Seeking Zion: Grace Aguilar’s Religious Nationalism

Lindsay Katzir, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA, USA

Abstract

This article looks at Grace Aguilar (1816–1847), a well-known Anglo-Jewish author, as a religious Zionist, and it analyzes Aguilar’s work in order to challenge three scholarly assumptions about the history of Zionism. First, that British Jews have never genuinely supported Zionism; second, that Zionism did not exist before Theodor Herzl, the founder of political Zionism; and third, that Jewish women rarely voiced Zionist ideas before the establishment of the State of Israel. Aguilar, an Anglo-Jewish woman writer, published during the mid-Victorian period, when she espoused orthodox views about the Jews’ restoration to Palestine. Aguilar’s belief in the biblical precept of Jewish nationhood was a precursor to the thought of later Zionists such as Herzl, as well as the convictions of religious Zionists such as Rav Kook. Her religious nationalism provides an important counterpoint to scholarly claims that Victorian Jews identified only as British, as no different than their Christian neighbors. Instead, Aguilar characterizes the Jews as a nation apart, a people bound together by an ancient religion with roots (and a future) in Palestine.

In November 1895, Max Nordau encouraged Theodor Herzl to visit Israel Zangwill in London, knowing that Zangwill would share Herzl’s zeal for Zionism. Excited by the prospect of preaching his gospel to the British, Herzl wrote in his diary, “The campaign’s center of gravity is shifted to London.” On November 21, 1895, Herzl marched into Zangwill’s office and declared, “I am Theodor Herzl. Help me to build the Jewish State.” Years later Zangwill recalled, “Dr. Herzl wished me to get him a representative Jewish audience, and this though he was only in England for three days.” Zangwill, who wielded some influence in the Anglo-Jewish community, having become a celebrity with the publication of his novel Children of the Ghetto in 1892, quickly arranged several engagements for Herzl. “By what I shall always regard as a social miracle,” Zangwill wrote,

I found myself two days later presiding over a goodly gathering of “Maccabaeans” at which the unknown Hungarian—dropped from the skies—gave to the world the first exposition of his scheme.

Zangwill not only claims the distinction of making Britain the first audience to hear The Jewish State but also mythologizes Herzl as a prophet calling for the dispersed Children of Israel to return to their ancestral home. The Maccabeans, a society of authors, artists, and professionals...
who named their club after the nationalists of Jewish tradition, applauded Herzl’s plans for the Promised Land.

In fact, many British Jews wanted to meet with Herzl. For instance, he dined with Chief Rabbi Hermann Adler, Rabbi Simeon Singer, and Sir Samuel Montagu, the Member of Parliament for Whitechapel, and debated ideas with Asher Myers, the editor of the *Jewish Chronicle*.5 Although some proposed alternate locations for a Jewish state, with a few advocating territories in Africa and South America, Herzl discovered that British Jews mostly yearned for Palestine. For example, Elkan Adler, Chief Rabbi Adler’s brother, claimed that “Palestine was the one country in which Jews should settle;” Asher Myers insisted, “The Jews will not want to go to Argentina, but to Palestine;” and Samuel Montagu would “hear nothing of Argentina,” instead desiring to relocate with his family to Palestine.6 Montagu actually confided to Herzl that “he felt himself to be more an Israelite than an Englishman.”7 Ahad Ha’am heard similar expressions of national allegiance when he visited England in 1893. He observed, “The Lovers of Zion here talk in public about the need to settle Jews in Palestine and that is their whole object and the basis of all their faith in the Jewish future.”8 Even Zangwill, who had thought that any territory would suffice as a refuge for persecuted Jews, became a leading spokesperson for the Zionist movement after meeting Herzl.9

Herzl began his publishing career in Britain much like Leo Pinsker, who during his 1882 visit to London was persuaded by Arthur Cohen, the president of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, to write what would become his Zionist pamphlet, *Autoemancipation*.10 Myers commissioned Herzl to write an article for the *Jewish Chronicle*, which appeared in print on January 17, 1896, and on February 14, a revised version of that article was published in Vienna as *Der Judenstaat*.11 Howard Sachar claims that “the reception of Herzl’s ideas [in Britain] was courteous, if generally noncommittal,” but Dan Cohn-Sherbok concludes, “British Jews whom he met were generally enthusiastic.”12 Though there is some disagreement about how well received Herzl’s ideas actually were, it is nonetheless clear that Herzl himself was galvanized by his visit to Britain; he emerged as a public figure, poised to change the course of modern Jewish
history. Herzl presented himself as a leader, but not as the creator of a new ideology. For example, in *The Jewish State*, he argues,

*I am introducing no new idea; on the contrary, it is a very old one. It is a universal idea—and therein lies its power—old as the people, which never, even in the time of bitterest calamity, ceased to cherish it. This is the restoration of the Jewish State.*

For Herzl, diaspora Jews needed only to wake from their slumber and seize their birthright. He reminded Chief Rabbi Adler that “the idea of his project was not new but as old as the Dispersion itself. Only his method was novel—the organization of ‘the Society and finally the State.’”

Scholars of Zionism often characterize Herzl’s modern political movement as irreligious because many of his writings focus on state building, but Herzl himself invoked biblical promises of restoration as the rationale for his ideas.

Zionism originated with the Hebrew Bible. As Gil Troy explains, “That first premodern birth [of Zionism in the Bible] reflected the Jewish homeland’s centrality to Judaism.”

David Ohana notes that “Religious Zionism saw itself as continuing Jewish tradition.” Indeed, Jewish prayers and texts look forward to God’s eventual restoration of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel. For example, the *Amidah*, the central prayer of Jewish liturgy, urges God to “rebuild [Jerusalem] rapidly in our days as an everlasting structure.” Likewise, Deuteronomy predicts that “the Lord your God will bring you to the land that your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it.”

According to Joan Peters, Sephardic Jews held fast to biblical promises of restoration throughout their long sojourn in Arab lands. Peters asserts, “Those Jews, who are uniquely indigenous to the terrain that now is the Arab world, have retained in their liturgy the steady longing for ‘return’ to the Land of Israel.”

Zangwill, too, saw Herzl’s movement as inherently religious. In an essay published after Herzl’s first (and only) trip to Palestine, Zangwill insists, “There is no need to take either Dr. Herzl or Max Nordau at their own estimate as unbelievers,” claiming, “Herzl’s tears at the sight of the Holy Land held perhaps as much religion as those of any of the weepers at the Wailing Wall.” Zangwill then asks, “If the leader is thus affected, how much more the followers?” He surmises that “the success, even the partial success, of [Herzl’s] project would promote a religious revival among the Jews.”
Much of Herzl’s persuasive ability hinged upon his personal charms. Famous British Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann recalled that “The Jewish State contained not a single new idea for us.” Rather, it was “the personality which stood behind them [that] appealed to us.” Yaron Peleg clarifies, “To many of his contemporaries Herzl seemed taken out of an Oriental romance.” For example, Erwin Rosenberger portrayed Herzl as a biblical prince:

The cut of his features, the dark hair, the dark beard and moustache, the dark eyes all proclaimed eloquently that here sat a son of the East—and one of the noblest blood. I found myself almost wondering: How does he come to be sitting on that plain chair? He would look perfectly at ease on the throne of a Babylonian king. How does that slim figure come to be wearing a modern business suit—that figure which was so obviously created for the robes on an Oriental prince?

