

Herman Melville, the Jew and Judaism

LOUISE ABBIE MAYO

Nineteenth-century American literature, derivative from British conventions to a great extent, tended to present Jewish characters in the molds of accepted stereotypes. The Jew was Shylock, the usurious old villain; Rebecca, the beautiful Jewess; or Sheva, the benevolent Jew and institutionalized countermyth to Shylock. Herman Melville is the only major American writer in the nineteenth century to include a serious consideration of Jews and Judaism in one of his works—*Clarel*.

For the most part, Melville's descriptions and discussions are singularly unprejudiced and unsteretyped, although it cannot be said that they reflect any real interest in contemporary Jewish life in America. Melville had a great deal of knowledge about the Old Testament, much of which may have come from the Calvinist orthodoxy of his mother (as his lack of prejudice may have stemmed from his father's Unitarianism). One analyst of his works comments, however, that Melville read a great deal more than the Bible in his study of the Jewish religion.¹ Lewis Mumford stresses, "In the period of his own discomposure, the black aphorisms of Solomon, Koheleth [Ecclesiastes] and Jesus Ben-Sirach [Ecclesiasticus], and the bitter plaints of Job, were closer to him than anything else in literature . . . he had stood on the brink of madness: looking in the Bible for comfort, Melville had found in the greatest Jewish writers only a confirmation of his own fears and exasperations. . . . Such sayings deepened his sympathy with Jewish culture, and in the sense that they carried the same burden as his own, they lessened his load."²

¹ William Braswell, *Melville's Religious Thought* (Durham, 1943), p. 18.

² Lewis Mumford, *Herman Melville* (New York, 1929), p. 320.



Courtesy, Library of Congress

Herman Melville (1819-1891)
Distinguished American writer

No City of God

In 1857, Melville went on a pilgrimage to Palestine, in the words of one of his biographers, out of a "still more special longing for the Biblical, the Hebraic, the Judean Past. . . . Few men's minds have been more richly stored than Melville's with the imagery of Biblical stories, of the Old Testament record especially: it had been woven into the fabric of his imagination from earliest childhood . . . it was a permanent point of reference for his spirit."³ The gloomy desolation of the land profoundly oppressed Melville. "The landscape of Judea must have suggested to the Jewish prophets their ghastly theology," he wrote in his journal of the trip. And again, more ironically and sympathetically: "Is the desolation of the land the result of the fatal embrace of the deity? Hapless are the favorites of heaven."⁴ Nevertheless, in *Clarel*, written years later and published in 1876, Melville used many of the sights he had witnessed and the people he had met during his Levantine adventure.

Clarel, written in verse, is a difficult book about the search for truth. The story concerns Clarel, a young divinity student tormented by doubts. He arrives in Jerusalem as a kind of "pilgrim-infidel." According to Mumford, he has come "thinking to find from an older race, the Jews, with a remoter history, some clue to the unsettled and uneasy state in which he lives, and some path of development which will lead again to wholeness."⁵ While there, he falls in love with Ruth, an American Jewess. (Mumford feels that Clarel was captivated by a Jewish maid just as Melville had been attracted to ancient Jewish thought.) Her father is an early-day Zionist who has settled in Palestine, where he is eventually killed by hostile Arab raiders. During the period of her mourning, Clarel is forbidden to see his love. In a combination of grief and restlessness, he sets out on a pilgrimage through the countryside with a widely assorted group of companions who represent various points of view about life. On his return, he finds that Ruth has died of fever and grief. The fulfillment that Clarel had hoped to

³ Newton Arvin, *Herman Melville* (New York, 1950), p. 212.

⁴ Herman Melville, *Journal of a Visit to Europe and the Levant*, Edited by Howard C. Horsford (Princeton, 1955), p. 140.

⁵ Mumford, p. 310.

find with her he must now find within himself, with only her memory to comfort him. He faces an even more uncertain future alone, after having discovered that Jerusalem is no city of God.

The heroine, Ruth, is the stereotyped beautiful Jewess. Leslie Fiedler feels that this archetype, in general, is part of a "dream of rescuing the desirable elements in the Judaic tradition (maternal tenderness . . . the figure of Mary) from the unsympathetic (paternal rigor and harsh legalism: the figure of the High Priest) . . ."⁶ In fact, of all the beautiful Jewesses in American literature, Ruth, who represents virginal love, is probably the most suggestive of Mary's saintliness. She wears a snowy robe and veils. She is Eden before the Fall, all innocence and hope for release from life's complexities: "She looked a legate to insure that Paradise is possible. . . 'Twas the grace of nature's dawn: an Eve-like face. And Nereid eyes with virgin spell . . . Hebrew the profile every line. . . ."⁷ Ruth provides a good example of Melville's inability to deal with heterosexual love. She is a reflection of Clarel's naïveté. She never materializes as a real person, but remains a dream of the female, a symbol rather than a woman. She is half child. Her mother fondles her while she rests her head on her mother's lap like a child. Such love, however, cannot be, and Ruth, the totally innocent, must die. She does not die because she is Jewish, but because she is not really of this world.

