And Byron perceives no elements of civilization among them. On Zion's hill, they worship the "False One"; on Sinai (hundreds of kilometers away from Jerusalem, but no matter), pagans violate the sanctity of the mount by worshipping Baal precisely where the Jewish God had descended to give the children of Israel His Law. On Sinai, Byron cries, fire was God's garb of glory, now it is the instrument of His Temple's destruction in Jerusalem. Byron borrows from the last Jew's soliloquy the prayer of transforming that fire into the lightning of God's angry glance so that His land will be swept clean of all its intruders.

The image in the last stanza is of the "worshipless temple," but that will not last forever. The last two lines carry the poet's emphasis on the sanctity of the Land and the temporality of its being deprived of its rightful inhabitants, the Jews. Byron's attitude inspired more than one scholar of the *Hebrew Melodies* to brand him a "proto-Zionist" – back in 1815!⁸ To ask "How long? . . ." is to insist that this exile will be temporary, however lengthy. The last wail of the poem, "Oh God!" announces that the Deity once worshipped there is still worshipped by His people everywhere, and on Him every hope, together with every groan of impatience, persistently rests. Thus the poem becomes a midrashic commentary on Jeremiah's admonition to live in hope for the ultimate redemption of the Land.

From the banks of the Jordan, the long trek into exile reaches the banks of the rivers of Babylon. Of all the biblical passages that inspired Byron in the *Hebrew Melodies*, his rendition is closest to Psalm 137.

BY THE RIVERS OF BABYLON WE SAT DOWN AND WEPT

By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down, yea we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hanged [sic] our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my ton-

*gue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above
the my chief joy (Ps. 137:1-6).*

I

We sat down and wept by the waters
Of Babel, and thought of the day
When our foe, in the hue of his slaughters,
Made Salem's high place his prey;
And ye, oh her desolate daughters!
Were scattered all weeping away!

II

While sadly we gazed on the river
Which rolled on in freedom below,
They demanded the song; but oh never
That triumph the stranger shall know!
May this right hand be withered for ever
Ere it string our harp for the foe!

III

On the willow that harp is suspended,
Oh Salem! its sound should be free;
And the hour when thy glories were ended
But left me that token of thee:
And ne'er shall its soft tones be blended
With the voice of the spoiler by me!

The biblical psalm set the scene for Byron of the exiles wearily and disconsolately sitting beside the river. The psalm embellishes the nostalgia, the enervation of the exiles.

The psalm also etched the images of willow trees, undoubtedly weeping, the harps silent in the hands of the exiles. Of course, Byron had his own program that added midrashically to the imagery. In the Bible, the refusal reflects the weariness and hopelessness of the prisoners – *How shall we sing*

the Lord's song in a strange land? In Byron's version, it is their dignity and resolution that cause their refusal – "Oh never / That triumph the stranger shall know." Byron ironically contrasts their loss of independence with the freedom of the river below them. He concretizes for us the meaning of the self-inflicted curse of the second stanza: "May this right hand be withered forever / Ere it string our high harp for the foe." Defiance in the face of death perhaps.

And there is, I suggest, a personal sense of satisfaction that Byron slips into his lines. How is this defiance, this unquestionable dignity, the everlasting hope symbolized? By the silent harp beneath the willow. But in 1814, George Gordon, Lord Byron wrote: "It is odd enough that this should fall to my lot – who have been abused as an 'infidel'"⁹ mysteriously chosen to strum his poetic harp, as it were, to compose his *Hebrew Melodies*.

The final song may now be sung. Perhaps the most widely known poem of the biblically-inspired lyrics in the *Hebrew Melodies* is "The Destruction of Sennacherib." It is reprinted in every anthology surveying English literature. The attraction of it is Byron's display of mastery of versifying that it displays: the perfect handling of the anapest (the "running" meter). This metrical "foot" has three syllables: the first and second are unstressed, and are climaxed by the stressed third syllable. The reader is urged to practice this meter aloud in the first two lines of the poem as scanned:

u u / u u / u u / u u /

The As syr ian came down like the wolf on the fold,

u u / u u / u u / u u /

And his co horts were gleam ing in pur ple and gold . . . –

Then, read the entire poem aloud. The flow of action, the imagery within the hurtling lines, the drum-beat of the stressed syllables, the felicity if not the potency of the rhyme scheme, will give you the thrill of great verse and satisfaction of the spirit!

THE DESTRUCTION OF SENNACHERIB

And it came to pass that night, that the angel of the Lord went out and smote the camp of the Assyrians an hundred four-score and five thousand: and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead (II Kg. 19:35; Isa. 37:36).

I

The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,
 And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;
 And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,
 When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.
 Like the leaves of the forest when Summer is green,
 That host with their banners at sunset were seen:
 Like the leaves of the forest when Autumn hath blown,
 That host on the morrow lay withered and strown.