Moshe Smilansky, an agricultural pioneer, hailed Herzl as royalty, recounting how, during Herzl’s trip to Palestine, a delegation of Sephardic Jews called him “the messiah, son of Joseph,” while the local Arabs dubbed him “the king of the Jews.” Emphasizing his majestic qualities, Zangwill described Herzl as a “tall, impressive, black-bearded figure, with a head that I have elsewhere compared to an old Assyrian king’s.” For many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Zionists, Herzl himself represented the Jews’ historical connection to the Levant.

British Jews’ support for Herzl’s plans (and their fascination with his person) grew from decades of their own Zionist writings. Grace Aguilar (1816–1847), a widely read Anglo-Jewish novelist, poet, and theologian, espoused orthodox views about the Jews’ redemption from exile. This article analyzes Aguilar’s work in order to challenge three assumptions about the history of British Zionism. First, that British Jews were largely uninterested in, even hostile to, Zionism, which is the prevailing scholarly view of British Jewry. Rather, it has been suggested by Judith Page, a leading scholar of Anglo-Jewish literature, that scholars should further analyze the Zionist beliefs of writers like Aguilar before drawing their conclusions. Second, that Zionism, as an ideology, was invented in the modern era, divorced from centuries of Jewish history and religiosity. In fact, before the organization of the Zionist movement and the establishment of the State of Israel, as Jeffrey Kopstein explains, Zionism was, essentially, a defense of Jewish communal interests, and Aguilar promoted such religious nationalism in her writings as early as 1830. Finally, that Jewish women have not, until recently, voiced their own Zionist ideas. As Deborah Bernstein observes, women’s Zionist thought has been overlooked by scholars. She
argues, “[Women’s] experiences, actions and struggles, their daily lives and their special moments have been passed over with hardly a mention.”\textsuperscript{30} Scholars continually uphold Aguilar as a paragon of British patriotism, but she also looked forward to the Jews’ restoration to the Land of Israel. Aguilar’s religious nationalism provides an important counterpoint to scholarly claims that Victorian Jews identified themselves as wholly British, as no different than Christian Britons. Instead, Aguilar characterizes the Jews as a nation apart, a people bound together by an ancient religion with roots (and a future) in Palestine.

A Nation Apart

Many histories of British Judaism and monographs about Anglo-Jewish literature show how Victorian Jews attempted to acculturate or assimilate into British society by adopting the social mores of Christian culture, thereby eliminating any perceived differences between themselves and their non-Jewish neighbors.\textsuperscript{31} Victorian Christians often accepted such overtures by Britain’s Jewish community, acceptance that was especially pertinent during the pre- and post-emancipation period. However, the belief that Jews were essentially foreign to Britain was commonly held by Jews and non-Jews alike. Peleg writes that Jews “were never fully regarded as an integral part of Western culture by other Europeans nor indeed by themselves for much of their history in Europe,” claiming that Christians saw the Jews as a distinct nation long before the rise of European nationalist movements.\textsuperscript{32} Donald Lewis confirms that nineteenth-century British Protestants cultivated “the idea of a Jewish national identity, and of world Jewry as constituting a ‘race’ and a ‘nation.’”\textsuperscript{33}

During the 1830s and 1840s, many Britons, including prominent politicians like Sir Robert Inglis and the Duke of Wellington, supported legislative efforts to exclude Jews from various segments of British society, often on the grounds of religious or national difference. For example, Inglis claimed to the House of Commons,

The Jews were aliens, not in the technical and legal sense . . . but in the popular sense of the word: they were aliens because their country and their interests were not merely different, but hostile [to Christian interests].\textsuperscript{34}
At the same time, evangelical missionaries sought to convert Jews to Christianity in order to eradicate their difference through religious assimilation.35

Toward the mid-nineteenth century, emerging theories about race helped to solidify the notion of Jewish racial difference. Michael Galchinsky clarifies, “Racist anthropology and England’s own social Darwinism between the 1840s and 1890s...categorized Jews racially, not as ‘white,’ but as ‘Semitic.’”36 During the latter half of the 1870s newspapers circulated theories that, as prime minister, Benjamin Disraeli supported the Ottomans in the Balkan crisis because, as a Jew, he did not sympathize with Christians living under the yoke of Ottoman domination. Rather, they said, he felt a racial kinship to Turkish Muslims. According to Eitan Bar-Yosef, Liberal Jews began supporting Disraeli during the Russo-Turkish War, which prompted Disraeli’s opposition to exaggerate “the racial and religious affinity between Ottomans and Jews.”37 All through the nineteenth century, in spite of the formal emancipation of the Jews in 1858 and the final removal of all remaining civil disabilities affecting Jews in 1871, Britons often represented Jews as foreign to Christian England and Europe.

Some of the most vocal Zionists of the nineteenth century were British Christians who hoped to return the Jewish people to Palestine, a hope that was as frequently predicated on millenarian zeal as on the sentiment that Jews had too often failed to Europeanize. To that end, British millenarianism usually worked against Jewish emancipation efforts because it operated under the assumption that Jews could not, or would not, integrate into British Christian society. For example, in their 1831 defenses of Jewish emancipation, both William Hazlitt and Thomas Macaulay denounced those who would deny full citizenship to Jews on the grounds that they wanted to emigrate to Palestine.38 For Hazlitt and Macaulay, Jews deserved equal legal status in Britain irrespective of their own Zionist dreams.

Regardless, many Britons continued to see Palestine, not Europe, as the Jews’ rightful home. Writing for the Contemporary Review, famed historian Goldwin Smith proposed, “Judea may revert to the Jews, and that portion of the race which refuses to be Europeanized may withdraw from Europe, where it is an alien element.”39 For Smith, Jewish culture originated in
the Middle East, a view that further alienated those unassimilated, usually orthodox, Jews from life in modern Europe. Peters reports that

In Britain, the idea of increasing the Jewish population in Palestine to form a Jewish state took on such popular appeal that the press repeated false rumors that Lord Beaconsfield—Benjamin Disraeli—had attempted and failed to achieve the restoration of Jewish Palestine. \(^{40}\)

One newspaper claimed, “If [Disraeli] had freed the Holy Land and restored the Jews, as he might have done instead of pottering about Roumelia and Afghanistan, he would have died dictator.” \(^{41}\) In fact, the Anglo-Jewish community even anticipated the 1917 Balfour Declaration. Michael Polowetzky argues,

This proclamation represented the culmination of more than half a century of a growing and often very active preoccupation with Jewish culture and history among the British political and intellectual elites. \(^{42}\)

In conversion tracts and travelogues, novels and sermons, newspaper articles and parliamentary speeches, Victorians continually asserted that the Jews would eventually return to their native lands in the East

