

A black and white portrait of Herman Melville, a man with a full, dark beard and mustache, wearing a dark suit jacket and a bow tie. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera.

Holy Land Travel and the American Covenant

19th Century Palestine in the Settler-Colonial Imagination

Hilton Obenzinger

"But Palestine," the eponymous American divinity student in Herman Melville's *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage to the Holy Land* asks, "do you not / Concede some strangeness to her lot?" (4.26.140-42).¹

Indeed, the Holy Land is strange - in the 19th century sense of uncanny, of being filled with transcendent meanings - for most American travellers. These meanings, in characteristic fashion, would cross back and forth between the discourses of covenantal religion and of a developing national consciousness based on expanding settlement.

When Pliny Fisk and Levi Parsons, the first American Protestant missionaries, left Boston to "occupy" Jerusalem in 1819, actual travel to Palestine (rather than through the Bible or

Portrait of Herman Melville. Source: Library of Congress.

through English and other travel writers) became a part of the American imagination. Fisk and Parsons' reports in the *Missionary Herald* inaugurated a set of conventions concerning physical contact with Ottoman Palestine that extended throughout the century and beyond. Developed by secular as well as religious travellers, such as Thomas De Witt Talmage, James Barclay, William Lynch, Bayard Taylor, William Prime, and Stephen Olin, these conventions overlapped with those of travel to other locales - such as Orientalist tendencies of travellers to the East - but with significant differences.

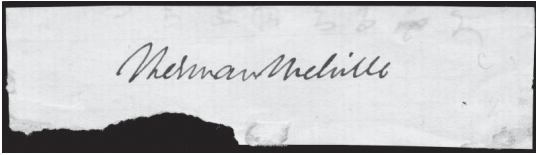
In Palestine, there was a consistent habit of attempting to find evidences of prophetic fulfilment and anticipation in the landscape, of reading sacred landscape. As William M. Thomson in *The Land and the Book* puts the hermeneutical character of the Holy Land, Palestine's

*testimony is essential to the chain of evidences, her aid invaluable in exposition... In a word, Palestine is one vast table whereupon God's messages to men have been drawn, and graven deep in living characters by the Great Publisher of glad tidings, to be seen and read of all to the end of time. The Land and the Book - with reverence be it said - constitute the ENTIRE and ALL-PERFECT TEXT, and should be studied together.*²

These conventions of reading - and ultimately of writing - sacred landscape in Palestine were placed in relationship to the long-standing typological practices established by both Puritan and Anglican settlers of seeking divine meanings in the landscape and history of the New World, the practice as described by Cotton Mather as "Christianography": old Israel would be paralleled and fulfilled by the

new Israel.³ The link of America and Palestine through the doctrine of Jewish restoration was, as one scholar put it, "endemic to American culture" from the first settlers, particularly the Puritans.⁴ Levi Parsons raised funds for the missionary journey to Jerusalem in 1819 from Christianised Indians who, having identified with the notion that American Indians were the lost tribes of Israel, gave money and a message for Parsons to transmit to "the Jews, their forefathers in Jerusalem."⁵ For many 19th century travellers, the "study" Thomson affirms would link the land/text of Palestine to the land/text of North America as the site of the New Israel settled by the true Jews, Protestant Christians. The link would lead to attempting to "facilitate prophecy" in Palestine through concrete actions, in addition to the actual act of travel itself. As a consequence, one of the first official acts of the Latter-Day Saints, perhaps the most characteristically settler-oriented religious movements in the United States, was to send Elder Orson Hyde in 1841 to Jerusalem to hold a ceremony announcing the imminent restoration of the Jews to the old Holy Land and the Latter-Day Saints to the new one. On the day he was assassinated, Abraham Lincoln took a carriage ride with his wife to discuss, now that the Civil War had drawn to a close, whether to travel to California or to Jerusalem - to the latest incarnation of the New World Holy Land or to the original.⁶