The other Jewish characters in *Clarel*, however, are far less conventional. Nathan, Ruth's father, is an American Zionist. His life is a study of American doubt and struggle to believe. (He is patterned after Warder Cresson whom Melville had met in Jerusalem.) Nathan was born of Puritan parents, but deserted Christian orthodoxy. He had read the deists and fallen into pantheism. Then he met and fell in love with Agar, a Jewess. She asked, "Wilt join my people?" To his parched and unsatisfactory paganism, Agar's faith came like rain in a drought. He converted out of love, reasoning that if man looks behind his present crumbling faith ". . . rear-wall shows far behind Rome and Luther—what? The crag of Sinai" And yet his heart was receptive to her words:

⁶ Leslie Fiedler, *The Jew in the American Novel* (New York, 1959), p. 7.

⁷ Herman Melville, *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land* (New York, 1960), p. 56.

Still as she dwelt on Zion's story
 All things but these seemed transitory—
 Love and his love's Jerusalem.

As the years went by, his doubts returned to plague him. To still them, he turned passionately to Zionism:

Here was an object; up and do!
 With seed and tillage help renew—
 Help reinstate the Holy Land.

Melville perceptively noted that many Jews “loyally maintain the dream” and salute Passover with “*Next Year in Jerusalem*.” Nathan holds on to his dreams fanatically despite attacks by the Arabs, the death of one of his children, and his wife’s pleas to return to America.⁸ One gets the feeling that Melville does not like Nathan, but respects the character’s singleminded devotion to an ideal. The fact that the character is a convert does not bother the author at all.

Agar, Ruth’s mother, left America unwillingly to go with her husband and children to Jerusalem. She is a representative of the good domestic woman, subordinate to her husband’s wishes. Her strong points are sentiment and virtue; she lacks any real powers to reason on her own. She is both an ideal Victorian woman and Jewish mother. To Clarel, who never knew his own mother, she provides a substitute mother figure. The biblical Hagar was a slave, in fact, and the name is understood to mean, “in bondage with her children.” Agar is nearer in spirit to Clarel, the American, than to the religious figures around her. She yearns for freedom. She had been happy at home with her cloth lovingly embroidered in Hebrew, “If I forget Thee, O Jerusalem”—just a nebulous dream for the future. America had been her paradise, but her husband had a need to try “to realize the unreal.” This was not Agar’s logic: “She did but feel, true woman’s way. What solace from the desert win, far from known friends, familiar kin?”⁹ She remains loyal, and when her husband dies, she too dies of grief. She is a unique character in nineteenth-century American fiction (where old men and beautiful daughters had been the norm)—a Jewish mother who

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 57-66.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 87-89, 530.

stands for what Melville considered to be the maternal and wifely virtues.

Melt In Or Be Separate

There are also several minor Jewish characters who add to the richness of the book. Abdon is the host at the inn in Jerusalem. He is a "Black Jew" from Cochin where ". . . his kin, never from true allegiance torn, kept Moses' law." After a successful career as a trader in Amsterdam, he came to Jerusalem to end his life at home and to be buried with his ancestors. He carries all the symbols of the Jewish faith: mezuzah, tallit, scroll. Although he is resigned to disillusionment, Abdon is never given to self-pity or cynicism. He represents experience through age and the virtues of ancient orthodoxy. Clarel notices him among the pilgrims at the Wailing Wall and thinks, "Yon Jew has faith, can faith be vain?"¹⁰ Then his doubts return. Abdon is the only old Jew in the book, and he is most certainly neither a villain nor a comic miser—nor even a benevolent stereotype.

Clarel also encounters a merry young French Jew, a traveling salesman from Lyons. He has come to Bethlehem to have fun with the pretty girls. Sharing a room with Clarel for a night, he jests about the power of beautiful Jewesses. "There is no tress can thrall one like a Jewess's." Hebrew husbands are "wondrous faithful," he feels, because, "as bees are loyal to the rose, so men to beauty." In his light-hearted version of history, all of the great beauties and coquettes are described as Jewish. He stands for extravagance, carefree youth and a light-hearted, strangely innocent sensuality—which in both its homosexual and heterosexual aspects is a temptation to Clarel. Even more interestingly, the Frenchman ignores his Jewish heritage and attempts to hide it, reflecting perhaps Clarel's own need to deny his spiritual inheritance. It is a Russian traveler who later informs Clarel that the bon vivant from Lyons is a Jew. Clarel remarks that he does not look much like a Hebrew. "Enough to badge him," the Russian responds. Clarel, very puzzled, asks, "Very well, but why should he the badge repell?" The Russian explains that society "is not quite catholic, retains some prejudice

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-10, 55.

. . .”—a Jew must “either melt in or be separate.”¹¹ In these few words Melville puts his finger on the Jewish dilemma of isolation or assimilation. Clarel begins to consider the possibility that he has unconsciously stayed away from Ruth because of her Jewishness.