Aguilar’s writings repeatedly affirm these beliefs. Since the Victorian period, Aguilar has been called unique among Anglo-Jewish writers for her sometimes-contradictory and often-unusual beliefs about Judaism and Jewish life in Britain. Most scholars agree that she supported Jewish emancipation in Britain, promoted Jewish acculturation in British society, and identified as a native Briton, and most scholarship focuses on her engagement with the Christian world. Born in London, Aguilar moved to Devonshire and then to Brighton, spending her formative years well beyond the more established centers of Anglo-Jewish life; to satisfy her personal need for communal worship, she regularly attended church services with her Christian friends. Perhaps because of these experiences, Aguilar often minimized differences between Judaism and Christianity. And because of these tendencies, scholars often overstate the universalism of her theology, overlooking her orthodox worldview. Like most religious Jews, Aguilar believed in the biblical precept of Jewish nationhood, and like most Victorian writers, she depicted Jews as the children of Palestine.
The daughter of Sephardic immigrants whose ancestors had fled the Spanish Inquisition, Aguilar cherished England, the country that sheltered Jewish victims of religious persecution. For example, in response to Nicholas I’s 1844 deportations of Russian Jews to the Pale of Settlement, she wrote a political poem calling on the British government to safeguard the Jewish people. “The Hebrew’s Appeal, on Occasion of the Late Fearful Ukase Promulgated by the Emperor of Russia” (1844) describes Britons as “friends of Israel’s race.” This poem appeals to British sympathies for persecuted Jews, reminding Christians of their close relationship with their Jewish neighbors, many of whom had also sought refuge in Britain:

Oh England! thou hast call’d us to thy breast,  
And done to orphans all a mother’s part,  
And given them peace, and liberty, and rest,  
And healing pour’d into the homeless heart;  
Then, oh once more, let Israel mercy claim,  
And suff’ring thousands bless our England’s honour’d name.

Here, British Christians and their adopted Jewish siblings share one mother: they are both Britain’s children. Likewise, “The History of the Jews in England” (1847) assures natural-born British subjects that Jewish immigrants and refugees, filled with patriotism for their new country, will happily uphold British norms and values. This essay, Aguilar’s primary argument for Jewish emancipation, repeatedly calls British Jews “Englishmen.”

However, like “The Hebrew’s Appeal,” it also calls them “Hebrews,” revealing their true national identity. In fact, “The History of the Jews in England” identifies Christians as the “natives” of Britain in contradistinction to its Jews even as it purports to attenuate such differences between Jews and Christians. For example, Aguilar claims that in Britain “it would be difficult to distinguish a Jewish from a native household” (emphasis added). Difficult, perhaps, but not impossible, as Aguilar herself makes that distinction. She reminds British Jews that regardless of their patriotism, Britain is merely “the land of their adoption,” not their native land. She makes a case for Jewish emancipation by commenting on Christians’ and Jews’ shared love of Britain, but her argument reflects traditional orthodox views of the galut, the notion that the Jews are “the exiles of Judea,” subject to alien rule in foreign lands while
awaiting their restoration to their own country. Aguilar ultimately thought of diaspora countries as temporary havens for displaced Jews.

In her writings, Aguilar asserts the Jews’ place in British society while affirming Jewish national difference, partly by assigning unique national traits to British Jews. Like many nineteenth-century writers, she derived some of these character traits from the Jews’ ancient history in the Middle East. Writing thirty years after Aguilar’s death in 1846, George Eliot, author of the famous Zionist novel *Daniel Deronda* (1876), echoed what had by then become a common view of Jewish nationality. In a letter to Harriet Beecher Stowe, Eliot grouped Jews with “Oriental peoples,” apart from the English, and then distinguished Jews from “western people.” Similarly, Zionists like Herzl romanticized the Jews’ Oriental origins. Peleg notes that Herzl, with his Oriental looks, “represented the final stage in a long cultural process” for Zionists (emphasis added). Specifically, this process was

a process of internalizing the very difference that always prevented the complete absorption of Jews into Europe, their perception as “Oriental,” and [finally] utilizing [that perception] constructively by highlighting it rather than by trying to ignore it or eradicate it. Importantly, this process of Jewish self-identification with the Middle East began long before Aguilar’s lifetime, meaning that her writings are part of Zionist history. Peleg argues, “The inspiring innovation of Zionism was that it recognized, rather than ignored or fought against, the inherent Jewish difference.” Like Herzl and his supporters, Aguilar treated some of the Orientalist traits associated with Jews positively instead of negatively.

Many scholars oversimplify Aguilar’s identification with non-Jewish groups, insisting that she saw Jews in relation to Christians rather than Muslims, the archetypal Orientals. Specifically, they assume that Aguilar thought only of Christian Britain and Christian Spain as Jewish homelands. However, Aguilar’s writings often praise Muslim, not Christian, Spain; moreover, her works frequently depict Jewish life in Muslim lands. For example, Aguilar prefaces “Song of the Spanish Jews, During their ‘Golden Age’” (1843), a poem about Jewish life in medieval Muslim Spain, with a passage from Henry Hart Milman’s *History of the Jews*
This passage highlights the Jews’ historically productive relationship with Muslims. Milman writes,

In emulation of their Moslemite brethren, [the Jews] began to cultivate their long disused and neglected poetry; the harp of Judah was heard to sound again, though with something of a foreign tone.\textsuperscript{55}

Aguilar thus locates Jews within an Oriental milieu, likening Jews to Muslims, not Christians. Moreover, Aguilar identifies the Muslim rule of Spain as the one peaceful time for Spanish Jews:

\begin{verbatim}
Home of the exiles! oh ne’er will we leave thee,
As mother to orphan, fair land we now greet thee,
Sweet peace and rejoicing may dwell in thy bowers,
For even as Judah, fair land! thou art ours.\textsuperscript{56}
\end{verbatim}

“The Hebrew’s Appeal” echoes themes from “Song of the Spanish Jews,” which calls Muslim Spain an adopted motherland for Judea’s exiles.

In fact, in “The History of the Jews in England” Aguilar indicts Christian nations as anti-Semitic, praising the Islamic world for its relative tolerance. She clarifies, “Subject as [Jews] are to the oppression of individuals—sultans and pashas—needing wealth or excitement, still these are but temporary misfortunes,” and concludes, “Their general position in the Ottoman provinces, both of Europe and Asia, is one of more security, peace, and consideration, than in contemporary and more enlightened kingdoms.”\textsuperscript{57} However, Aguilar tempers her praise of Muslim rulers, arguing that Eastern Jews owe their prosperity to “the extreme indolence of the Musselmans assisting in permitting them to obtain the almost exclusive trade of the Levant.”\textsuperscript{58} In this way, Aguilar sometimes makes derogatory comments about Muslims, especially in her attempts to elevate Jews above Orientalist stereotypes.

Victorian Jews knew that in conversations about race and religion Britons often grouped them with Eastern peoples like Muslims rather than with European Christians. For example, Aguilar’s theological treatise \textit{The Women of Israel} (1845), a series of biographical sketches of female biblical characters, responds to such comparisons of Jews and Muslims. Here, Judaism resembles Christianity, not Islam. But rather than westernize Judaism, Aguilar’s comparison of Judaism and Christianity actually counters Christian charges that Judaism, an Eastern religion,
Seeking Zion: Grace Aguilar’s Religious Nationalism

dehumanizes women. In the introduction to The Women of Israel, Aguilar refutes “the charge that the law of Moses sunk the Hebrew female to the lowest state of degradation, placed her on a level with slaves or heathens.” According to Aguilar, Jewish scripture self-evidently disproves this charge. However, she confesses, if “there are such laws, they must have been compiled at a time when persecution had so brutalised and lowered the intellect of man, that he partook the savage barbarity of the nations around him.” More specifically, she claims that Eastern Jews were influenced by Islamic customs. The unequal status of women in Judaism, she says, if traced to its source, will be found to have originated in the blinded notions of the Jews of Barbary, and other Eastern countries; infused unconsciously, by the contempt for the sex, peculiar to the Mahomedan inhabitants of those lands.