II

For the Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast,
 And breathed in the face of the foe as he pass'd,
 And the eyes of the sleepers wax'd deadly and chill,
 And their hearts but once heaved, and forever grew still!
 And there lay the steed with his nostril all wide,
 But through it there roll'd not the breath of his pride;
 And the foam of his gasping lay white on the turf,
 And cold as the spray of the rock-beating surf.

III

And there lay the rider distorted and pale,
 With the dew on his brow, and the rust on his mail:
 And the tents were all silent, the banners alone,
 The lances unlifted, the trumpets unblown.
 And the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail,
 And the idols are broke in the temple of Baal;
 And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword,
 Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord!

Byron's poem is truly midrashic. Nothing – except the denuded fact that a Divine plague wiped out the surging Assyrian force – is taken from the biblical verse. He added a colorful, action-filled charge of knights with lances, a scene more likely to be found in a novel or narrative poem by his contempo-

rary Walter Scott. On our imaginative screen we see the gorgeous, but also prideful colors of "purple and gold" of the Assyrian cavalry with their lances flashing in the slanted rays of the setting sun, the specter of the Angel of Death brooding and breathing on the soldiers as they pass him, and the verbal camera focusing on the death of man and mount on the field of battle. The poem rises to the climax in which the power of Ashur is seen to be no match for even the "glance of the Lord." Here is illustrated the "impermanence of human action."¹⁰ It is a scene that Cecil B. DeMille might have filmed. All this is enhanced by the manipulation of standard versifying elements that connote inevitability, incremental repetition: In the last four lines of stanza 1 that conveys its moral through the imagery of the "fable of the seasons" – Summer versus Autumn, green versus withered, sunset, the end of day, versus the morrow, the hoary symbol of a new day, a new life adawning, but which ironically here reveals the fantastic end of the Assyrian army strewn on the battlefield. Thirteen of the 24 lines begin with the biblical, breathless "And" to signify the inexorable playing-out of the Lord's design. Repetition is counter-pointed by alliteration: "face of the foe," "hearts but once heaved," "steed with his nostril all wide," "the spray of the rock-beating surf," "And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the Sword." Indeed, synopsis and the significance of the entire incident are almost carried by the alliterated phrases!

How can a reader return to the Book of Second Kings or even the poetic Book of Isaiah and not see, feel, and comprehend the power and the pride in Byron's climactic final phrase in his midrashic description unfolding before his eyes? The incident related in this poem occurred in Jewish history centuries before the fall of the Second Temple, but one student of Byron's poems declares "It is easy and probably correct to think of 'The Destruction of Sennacherib' as a sort of battle hymn of Zion."¹¹ The poem surely reflects Byron's consistent belief, shining throughout those Hebrew melodies derived from the Bible, in the Omni-presence and Omnipotence of the Jewish God of history, Who promised the children of Israel redemption and restoration to Zion. The resounding last lines, the curtain lines, to this scene, at once announce that, though the Lord had shown He can hide His face when Jerusalem fell, He has the power to protect His people, that it His power that shall prevail:

And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword,
Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord!

Byron never knew how prophetic he was. He could not foresee, for all his proto-Zionism, that a dispersed, downtrodden people would produce in another 100 years an emerging new Jewish generation that could organize a movement and an army that will be the instruments of new miracles of the Lord. Perhaps these miracles will be unrecognizable ones because the modern mind cannot comprehend such a dramatic and compelling miracle as that which destroyed the army of Ashur. After all, it took the Israel Defense Forces six days in 1967 to approximate what the Lord did overnight. What can be observed today is the fulfillment of the promises in the Bible that Byron believed in and poetized in his *Hebrew Melodies*.

NOTES

1. Thomas L. Ashton, *Byron's Hebrew Melodies* (London: Routledge, Paul, 1972) p. 169.
2. Ashton, op. cit., p. 75.
3. Joseph Slater, "Byron's Hebrew Melodies," *Studies in Philology* XLIV (1952) p. 89.
4. Ibid.
5. Ashton, op. cit., p. 72.
6. Ashton, "Byron's Lyrics for David's Harp," *Studies in English Literature*, 12 (Autumn 1972) p. 665.
7. Frederick Berwick and Paul Douglass, eds., *A Selection of Hebrew Melodies, Ancient and Modern* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 1988) p. 25, opine that Byron read Josephus VI:4 on the destruction of the Temple.
8. See Ashton, *Hebrew Melodies* p. 73 and elsewhere; Burdick and Douglass, p. 23; Slater, pp. 89 ff..
9. Byron to Annabella Milbanke, October 20, 1814, in Leslie Marchand, ed., *Byron's Letters and Journals* (London: John Murray, 1975) Vol. 4, p. 220.
10. Ashton, "Byron's Lyrics," p. 672.
11. Slater, p. 90.