The Question of Religion(s) in Lord Byron's *Hebrew Melodies*

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Abstract

Although many Jewish readers and commentators have recognized Byron's *Hebrew Melodies* as pro-Zionist songs since their composition to the music of the Jewish composer, Isaac Nathan in 1815, there are traces of Christian and Islamic *origins* 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 is sensibly and pragmatically, as many of Byron's scholars have noticed, derivative from the 'Islamic Levant' which he sought for salvation after the failure of his relationship with his Calvinist devoted wife Annabella. This paper is concerned with a *textual* investigation of Byron's *Judaic Songs*, attempting to find evidences of their multi-religious discourse beside its Judaic background.

Key Words: Byron; Hebrew Melodies; religion; mythology; Platonism; Islamic discourse.

اشكالية الدين في الحان بايرون العبرانية

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الخلاصة :

على الرغم من أن العديد من القراء والمعلقين اليهود قد اعترفوا بألحان بايرون العبرية كأغاني مؤيدة للصهيونية منذ تأليفها إلى موسيقى الملحن اليهودي إسحاق ناثان في عام 1815 ، إلا أن هناك آثارًا لأصول مسيحية وإسلامية بجانب العهد القديم التي بدا أن بايرون يقلدها في أغانيه صهيون .تتبع بعض كلمات بايرون من مصادر توراتية ، والبعض الآخر ليس كذلك .شخصياته مستمدة من كل من العهدين القديم والجديد ، والجو الذي يقدمه منطقي وعملي ، كما لاحظ العديد من علماء بايرون ، مشتق من `` بلاد الشام الإسلامي " التي سعى للخلاص منها بعد فشل علاقته به .زوجته الكالفينية المخلصة أنابيلا . تهتم هذه الورقة بالتحقيق النصي في أغاني بايرون اليهودية ، في محاولة للعثور على أدلة على خطابهم متعدد الأديان إلى جانب خلفيته اليهودية

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 pathetic'ly, saying by this he conquers enemies and governs kingdoms.'

William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

Introduction

Byron's *Hebrew Melodies* have been recognized by Jewish readers and commentators as pro-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* (1919: I, 95), 'owes more to Byron than to any other Gentile Poet.' The *Hebrew Melodies*, adds Sokolow, adheres to 'an intensity of grief and yearning ... a tenderness which makes [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 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 (1952, 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. During the period of composing his *Hebrew Melodies*, Byron wrote sarcastically to his fiancé, Annabella that his half-sister, Augusta says: 'They will call me a Jew next' (Cited in Blackstone: 1975, 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., 129). This paper attempts to deny the common belief that Judaism is the only source from which the *Hebrew Melodies* are derived

ridding them from any Zionist claim, especially if we know that some them are non-religious songs.

The Non-Hebrew Melodies

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 pro-Zionist attitude. Moreover, even if most of his *Hebrew Melodies* stem from Scriptural sources, some are not; like 'I Saw Thee Weep,' which was written for Lady Frances Webster, and his favourite lyric 'She Walks in Beauty,' written for Mrs. Wilmost Horton. Both are pure secular love poems.

I.
She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climate 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 serenly 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!
(1-18)

This metaphysical phase in Byron's *Hebrew Melodies* is non-religious in the conformist sense of the word, it is inspired by Platonic rather than Biblical sources. He approaches the Divine beyond the realm of ordinary theological perception, visualizing his female figures as goddesses or muses who inform of divine grace in timeless moments of epiphany. He shows, through perfect female figures, that reality can be derived from a single principle, the One. Like Philo, the Hellenized Jew, Byron borrows the neo-Platonic conception of the relationship between light, beauty and religious virtue. And borrowing the language of religion, he almost mystified the classical theme of praising the ecstatic bliss of the lady's beauty. He turns his ladies into saint-like-figures by theologizing Plato (Al-Khafaji: 2016, 54). They are rising the levels of wisdom in the poet, turning his carnal attraction to their beautiful bodies into higher attraction to their souls and, eventually, to union with absolute truth. It is a non-sexual magnetism that inspires the poet's mind and soul, directing his attention from vulgarity into transcendental spiritual matters. Thus his Platonic identification

of the *good* and *beautiful* in these two poems is a good indicator of his understanding in this early stage of the *Melodies* that he can escape beyond desire with the purpose of mending his agonized human nature. These secular songs are optimistic attempts to rectify his perverted sexual behaviour (See Al-Kurwy: 2019, 966).