Aguilar renounces certain practices that, to her, reflect the sexual licentiousness of Muslim men, such as polygamy. Although she notes that Jews and Muslims come from the same Eastern lands, Aguilar blames Islam, not Judaism, for spreading misogyny. Peleg observes that fin de siècle Zionist writings contain many similar inconsistencies:

Like the early Romantics, Zionists looked to the East for a cultural alternative. But like European colonists, they felt the need to distance themselves from the Arabs in order to maintain the integrity of their emerging national culture. . . . The Jews who came to Palestine feared of “going native,” especially since they felt a need to preserve their culture-in-the-making. At the same time, even this typically colonial concern was complicated by the affinity many early Zionist pioneers felt toward the local Arabs, for ethnic and historical reasons.

In general, Aguilar distinguishes Jews from Muslims, rejecting the Orientalist stereotypes associated with Islam and drawing on the attractive tropes of Orientalism when describing Judaism.

Replicating Orientalist beliefs that Islam is primitive and Muslims barbaric, Aguilar represents Judaism as enlightened and Jews as aristocratic. The Women of Israel defends Jewish legalism, which Victorian Christians commonly denigrated as outdated and repressive. Concerning women, the justness of Jewish law could

only be realised by contrasting it with the statutes of the southern and eastern nations, with whose quick passions and excitability, Israel, when the law was given, had more in common than with the cooler and more dispassioned north.
According to Aguilar, Jews and Christians value women, unlike Muslims, who unthinkingly “commit the helpless woman to a watery grave, with no one to interfere in her behalf, or mourn her when at rest.” Despite her nominal defense of Jewish legalism, Aguilar often disregards rabbinical interpretations of Jewish texts. For example, she ignores rabbinical readings of Hagar’s story, which are typically sympathetic, envisioning Hagar as an Egyptian princess whose good deeds merit the promise of innumerable descendants. Contradicting standard rabbinical exegesis, Aguilar rebukes Hagar—whom she describes as an ungrateful servant—for her prideful resentment of her benevolent, aristocratic mistress, Sarah. British writers like Disraeli and Eliot reconciled Jews and Muslims as fellow Orientals in their novels, and many European Zionists developed positive relationships to Muslims, drawing from Arab culture in fashioning Zionist identity. But Aguilar only likened Jews to Muslims when the Orientalist traits she adapted had positive connotations, such as modesty, nobility, and bravery. The conflict between Jews and Muslims in Aguilar’s works arises from her dual, and sometimes competing, aims: she wanted Christians to accept Jews as fellow Britons, but she also wanted to highlight the Jews’ cultural and national distinctiveness.

Auto-Orientalism

Although her argument for Jewish virtue appropriates Christian ideals, Aguilar portrays the Jews as a separate nation, complete with distinctive national histories and characteristics. First, Aguilar imagines Jewish history as linear, beginning with the biblical patriarchs and matriarchs. Cynthia Scheinberg claims that *The Women of Israel* helped Victorian Jewish women to “find personal connection to Jewish history.” Dianne Ashton points out, “[Aguilar’s] insights framed in sacred terms and phrases have identified contemporary Jewish women with ancient founders of Jewish existence.” *The Women of Israel* more closely connects biblical and Victorian Jews than it does British Christians and Jews, pointing to Abraham and Sarah as the ancestors of British Jews. Peters observes that Sephardic Jews “often become incensed when confronted with the argument that Zionism originated in Europe” because they believe that “their ancient uninterrupted Jewish history led directly from the destruction of the Temple at
Seeking Zion: Grace Aguilar’s Religious Nationalism

Jerusalem.”67 In the Sephardic tradition, Aguilar establishes an unbroken lineage from the Jews’ origins in the ancient Middle East to modern England.

Aguilar then assigns a series of character traits, especially modesty, nobility, and bravery, to biblical Jews, post-biblical Jews, and their descendants. In The Women of Israel, Aguilar redefines Judaism in terms of prevailing Victorian domestic values. For example, the queenly Sarah honors “the modest and dignified customs of the East,” which prevent her from intruding on her husband when entertaining guests.68 Imitating the rhetoric of Victorian conduct manuals in her assessment of Sarah’s behavior, Aguilar claims that Jewish women prefer the domestic sphere:

Unless particularly asked for, the place of the Eastern, and Jewish wife, was in the retirement of home; not from any inferiority of rank, or servitude of station, but simply because their inclination so prompted.69

Further, she emphasizes Jewish women’s performance of domestic duties, noting that the daily employments of the young females of the East appear to have been completely domestic; and, in obedience to these daily duties, we find Rebekah, one evening, going as usual to the well with her pitcher on her shoulder to draw water.70

In Aguilar’s reading of Rebekah’s story, the virtuous Rebekah caters to the needs of her household and guests, deeds common to Eastern Jewish women of the biblical era. Harnessing the rhetoric of Victorian domesticity, Aguilar characterizes modern Jewish women as equally virtuous, deeming virtue central to Jewish life and culture.

Aguilar also includes images of Oriental nobility, like those later utilized by Zangwill and Rosenberger, to show the Jews’ connection to Palestine. In The Women of Israel, she argues that God rewarded Abraham and Sarah for their noble natures:

He had changed their names to signify their royal claims—to make them regarded, in future ages, as noble ancestors of a long line of prophets, kings, princes, and nobles: and there was a refinement, a nobleness, a magnanimity of character in both the patriarch and his wife, which, breathing through their very simplicity, betrayed their native aristocracy, and marked them of that princely race which has its origin in the favor and election of the King of kings.71

As the direct descendants of Abraham and Sarah, Victorian Jews boasted “a higher and nobler race than even Gentile kings.”72 Ivan Davidson Kalmar notes that nineteenth-century European
nationalists “often claimed nobility for their own nation,” asserting that Disraeli, himself a Sephardi Jew, “who shared with other Englishmen the conviction that the English were a most noble race, wanted them to believe that the Jews, as Orientals, were a noble race, also.” In “The History of the Jews in England,” Aguilar reiterates that, despite the Jews’ dispersion from Israel, the “Hebrew nation” retained “the religion, manners, and recollections of its ancestry, . . . everywhere possessing the same unconquerable buoyancy of spirit and the same indomitable industry.”

Ostensibly an argument for Jewish emancipation in England, this essay in fact chronicles Jewish life in Britain since their expulsion from Palestine. For Aguilar, Victorian Jews originated with the nobility of ancient Judea.

Both texts also highlight the Jews’ natural heroism, a recurring feature of Zionism. For Herzl,

the sight of the fierce-looking Jewish horsemen [during his visit to Palestine] was an incarnation of his own romantic imagination, in which he envisioned the ridiculed Jewish peddlers of Eastern Europe as proud farmers and fighters in their old-new homeland in Palestine.