The fascination of millennialist "restoration" of the Jews would be a regular feature of reading the divine landscape, a fascination and anxiety that paralleled the anxiety of the "restoration" of the New Jews in North America: if the old Jews could be "restored" to their nation, then certainly the new ones could be restored as well. Questions of religion and nation became intertwined. As Rev. Stephen Olin writes in 1844, "Pilgrimage is little less than to be naturalized in the Holy



Land. Only then does the Bible become *real*.⁷ The Bible becomes real, and Americans are "naturalized" into their identities as a result, a term resonant with the "naturalization" of immigrants, particularly if Palestine is, as Episcopal bishop Henry White Warren says in 1874, "the first country where I have felt at home" because of its sacred geography.⁸

There are other conventions, and I will mention them briefly before returning to the key role of Jewish restoration. Disappointment was a regular feature, one causing, as Mark Twain comically creates, "a system of reduction" of distances and auras.⁹ The Church of the Holy Sepulchre was one such overwhelming disappointment. The fact that the Christian shrines were in the hands of Eastern and Catholic churches alienated the travellers, forcing them to privilege the landscape over the edifices (and consequently the popularity of "tenting" in the Holy Land, since the "landscape" had not yet been claimed). Heightened and conflicted religious sensibility, particularly in reaction to the "pious frauds" of Orthodox and Catholic shrines, geographic "reduction" (as Mark Twain put it) in relation to American vastness, feminisation of the landscape, overwhelming, often disorienting disappointment - all would be linked to religious awe and a sense of theatricality, of seeing Biblical scenes or even acting in them. The disappointment with the Holy Land could prompt its displacement as the Holy Land in favor of the New World or could prompt a parallel critical, "disappointment" with America itself. In some instances, such as the Adams Jaffa colony, the dissolution of

which Twain witnessed, it could also prompt Americans to "prepare the ground" for millennialist restoration through colonial projects.

Of all the travellers, Herman Melville was the most sensitive and most critical of the hermeneutical quality of the landscape and of the central role millennialist doctrines, particularly Jewish restoration, play in producing American identities. Melville is particularly obsessed with the play between philo- and anti-Judaic strains in Christianity and western culture. In the poem - based on his travel to Palestine in 1857 - the pivotal, if not central character, is Nathan, an American convert to Judaism who attempts to establish what could be seen as a proto-Zionist settlement. He is "a strange pervert" (1.16.198) - remember the nuances of "strange" - when first seen by Carel, the divinity student, at the Wailing Wall, and Melville writes an extended biographical account of Nathan's transformation from Protestant, through the varieties of sects and deism in successive waves of colonial settlement to the West, finally to Judaism, by way of falling in love with a Jewish-American woman, upon which he decides to convert. "Nay, and turn Hebrew? But why not? / If backward still the inquirer goes / To get behind man's present lot / Of crumbling faith; for rear-ward shows / Far behind Rome and Luther - what? / The crag of Sinai. Here then plant / Thyself secure: 'tis adamant" (1.17.212-18).

Nathan becomes not only a Jew but an ardent Zionist, bringing his family to Jerusalem. Melville makes the connection with the American colonial experience: "the Puritan -- / Mixed latent in his blood - a strain / How evident, of Hebrew source; / 'Twas that, diverted here in force, / Which biased - hardly might do less" (1.17.227-31). The return of the Jews to the Holy Land was a

major part of millennialist thinking, as expressed by another character, Nehemiah, a Biblical literalist who comes to Jerusalem in anticipation of the return of both the Jews and Jesus: "Zion restore, convert the Jew, / Reseat him here, the waste bedew; / Then Christ returneth: so it ran" (1.8.27-29). And for Nathan, "The Hebrew seers announce in time / The return of Judah to her prime; / Some Christians deemed it then at hand" (1.17.259-61). And the return becomes a cause for Nathan: "Here was an object: Up and do! / With seed and tillage help renew - / Help reinstate the Holy Land" (1.17.262-64).