The Religio-poetic Question in Byron's *Hebrew Melodies*

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 his poems, and Byron's songs are Hebrew only because they are inspired by the Old Testament's ancient Poets/Prophets. He repeatedly expresses his admiration of the Bible, not only 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, 666-7).

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 join the primordial prophetic/poetic institution, to be 'the successor of the ancient poets and prophets.' The Old Testament Prophets/Poets are prototypes of an essential romantic tradition that provokes the poet as 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). Likewise, Byron's Cockney peer, P.B. Shelley believes that in the infancy of societies, all authors were poets (Al-Khafaji: 2013, 6). So does 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' (Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*). Hence, returning to Biblical legacy in the thorny nineteenth century with a 'Mad, Bad, and dangerous' poet like Lord Byron, the brain 'perplexes, and retards,' says John Keats. Like all romantic poets, he longs for a time when people 'still from God did they receive / Heavenly lore in earthly speech, / Nor beat the brain to pass their reach' (Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan*: I, i).

The audience of the *Hebrew Melodies* were initially intended to be conventionally pious listeners, like Annabella and Isaac Nathan, but their poet is far from being a devotedly religious person. Rather, he was a fallen angel whose real love remained all his life dedicated to John Edleston, the chorister and Augusta, his half-sister and the 'unnamed sin' of his life. He tried his best to be redeemed during a particular period of his life (1814-15), the time of his marriage, but he was not rescued and his saviour, Annabella herself, was unable to shoulder this responsibility. Yet, one cannot deny the fact that, during the time of writing the *Hebrew Melodies*, Byron was in love, in harmony with humanity and religion so he composed these poems and set them to music turning the Bible from a Sacred Book into a romantic discourse. For example, he expresses a totally un-Byronic atmosphere, in his 'If That High World,' speculating on the validity of neo-Platonic 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!
(1-16)

He speaks as a Hebrew Orpheus, presenting weeping harpists and Psalmists to seek cathartic effects from them. His negative emotion (despair) is absorbed or purified either by music, tars 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 he at rest!
The wild-dove hath her nest, the fox his cave,
Mankind their country - Israel but the grave!
(1-12)

In his 'The Gulf and the Fountain: The *Hebrew Melodies*,' Bernard Blackstone eschews the triple effect of the Old Testament, New Testament and Islam on Byron's poems. Like William Blake, says Blackstone (133-4), 'Byron believed that "all religions are one": the Father of Christianity and Allah of the Muslims are one and the same. The Unitarian 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, after his 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
The 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 over her scenes of lost delight
Inhabitants more fair.
The cedars wave on Lebanon,
But Judah's statelier maids are gone!
(1-12)

Deterritorialized from his country and alienated from his people, as most of his major poems tell, he selected the 'Islamic Levant' as 'the homeland of his choice' (Ibid., 132). Thus, Annabella was totally convinced after their separation that Byron 'turned Mussulman..., had renounced the faith and moral code of his country' (Ibid.). She considered 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 intimacy with the East encouraged some of Byron's scholars to challenge what they called Edward Said's 'sweeping, negative view of Western representations of the Orient' (Franklin: 2007, 113). They argued against what Said considers as 'colonizing context' in Byron's presentation of some negative Eastern stereotypes; like Ali Pasha, in *Childe Harold Pilgrimage*. In this context, Byron resorted to Islamic East in order to obtain oblivious catharsis to his tormented soul in order to turn his spiritual nonsense into certain meaning (Al-Khafaji: 2014a, 441). In 'My Soul is Dark' (from I Samuel 16:14-23), 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 ov'r 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). He begs her to understand him, forgive his sinful past, and cure his anguished conscience. If she adheres to his request, he can be saved and end his exile. However, his hope for salvation was not fulfilled by Annabella, she could not 'save him from himself,' she deemed her husband as a guilty man, an exile on earth and 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 stands for, 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, the 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.
(1-12)