Negating the stereotype of the fearful and weak Jew, The Women of Israel also depicts the Jews as a tribe of warriors. Following the Roman invasion of Judea, the Jews fought against their oppressors. Aguilar suspects that the Romans “would have laughed to scorn the very idea, that Judea could lead armies to subject [them].” Despite their defeat by the Romans, the Jews displayed “courage, patriotism, spirit, all that makes the warrior,” and Aguilar defies her skeptical contemporaries to then “accuse us of tacit submission.” Diaspora Jews share their Middle Eastern ancestors’ warrior spirit. In “The History of the Jews in England” the doomed Jews of York show “unshrinking courage, noble self-denial and heroic endurance,” vigorously resisting their persecutors. Rejecting the charge of Jews’ helplessness, Aguilar argues,

The spirit of true heroism peculiar to their race in the olden time might indeed appear crushed and lost beneath the heavy fetters of oppression, but it burned still, ready to burst into life and energy whenever occasion demanded its display (emphasis in original).

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first chief rabbi of Mandatory Palestine, saw the “new Jew” as “the true national Jew, brave, willing to sacrifice himself for the nation.” Zionists like Herzl
and Kook popularized tropes that were already extant in works by writers like Aguilar, who imagined nineteenth-century Jews as the heroic defenders of their nation.

Further, Aguilar’s works anticipate later Zionist leaders’ preoccupation with masculinity. Peleg explains,

Because anti-Semites sexualized Jews and considered Jewish men effeminate, not the least because they were thought of as Oriental, Zionists had to resolve this tension by internalizing and deflecting it or by adopting masculine imagery that would compensate for it.81

For example, in “A Vision of Jerusalem, While Listening to a Beautiful Organ in One of the Gentile Shrines” (1844), a poem that recounts Aguilar’s feelings upon visiting a Christian church, she recalls God’s promise to the Jews: “Then will I all my vows recall, and from them take my hand, / My covenant remember, and have mercy on the land.’ / So spake the Lord in boundless love to Israel his son.”82 Scheinberg presents Aguilar’s use of the phrase “Israel his son” as “a good example of Aguilar’s constant awareness of a doubled audience of Christian and Jewish readers; with this reference, Aguilar uses language that ‘works’ within Christian epistemology.”83 She further postulates,

Her emphasis on Israel as God’s son, as opposed to the repeated images from Jewish texts of Israel as a daughter, suggest Aguilar’s interest in claiming a masculine identity for Israel—perhaps in order to counter the Christian claim of Christ as the true son of God.84

Although Jewish literature usually characterizes Israel or the Jewish people as feminine, in this instance, Aguilar is actually paraphrasing Exodus, where God declares, “Israel is my son, even my first born.”85 Zionists turned to the Hebrew Bible to legitimate their ideas, and Aguilar, too, derived her masculine ideal from biblical and post-biblical texts. Many of Aguilar’s female characters, especially Marie, the heroine of her novel The Vale of Cedars (1835), also exhibit traits that her Victorian readers would have associated with men, such as physical strength and strength of character. Marie, a refined Jewish woman who lived publicly as a Catholic during the Spanish Inquisition, bravely withstood the tortures of the Tribunal, never renouncing Judaism. For Aguilar, Jews have always been, from their Oriental origins, uniquely heroic and aristocratic among Eastern societies.
Aguilar supported Jewish acculturation in England, but she also feared Jewish assimilation and loss of distinction. Many nineteenth-century Zionist writers, including Aguilar, recast Jewish culture as Middle Eastern rather than European or American, anticipating their eventual relocation to Palestine, where they would establish a Jewish state. Mikhal Dekel observes,

More than half a century before the foundation of the State of Israel and prior to the establishment of the Zionist political movement, Zionism emerges as an imaginary concept in literary texts that create, facilitate, and naturalize the transition from Jewish-minority to Jewish-majority culture (emphasis added).⁸⁶

Aguilar thus formulated Jewish nationality based on the notion of Jewish difference and the tropes of Orientalism, much like Herzl would a half century later.

**A Return to the East**

Traditional Judaism has always been certain of the Jews’ eventual restoration to the Land of Israel. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with the advent of Liberal and Reform Judaism and increasing secularization in Europe and America, many Jews began to identify with their diaspora nations rather than with an imaginary homeland in the Middle East. Nadia Valman insists that

[Zionist] enthusiasm was shared in the early 1840s not by the majority of Anglo-Jews, but by the Christian millennialists who tirelessly lobbied the British Foreign Secretary, Lord Palmerston, in the hope of promoting Jewish restoration to the Holy Land and insisted, *against the evidence*, on the Jews’ continued attachment to it (emphasis added).⁸⁷

Indeed, many Jews were not prepared to leave their comfortable homes in Britain for what they imagined were ramshackle settlements in Muslim lands. Jeffrey Kopstein and Jason Wittenberg explain that European Jews who supported Zionism did not necessarily plan to leave their countries. Often, their support “meant favoring a new kind of Jewish politics, one that was proud and assertive...a signal of support for a vigorous and public defense of Jewish national interests.”⁸⁸ Without a designated homeland, Zionists like Ahad Ha’am argued that “the movement’s primary purpose must be the development of a separate Jewish national consciousness and a full-chested defence of Jewish interests and values where Jews actually lived.”⁸⁹ In addition to such political support for Jewish national interests at home, many Zionists...
also supported Jewish national homeland movements in the Middle East. Some nineteenth-century evangelical Christians might have exaggerated the Jews’ plans to relocate to Palestine; still, many British Jews anticipated the fulfillment of God’s promises.

Celia and Marion Moss, Jewish sisters from Portsmouth who wrote and published during the mid-nineteenth century, considered Palestine the Jews’ birthright. Valman agrees that their works reflect the themes of Romantic nationalism, but she does not think that such nationalism constitutes Zionism. However, Valman’s argument that Victorian Jews maintained no connection to the Land of Israel ignores not only the Zionist dimensions of Jewish liturgy but also Zionist themes in Jewish literature. For example, in “Lament for Jerusalem,” from their first publication, Early Efforts: A Volume of Poems (1839), Celia Moss wonders, “How long shall we, thy children, roam / As exiles from our native home?” (Emphasis added). She clarifies the political thrust of the sisters’ literary project, beyond religious sentiment, expectantly asking,

When will that glorious hour come?
When shall we once more see
Thy temple rear its stately dome,
Thy children with the free?
And thou, our fair, ill-fated land
Amongst the nations take thy stand?

Like Grace Aguilar, Celia Moss saw the Jewish people as native to the biblical lands of the East, regardless of their expulsion from those lands by the Romans. And unlike Christian Zionists who viewed Judaism as a precursor to Christianity and saw the Jews as an element of millenarianism, the Mosses assumed the Jews would ultimately gain autonomy in the Land of Israel. Despite their certainty, they understood the geopolitical difficulties of relocating Jews to Ottoman-controlled territory. Interrupting her narration of “The Promise,” from The Romance of Jewish History (1840), a collection of short stories retelling scenes from biblical and post-biblical literature, Marion Moss confesses,

I could weep and turn with the passionate yearning of the expatriated to the far-off home, beyond the blue Mediterranean. Vain yearning! Futile dreams!—the inheritance of Israel is again in the hand of the stranger, and the time has not arrived for the wandering exiles to return.
Notwithstanding Muslim control of Palestine during their lifetimes, the Mosses believed the Jews would inherit Israel as the Bible promised.