The one unpleasant Jewish character in *Clarel* is the geologist Margoth. More comic than villain, he is a savage dissection of scientific materialism. He is described as short and round-shouldered, as powerful as the hammer which is always in his hand. There are no mysteries to Margoth: science is everything. He is antagonistic to all “theologic myth.” He drinks of the Jordan River and spits it out in disgust. To him the Dead Sea is nothing more than a geological fact. He loves to refute the Bible and suggest the building of railroads in all sorts of sacred sites. He is an enemy to all the values of the other pilgrims, even the rational Rolfe (who represents Melville himself). Margoth represents Melville’s own quarrel with materialism and atheism. He is first seen carrying limestone:

This now is a Jew—
 German I deem—but readvised—
 An Israelite, say Hegelized—
 Convert to science, for but see
 The hammer, yes, geology.

He is portrayed as . . .” the busy Jew with chemic lamp aflame, trying some shrewd experiment.” Considerable point is made of Margoth being a Jew, but Melville specifically states that no criticism of Jews should be implied, “. . . if stigma then survive, elsewhere let such in satire thrive—Not here.” Here, he says, the opposite point is to be made. “In picturing Margoth, fallen son of Judah. Him may Gabriel mend.”¹² In fact, the criticism of Margoth is not that he is a Jew, but that he is an apostate, a cynic, an unbeliever.

Melville is particularly effective in describing Jewish customs, rituals, and quality of life. These are not presented as exotic or romantic. Thus, the unextinguished lamp burns, for it may not be quenched on Saturday, “the unaltered Sabbath of the Jew.”¹³

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 497-98, 505.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 203, 205, 267.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

Agar's family had maintained its Judaism and clung to Moses' lore though far from the Holy Land. Their Jewish heritage was precious to them:

'Twas Eld's romance, a treasured store
Like plate inherited. In fine
It graced in seemly way benign
That family feeling of the Jew,
Which hallowed by each priestly rite,
Makes home a temple—sheds delight
Naomi ere her trial knew.¹⁴

What a contrast this presents to the usual picture in American literature of this period of miserly money-lenders living in secret Oriental splendor!

The world has changed. One of the pilgrims remarks that Jews have taken part in science and enlightenment in countries like Holland, "that historic home of erudite Israel." Despite all changes, Rolfe (Melville) believes:

Nor less the Jew keep fealty
To ancient rites. Aaron's gemmed vest
Will long outlive Genevan cloth—
Nothing in time's old camphor chest
So little subject to the moth.¹⁵

Melville shows an awareness of historic movements within Judaism such as the reforms of Hillel and the Essenes and the bold ideas of Moses Mendelssohn. He is particularly sensitive to early Zionist feelings, even though he appears convinced that the Zionists he met were "preposterous; half melancholy, half farcical."¹⁶ In his journal he comments, "In the emptiness of the lifeless antiquity of Jerusalem, the emigrant Jews are like flies that have taken up their abode in a skull." He dismisses dreams of setting up a nation of Jewish farmers in Palestine. "In the first place, Judea is a desert. . . . In the second . . . the Jews hate farming . . . Besides the numbers of Jews in Palestine is comparatively small. And how are the hosts of them scattered in other lands to be brought here? Only by a

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 543.

miracle."¹⁷ Clarel, however, cannot help but respond to the sight of pilgrims by the Wailing Wall, shut out from the gate by the Turks. With sighs and groans, they cry, "To be restored! We wait, long wait." They live in Palestine in dismal poverty. Groups hang out in the streets with nothing to do at home. How can they live and get enough bread to survive? In surprisingly modern solutions: "In almost every country known, rich Israelites these kinsmen own: the hat goes round the world."¹⁸

The only condemnation of Jews occurs when Ruth's father dies. Clarel, rushing to her side, is informed. "That never Jewish modes relent; sealed long would be the tenement to all but Hebrews. . . ." No one can verify the existence of any such custom. It would seem to be an invention to further the melodramatic aspects of the story. When Ruth dies, Clarel blames "Your tribe—'twas ye denied me access to this virgin's side." Nevertheless, in his bitterness, he rejects not Judaism, but all belief: "And here's the furl of Nathan's faith: then perish faith—'tis perjured."¹⁹ This reflects the fact that Melville himself found it impossible to accept the solutions of either Judaism or historic Christianity.

In many ways *Clarel* is remarkable for a time when Jewish characters were presented as pleasant or unpleasant stereotypes and when Judaism was viewed as an exotic Oriental faith. Here, Judaism, Jewish customs and characters are intertwined with Clarel's search for faith, although they are not central to the book. *Clarel* exhibits an understanding and tolerance which go beyond any other American book of this period, a reflection perhaps of a great and wide-ranging mind.

¹⁷ Melville, *Journal*, pp. 154, 160-61.

¹⁸ Melville, *Clarel*, pp. 54, 110.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 134, 513.