At the end of the poem, the poet considers himself as a cursed man, a Wandering Jew. His sarcastic and harsh tone in this short lyric is not less Byronic than in his *Childe Harold Pilgrimage* or *Don Juan*. At last, he makes up his decision that Annabella goes on in her faith and he would live and die following boundless spiritual creeds. He thought, erroneously, that Islam is one of these liberal creeds so he resorted to 'the Islamic way of life.' 'What in Western eyes are the crimes of the Byrons (Mad Jack, Byron, Augusta),' says Blackstone (132-3), 'would have been readily accepted in the tolerant moral code of Islam.'

As Annabella failed to save the poet from his agonies and his honeymoon (treaclemoon) was over, the *Hebrew Melodies* begins to express the tone of lamenting the captives in foreign lands and fallen kings who aspire to compensation. These themes match with typical Byronic mentality which searches for salvation, but descends instead into infernal abyss. The Songs of Zion echo the present life of the poet with the voice of a regretted Adam, or a lost Paradise. 'The *Hebrew Melodies*,' says Thomas L. Ashton (1972, 669), '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 became an archetype for Byron to describe his personal fate. This coincides with Leigh Hunt's saying that Byron 'furnish[es] others out of himself' (Ibid., 680), or, according to Harold Bloom (2009, 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 (1988, 522), '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 cup of Judah,' the host of Sennacherib is destroyed by the 'angel of death,' Herod is haunted by the spectre of the ideal Mariamne, and Eliphaz the Temanite is chilled by the 'spirit' that appeared to him. Byron's tyrants, Hebrew and Assyrians, stemmed from the Old and New Testaments. 'They are

destroyed,' says Ashton (670), 'by the spectre of 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' (See Al-Kurwy: 2013, 10).

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* can be parallelized with Byron-Edleston, or even Byron-Augusta. Edleston was the choirboy who Byron loved when he was in Trinity College, but the boy died suddenly. Byron shared with the boy 'intense feelings of protective and idealized love but also sexual guilt' (Franklin, 37). The poet laments the boy's death in one of the *Hebrew Melodies*, 'Oh! Snatch'd Away in Beauty's Bloom,' which is an elegy foreshadowing Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850).

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.
(1-16)

Similar to Tennyson, Byron laments his friend using Husband-wife imagery. He addresses his friend using gender-based discourse 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.
(1-8)

Byron presents Judea's most horrible tyrant in a moment of agony and pain which require understanding, if not sympathy. However, the speaker 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' (13-6). This torment 'is not consumed, but still

consuming' the soul of the mourner, Herod or Byron himself. He realizes that, in a mutable world, there is no victor, and all is vain. Thus, the leader of the *Satanic School*, as Robert Southey called Byron, presents in one of his Melodies a typical Christian preaching poems, 'All is Vanity, Saith the Preacher.'

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.
(1-24)

The Judaic, Christian, and Islamic myths 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 *monolithic* Ibrahamic religions (Al-Khafaji: 2014b, 64). So immortality becomes predominant in the hereafter.

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 namelss and eternal thing,
Forgetting what it was to die.
(IV, 1-8)

Consequently, the *Hebrew Melodies* are as Byronic as any other major poem in which Byron used to mediate his personal life. These thirty poems that he wrote during a very critical period of his life convey his use of the religious question to portray the drama of his personal life. The *Melodies*, which are called Hebrew, carry theological aspirations from three major religions of the Book. They start with neo-Platonic conception of woman-worship and end up with Platonic idealization as well. In between Platonic beginning and end, there we can read the story of Byron's engagement and marriage, his optimistic view of love's power to heal the fallen angels and his disappointment with lover's religious and moral restrictions that drive him to get rid of conventionalities and resort to romantic transcendental idealism for redemption and salvation (See Ali: 2020, 306)..

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