In 1839 the revered Anglo-Jewish philanthropist Sir Moses Montefiore and his wife, Lady Judith, traveled to Palestine to purchase land from Ottoman governors, eager to establish several Jewish farming communities for the benefit of poor Jews. Montefiore wrote in his diary, “I hope to induce the return of thousands of our brethren to the land of Israel.” In fact, groups of Sephardic Jews had already settled in the Holy Land by 1839. Still, the Sephardic chief rabbi likened Montefiore’s arrival in Palestine to “the coming of the Messiah.” Montefiore secured funds to sustain Jewish settlements in Palestine decades before Herzl himself had determined to purchase land for agricultural colonies. Abigail Green claims, “[Montefiore’s] support for the struggling Jewish community in Palestine has led many to see him as a founding father of modern Israel.” Although the Montefiores’ colonies did not thrive as the couple had hoped, they were the forerunners to later, more successful, Jewish settlements.

Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews alike articulated Zionist sentiments before Herzl’s lifetime. Peters argues that historians “give sparse credit to the significant role of Sephardic Jews’ devotion over the centuries to the philosophical and spiritual nationalism that undoubtedly prepared a base for modern Zionism,” pointing out that “a Sephardic Jew, Rabbi Yehudah Alkalay (1798–1878), has been called the precursor of modern Zionism.” In 1857, Alkalay published his plans for a “return of the Jews to the Holy Land and renewed glory of Jerusalem.” In fact, Herzl’s grandfather once attended Alkalay’s synagogue in Semlin, Serbia, where he discussed Zionism with Alkalay and obtained a copy of Alkalay’s book. Peters asserts, “Herzl’s own implementation of modern Zionism was undoubtedly influenced by that relationship.” Further, in 1878 orthodox Jews from Russia established Petah Tikvah, Palestine’s first modern Jewish agricultural settlement.

Such colonizing efforts continued throughout the nineteenth century, prompting the Jewish Chronicle to debate Zionism in its pages. According to David Cesarani, the Chronicle’s editors “recognised the lure of Palestine and expressed admiration for the pioneers who set out to
work the land, despite the obstacles in their way."\(^{101}\) Moreover, “the paper thought that Anglo-Jewry had a duty to ensure the success of [pioneers'] efforts and should contribute funds to viable settlement projects.”\(^{102}\) Anne Summers suggests,

While Zionism did not immediately become the mainstream commitment of Anglo-Jewry, the movement rapidly became prominent within communal cultural and political affairs, making constant and energetic efforts to “convert” the Jewish majority.\(^ {103}\)

Eventually, British Jews came to support such Zionist initiatives in Palestine.

Victorian novels like Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* also convey Jews’ desire for self-determination. When looking at Zionism in *Deronda*, some scholars emphasize Daniel’s European sensibilities, pronouncing him a hybrid of East and West. Peleg describes Daniel as a visionary leader who epitomizes in his appearance a mixture of the ancient and the modern: the bearing, ideals, and fervor of a biblical prophet; the looks of an Arab prince; and the psychology of a modern European man, cultured and refined.\(^ {104}\)

For Reina Lewis, Daniel embodies “all that is best about Englishness and Judaism” (emphasis in original).\(^ {105}\) However, Eliot’s Daniel maintains Jewish separateness, leaving England with a mind toward “restoring a political existence to [his] people, making them a nation again, [and] giving them a national center” in the Jews’ ancient land.\(^ {106}\) Gertrude Himmelfarb observes, “Eliot has been credited by historians and eulogized by Jews as the prophetic inspirer of Zionism and the state of Israel” because “Deronda emigrated to Palestine...to fulfill a proud and unique heritage.”\(^ {107}\) In fact, in 1895, when Herzl first met one of the most devoted British Zionists, Colonel Albert Goldsmid, the colonel did not simply tell Herzl that he was an assimilated Jew who had only recently discovered his Jewish heritage. Rather, Goldsmid declared, “I am Deronda.”\(^ {108}\) Indeed, many British Jews identified with *Deronda*’s nationalism.

Zangwill, who was himself a Zionist, ultimately rejected Palestine as the site of a Jewish state despite his earlier ideas about it as a possibility for Jewish settlement. Meri-Jane Rochelson claims,

He believed that a territory dominated by a non-Jewish population would never allow the formation of an autonomous Jewish national home. ... He has been called, in fact, the first Zionist to recognize the difficulties that the Palestinian Arab population would pose, and he could see no way around it but to search for a homeland elsewhere.\(^ {109}\)
In *Children of the Ghetto*, Zangwill represents Zionism as a doomed enterprise. Comically impracticable, the Holy Land League, a fictional Anglo-Jewish Zionist organization, fails to accomplish anything substantial. However, Zangwill respects true believers, especially older men such as Moses Ansell and Mendel Hyams, whose “hearts turned to the East like passion-flowers seeking the sun. Palestine, Jerusalem, Jordan, the Holy Land were magic syllables to them.”¹¹⁰ In fact, the pious Mendel Hyams accomplishes the prophesied return to the Land of Israel. Married to a woman he never met until their wedding day in Poland, Mendel remains silent in life, left alone in his marriage with his last hope—to die in Jerusalem. Revering the romantic image of Zion,

his feeling for Jerusalem was unique. All the hunted Jew in him combined with all the battered man to transfigure Zion with the splendour of sacred dreams, and girdle it with the rainbows that are builded of bitter tears. Every year at the Passover table he gave his hope voice: “Next year—in Jerusalem!”¹¹¹

When Mendel unexpectedly falls in love with his wife before she dies, Palestine becomes the dream of his late-in-life romance. However, Zangwill had become disillusioned with the prospect of Palestine, as is shown in the conclusion to Mendel Hyams’s story.

For the Mosses and the Montefiores, Palestine’s Muslims posed a temporary obstacle to the Jews’ religious resettlement of Israel, but Zangwill, a secularist, harbored no such religious certainty. Indeed, the local Muslims destroyed the dream of Mendel’s life, which, the narrator laments, “had better have remained a dream.”¹¹² Landmarks fail to match the scenes of his imagination, with Jerusalem more resembling the ghetto than the Bible:

The magic of his dream-city was not here. This was something prosaic, almost sordid; it made his heart sink as he thought of the sacred splendours of the Zion he had imaged in his suffering soul. The rainbows builded of his bitter tears did not span the firmament of this dingy Eastern city, set amid sterile hills. Where were the roses and lilies, the cedars and the fountains? Mount Moriah was here indeed, but it bore the Mosque of Omar, and the Temple of Jehovah was but one ruined wall. The Shechinah, the Divine glory, had faded into cold sunshine. “Who shall go up into the mount of Jehovah?” Lo, the Moslem worshipper and the Christian tourist. Barracks and convents stood on Zion’s hill. His brethren, rulers by Divine right of the soil they trod, were lost in the chaos of populations—Syrians, Armenians, Turks, Copts, Abyssinians, Europeans—as their synagogues were lost amid the domes and minarets of the Gentiles. The city was full of venerated relics of the Christ his people had lived—and died—to deny, and over all flew the crescent flag of the Mussulman.¹¹³

Mendel despairs of Muslim rule, but Zangwill ends the old man’s story with a prayer for Zion:
And so every Friday, heedless of scoffing onlookers, Mendel Hyams kissed the stones of the Wailing-Place, bedewing their barrenness with tears, and every year at Passover, until he was gathered to his fathers, he continued to pray, “Next year—in Jerusalem.”