And so Nathan sets up his farming settlement: "Himself and honest servants three / Armed husbandmen became, as erst / His sires in Pequod wilds immersed" (1.17.303-05). The Arabs, called "Hittites - foes pestilent to God" (1.17.306), attack the settlement, and they are explicitly compared to Indians (Indians are, in this typological association, no longer Lost Tribes but evil Hittites or Amalkites). Nathan dies, spurring Clarel, who has fallen in love with Nathan's daughter but who is excluded from the mourning period, to go on to a pilgrimage-within-the-pilgrimage to the Dead Sea and back.

Melville was quite aware of the millennialist fascination with Jewish restoration, and in his journal of his 1857 visit, he notes meeting various American Protestant visionaries who have settled in Palestine. Melville was keenly aware of what he called "this preposterous Jew mania," the absurdity of expecting the Jews to return. He thought it was impractical, a "Quixotism," that would occur "only by a miracle."¹⁰ Yet it was no accident that he was attracted to this absurd, quixotic doctrine - a kind of spiritual Ahab quest that, because it was "half melancholy, half farcical - like all the rest of the world,"¹¹ appealed to him.

One of those who Melville met in Jerusalem was Warder Cresson, a key inspiration for the character of Nathan. Cresson was a product of Protestant volatility, moving from sect to sect, increasingly becoming an advocate of Jewish restoration. He arranged to become the first American consul to Jerusalem, and when he arrived he converted to Judaism, convinced that, rather than just receiving blessings as a Gentile who "prepared the ground" for the Jewish actor, it would be far better to become the prophetic agent himself. When he returned to Philadelphia in 1851, his family put him in an insane asylum, and Cresson sued for his release, prompting a crucial lunacy trial - was a Christian insane if he converted to Judaism? Or, for that matter, if a Protestant converted to Mormonism? Cresson eventually won his release, and the case advanced religious freedom in the US.¹² Cresson returned to Jerusalem and set up an agricultural settlement. I believe it is no accident that the first proto-Zionist settlement was actually founded by an American, and Melville through Nathan, draws the parallel too: Nathan is that "strange pervert," the Puritan Zionist instead of the colonizing Hebraic or Zionist Puritan.

But for Melville, the America-Palestine / Jew-American links are not necessarily happy ones. In his notebook, Melville writes three observations that serve almost as a set of logical propositions:

*No country will more quickly
dissipate romantic expectation than
Palestine - particularly Jerusalem.
To some the disappointment is heart
sickening, etc.*

*Is the desolation of the land the
result of the fatal embrace of the
Deity? Hapless are the favorites of
heaven.*

*In the emptiness of the lifeless
antiquity of Jerusalem the emigrant
Jews are like flies that have taken
up their abode in a skull.¹³*

If America is also a "favorite of heaven," then it too may suffer "the fatal embrace of the Deity," as do the old Jews, and Melville uses Palestine as the landscape to examine the fallen or cursed state of the New World.

In the final part of the poem-pilgrimage, Clarel encounters another character, Ungar, a Confederate veteran, part-Indian, who did not support slavery but fought for the South nonetheless, and who, embittered, becomes an exile, a mercenary for the Sultan - "A countryman - but how estranged!" (4.1.102). Like Nathan, Ungar was also based on real experience in the Middle East, the scores of Union and Confederate officers that served as mercenaries for the Khedive of Egypt, not out of bitterness but from a desire for opportunity.

For Ungar, like Nathan, different strains intersect, as his forebear "wedded with a wigwam maid," eventually producing in Ungar "An Anglo brain, but Indian heart" (4.5.134-40). Ungar rejects modernism and "the Dark Ages of Democracy" as "New confirmation of the fall / Of Adam" (4.21.139,124-25). The masses are "Myriads playing pygmy parts - Debased into equality: / In glut of all material arts / A civic barbarism may be: / Man disennobled - brutalized / By popular science - Atheized / Into a smatterer..." (4.21.127-33). And his conclusion, so radically going against the current of American optimism: "To Terminus build fanes! / Columbus ended earth's romance: / No New World to mankind remains!" (4.21.155-59).