Zangwill never rejected Jewish nationalism, though, and he spent his life trying to secure a homeland for the Jews. His works show that he believed in the dream of Zionism if not the practicability of a Jewish state in the Levant. Aguilar, however, absolutely believed in the fulfillment of God’s promise to the Jews.

**Visions of Jerusalem**

Like the Mosses, Aguilar depicted Jews as part of a self-governing, insular society. In “The History of the Jews in England” she explains that in Britain, “Jews are still considered aliens and foreigners; supposed to be separated by an antiquated creed and peculiar customs from sympathy and fellowship.” According to Aguilar, these beliefs and customs isolated Jews from their Christian neighbors. Regarded as foreign to Christian England, “the peculiar religion of the Hebrews, and their habit of worshipping apart, keeps them strangers in a great degree to the community at large.” British Jews even had their own sociopolitical structure, governing synagogues in the manner of a “Jewish state.” Aguilar did not call for British Jews to relinquish their religious customs so that they would more closely resemble Christians. Rather, she opposed conversion and assimilation, advocating separateness, as part of the Jews budding nationalism.

In two of Aguilar’s stories, *The Vale of Cedars* and *The Perez Family*, Jewish ritual flourishes in secluded, natural spaces. Set during the height of the Spanish Inquisition, *The Vale of Cedars* details the secret religious practices of a Jewish family, some of whom live as Jews deep in a forest, and some of whom live as Catholics at the royal court. The Vale of Cedars shields their practice of Judaism from the watchful eyes of the Inquisition:

The Vale of Cedars, as described in our first chapter, had been originally the work of a single individual, who had found there a refuge and concealment from the secret power of the Inquisition, from whose walls he had almost miraculously escaped: this individual was Julien Henriquez, the grandfather of Marie. For five years he remained concealed, working unaided, but successfully, in forming a comfortable home and concealed retreat, not only for himself but for his family. Nature herself appeared to have marked the spot as an impenetrable retreat, and Julien’s skill and energy increased and strengthened the natural barriers.
Ensconced in the natural world, their little temple was erected by the active aid of the young men, and the solemn rites of their peculiar faith adhered to in security. Small as the family was, deaths, marriages, and births took place, and feelings and sympathies were excited, and struggles secretly endured, making that small spot of earth in very truth a world.\textsuperscript{119}

The Vale of Cedars operates independently of the Christian monarchy, their lives instead governed by Judaism.

\textit{The Perez Family} replicates the world building of \textit{The Vale of Cedars}. Set in Victorian London, members of the Perez family, themselves the descendants of Sephardic Jews like the Henriquez family, create their own refuge from Christian Britons:

[Their] cottage stood apart from the others, with a good piece of ground for a narrow lane, to the banks of the Mersey, and thus permitted a fresher current of air. The garden was carefully and prettily laid out, and planted with the sweetest flowers, and the small parlor and kitchen of the cottage opened into it, and so, greatly to the disappointment and vexation of the gossips of the alley, nothing could be gleaned of the sayings and doings of the inmates.\textsuperscript{120}

Kept apart from their Christian neighbors by their garden, the family assembles for prayers in the privacy of their home. Galchinsky and Page both claim that in these stories Aguilar confines Judaism to the private world of the home as part of a bargain with Christian society. Specifically, Galchinsky argues,

In setting out to convince Christian liberals to quit their tactics of toleration, their pity and projection, Aguilar agreed to a trade-off: Jews would in turn restrict their expressions of differentness to the domestic sphere.\textsuperscript{121}

But rather than conceding to assimilationist demands, Aguilar seeks to preserve Judaism through the creation of self-governing Jewish spaces. These spaces, set among vales and gardens, are suggestive of the Jewish colonies in Ottoman Syria that formed the Yishuv, the first relatively autonomous cities and agricultural settlements that would comprise Mandatory Palestine and eventually the State of Israel.

In these stories Aguilar overturns the image of the Wandering Jew, instead depicting Jews as rooted in the natural world, a strategy of later Zionist agrarian utopias. During the 1830s, when Parliament was debating Jewish emancipation, Britons like William Cobbett, a farmer and champion of rural England, revived the stereotype that “Jews, as international vagabonds, have...
In response, Aguilar claims, “Local and national disadvantages often unite to debar the Jews from agriculture, and therefore it is a branch in which they are seldom, if ever, employed.” She explains,

Their scattered state among the nations, the occupations which misery and persecution compel them to adopt, are alone to blame for those peculiar characteristics which cause them to herd in the most miserable alleys of crowded cities, rather than the pure air and cheaper living of the country.

Refuting charges of vagrancy and destructiveness, Jewish writers “returned to the biblical notion of the Jews as cultivators of fields and vineyards.” Aguilar frequently reproduces ecological motifs from biblical literature. For example, the Vale of Cedars features Levantine plants such as palms and cedars:

A gradual hill, partly covered with rich meadow grass, and partly with corn, diversified with foliage, sloped downwards, leading by an easy descent to a small valley, where orange and lime trees, the pine and chestnut, palm and cedar, grew in beautiful luxuriance. On the left was a small dwelling, almost hidden in trees. Directly beneath . . . a natural fountain threw its sparkling showers on beds of sweet-scented and gayly colored flowers. The hand of man had very evidently aided nature in forming the wild yet chaste beauty of the scene.

Julien Henriquez deliberately re-created Levantine landscapes, scenes of divine revelations. Similarly, the Perez family experiences divinity in nature. Perez and his wife, Rachel, worked in their garden together, teaching their children that “their God was a God of love, alike through his inspired Word, and through his works.” Their children learn about Judaism through their family garden. Aguilar predicts that, after the restoration of the Jews to Israel, “pastors and shepherds will be granted us according to the spirit of the Lord, and they will fill us with knowledge and understanding.” Page argues that Aguilar’s landscapes symbolize her characters’ assimilationist goals. Although Aguilar cultivates Britishness in her works, her agriculturists represent the Jews’ enduring connection to the Land of Israel.

Herzl imagined the Jewish people as a nation of farmers. As the natural cultivators of Israel’s rich land, Jews would, Herzl believed, “grow forth from the earth” themselves. Like Zionist pioneers, the Henriquez and Perez families cultivate land, and thus Aguilar transforms European Jews, formerly peddlers, merchants, and even thieves, into farmers. Feeling stifled by urban London, Perez, his wife, and his children thrive in natural settings. Ultimately, though,
diaspora Jews languish without their land, and Jerusalem, without the Jews, lies fallow. In “A Vision of Jerusalem,” Aguilar characterizes Jerusalem as a barren oak tree, its “leaves and branches shorn.” Those leaves, the Jewish people, wither when disconnected “from parent stems, and scattered wide o’er hill, and vale, and sea.”

Aguilar’s notion of Jewish belonging more closely associated Jews with the Land of Israel than with Britain. As in her other works, “A Vision of Jerusalem” describes Jews as the native children of Israel. In this poem, Aguilar imagines that she transcends her present location, an English church, and finds herself, along with her coreligionists, restored to Palestine. While her other poems embrace various European nations as adoptive mothers to orphaned Jews, “A Vision of Jerusalem” evokes the image not of the adopted motherland but of the natural “fatherland.” In nineteenth-century parlance, the term “fatherland” signified a native place, implying a common national history grounded in a shared belonging to an ancestral homeland. Utilizing light and dark imagery, Aguilar contrasts Jewish diasporic life to life in biblical lands. Envisioning the restoration of the Jews to Israel, Aguilar sees the Jewish people as bound to God “in links so brightly woven, no sin their light could dim,” and they celebrate their return to “[their] own bright land.” Asserting national allegiances to Israel, Aguilar laments the passing of her vision, which leaves her in the darkness of the diaspora:

My country! oh, my country! was my soul enrapt in thee
One passing moment, that mine eyes might all thy glory see?
What magic power upheld me there?—alas, alas! it past,
And darkness o’er my aspiring soul the heavy present cast.

Held captive in a modern-day Babylon, she feels like “an exile . . . from Israel’s native sod / An exile yearning for [her] home” (emphasis in original). A traditionalist, Aguilar professes the orthodox belief that the Jews must fully repent of their sins before God will fulfill his promise of restoration. Fully contrite, Jews will return to their “home” in Palestine, “ne’er, ne’er again to roam!” Portraying Muslims as the conquerors of Jewish land, Aguilar writes, “Jerusalem! my beautiful! my own! I feel thee still, / Though for our sins thy sainted sod the Moslem strangers fill.” Like several other Victorian Jewish writers, Aguilar depicts Muslims as foreign to
Palestine, a group who was able to settle the Land because the majority of the world’s Jews were forcibly dispersed elsewhere.

Aguilar’s belief in biblical prophecy assures her of a Jewish future in Palestine. She opens “A Vision of Jerusalem” with her own prophecy: “I saw thee, oh, my fatherland, my beautiful, my own! / As if thy God had raised thee from the dust where thou art strewn.” In this passage, Aguilar alludes to Ezekiel’s vision of the resurrection of the House of Israel and the restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem. For many religious Zionists, Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones predicted the eventual ingathering of Jews and their return to Israel. In The Women of Israel, Aguilar confirms her faith in Ezekiel’s vision:

In Jerusalem the glorious Temple be upraised from the dust, as the visioned eye of Ezekiel saw and prophesied, in the sublime description contained in the last eight chapters of his book. We cannot doubt that these things will be, when we behold, by our residence in every land, what has been and what is, and remember, that the same word which prophesied the past, whose fulfillment we have seen, hath prophesied the future, whose fulfillment we must equally behold, and believe even while it be deferred.

Aguilar campaigned for Jewish emancipation in Europe because she believed Jews could better benefit their own nation if they achieved equal rights under secular law. She makes it clear in The Women of Israel that British Jews must adjust to life in Britain at their particular historical moment.

Karen A. Weisman claims that, for Aguilar,

The dream of the return to Jerusalem is not yet a plan actually to journey to the Middle East; it is acknowledged consistently and self-consciously as imaginative vision, or at least as millennial prayer.

Aguilar herself responds, “With all due deference to such critiques, we would say, that unless we disbelieve the prophets, our Future Destiny is quite as clearly traced out as [our] own past history.” Moses Maimonides, a medieval rabbi who codified orthodox belief and practice, argued that the coming of the Messiah would be accompanied by Jewish sovereignty over the Land of Israel and the reinstitution of Temple sacrifices and agricultural laws. He warned, “Anyone who does not believe in [the Messiah] or does not await his coming, denies not only the statements of the other prophets, but those of the Torah and Moses, our teacher.” Thus,
whether or not an individual Jew moves to the Land of Israel, it is nevertheless incumbent on the orthodox to believe in an eventual return to Jewish sovereignty over the Land. Like Maimonides, Aguilar knows that to disbelieve in the literal return of Jews to the Land of Israel is to disbelieve the Torah altogether.

Aguilar’s commentary on Ezekiel confidently asserts that the Jewish people will return to their ancient land. Because she is schooled in prophetic literature, Aguilar knows that the ingathering of the exiles is not a passive process. She writes,

A long and careful study of His word, will, however, convince that merely to wait is not enough: our own exertions, our own ceaseless prayers must hasten the day of our restoration or still it will be postponed. We must return to the Lord in our captivity, or how will He hear us?  

She similarly asserts,

This spiritual restoration will not be distinct from a return to Jewish ordinances and Jewish ceremonies, as our opponents believe. I know not how any reasoning and believing mind, be his creed what it may, can peruse the prophet Ezekiel, from the 40th chapter to the end, without being almost startled at its close resemblance to the Hebrew religion ordained by God through His servant Moses.  

Following biblical literature, Aguilar believes that the return to the Land of Israel will be accompanied by another return: a spiritual return from assimilation and irreligiosity to the derech hashem, the path of God.

Conclusion

For centuries, Jews have prayed for the restoration of the Land of Israel. The secular Zionism of the twentieth century may have capitalized on these religious beliefs, but nonetheless secular politics was indebted to centuries of religious conviction. Like Moses and Herzl, Aguilar did not live to see the Jews’ return to the Promised Land, a fact that W. Milbourne Kirkhouse notes in the poem, “To the Memory of Grace Aguilar.” Kirkhouse writes,

For though "destruction's" besom swept
Thy children o'er the earth,
They yet shall worship in the land
Which gave their fathers birth;
And Zion's songs shall yet be deemed
Acceptable to God,
And Zion’s maidens sweetly dance,
On Judah’s hallowed sod.
And, lovely one—like Wilberforce,
Thou scarce did live to see
Thy prayer fulfilled, the factory child
From slavery set free.\textsuperscript{145}

A half century after Aguilar’s death, Herzl would convene the First Zionist Congress in Basel with the aim of establishing a Jewish state in Palestine. Following the first Congress, Herzl wrote in his diary, “At Basel I founded the Jewish State. If I said this out loud today, I would be greeted by universal laughter. In five years perhaps, and certainly in fifty years, everyone will perceive it.” Aguilar, who promoted Jewish nationalism decades before Herzl visited London, would not have met Herzl’s proclamation with laughter. In 1921, Dr. Jacob S. Raisin observed that Aguilar lived “long before Zionism, in its present phase, was even dreamt of.”\textsuperscript{146} However, he declares,

Grace Aguilar’s poetic soul saw visions and painted scenes of the great future when her people will be rehabilitated in the Land of Israel. Seldom has there been uttered such an eloquent and ardent appeal for Jewish renationalization as the one she made to her sisters in Women of Israel, seldom has any one expressed himself so certain of its ultimate success.\textsuperscript{147}

Indeed, Aguilar would have applauded Herzl’s proclamation, thankful that the Jewish national project in which she so fervently believed was coming to fruition at last.
Endnotes


2. Quoted in Hein.


4. Zangwill.


6. Quoted in Hein, 14–16.

7. Quoted in Hein, 14.


23. Quoted in Sachar.


41. Quoted in Peters.


52. Peleg, Orientalism, 7.

53. Peleg.

54. Peleg, 6.


62. Peleg, Orientalism, 8–9

63. Aguilar, Women, 1:236.

64. Aguilar, Women, 1:236.


84. Scheinberg.

85. Exod. 4:22.


91. Moss and Moss, 26.


98. Quoted in Peters, 92.


100. Troy, *Zionist Ideas*, xxxviii.


102. Cesarani, 85–86.


112. Zangwill, 2:73.


114. Zangwill, 2:74


122. Page, 149.


133. Aguilar, “Vision.”


147. Raisin, 797.
Bibliography


———. The Vale of Cedars; or, the Martyr. New York: D. Appleton, 1851.