I compare these two characters, Nathan and Ungar, because of the way Palestine

becomes the ground upon which the myth of America is constructed or challenged. Jewish restoration - and Christian Zionism and even Herzlian Zionism - identifies obsessions with both landscapes, both destinies, in a kind of tandem relationship. If the old Holy Land can be restored, then the new Holy Land and its new Israelites can also be "restored". And, conversely, if the Jews and the old Holy Land are cursed, Americans and the New Israel can also receive divine condemnation.

After 1882 and the beginning of Zionist settlement, this dynamic becomes even more complex - and I would like to conclude with the example of Israel Zangwill, Anglo-Jewish fictionist, playwright, and political activist of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In his play *The Melting Pot*, he coined the term of American assimilation, although his vision of radical amalgamation was far more subversive than that of Teddy Roosevelt, who gave the play a standing ovation when it was performed in 1908. The play revolves around the love affair between a Jewish musician who survived a pogrom in Kishinev and the Russian daughter of the Czarist General who led the pogrom after they meet in the Lower East Side - only in America. At the end, filled with doubt and hope, David, the musician, voices the vision of America to Vera, the General's daughter, as they watch a sunset from the roof of a tenement:

DAVID

*It is the fires of God round His
Crucible. There she lies, the great
Melting Pot - listen! Can't you hear
the roaring and the bubbling? There
gapes her mouth - the harbour
where a thousand mammoth feeders
come from the ends of the world to
pour in their human freight. Ah,
what a stirring and a seething! Celt
and Latin, Slav and Teuton, Greek
and Syrian, - black and yellow -*

VERA
Jew and Gentile -

DAVID
*Yes, East and West, and North and South, the palm and the pine, the pole and the equator, the crescent and the cross - how the great Alchemist melts and fuses them with his purging flame! Here shall they all unite to build the Republic of Man and the Kingdom of God. Ah, Vera, what is the glory of Rome and Jerusalem where all nations and races come to worship and look back, compared with the glory of America, where all races and nations come to labour and look forward!*¹⁴

Melodrama was Zangwill's specialty. You may also wonder - not only is he a British subject defining the mix of American society, he is not even a Protestant. Yet, the British Jew was a thorough modernist (Nietzsche is on David's bookshelf) and Zangwill counted Jesus as a prophet.

And what does he have to do with Palestine? At the same time that he was a radical amalgamationist, he was a Zionist. Initially, he was a territorialist. This meant he advocated multiple sites for colonization - Mesopotamia, Angola, Argentina, etc. - and he was not exclusively fixated on Palestine: "To colonize another territory in no way interferes with the march towards Zion."¹⁵ For example, he was a supporter of the British offer of Uganda as a site for a Jewish homeland as a stepping-stone to Jerusalem. He was, during the time when *The Melting Pot* was appearing on stages, an organizer of the Galveston Plan of bringing Russian Jews to settle in Texas and the Southwest. When he travelled to Palestine, and in 1897, as part of the Macabean Pilgrimage, he noted the

presence of the Arab population, and identified this as a problem: "There is, however, a difficulty from which the Zionist dares not avert his eyes, though he rarely likes to face it. Palestine proper has already its inhabitants ... so we must be prepared either to drive out by the sword the tribes in possession as our forefathers did, or to grapple with the problem of a large alien population ..."¹⁶ During WWI, until his death in 1926, he increasingly became an advocate of Palestine, eventually becoming a supporter of Jabotinsky, the extremist who believed that the Arabs would never accept a Jewish colony in Palestine and therefore needed to be forcibly "transferred" to neighboring countries.

Melting Pot and colonial exclusion or ethnic cleansing - how could two such apparently incongruous visions, universalist and particularist, co-exist in one mind? I believe, as in the example of Mormon Elder Orson Hyde's ceremony commemorating the "restoration" of both Holy Lands, Zangwill illustrates the complex link between the two over-determined sites. Zangwill believed that amalgamation was possible in America but that "backward" Russian Jews would need their own state in their historic homeland, Palestine. He was not the only one to link visions of America with those of Palestine. Emma Lazarus believed "huddled masses" would come to America to be absorbed according to liberal integration at the same that the Jews would need a homeland in Palestine. Horace Kallen would object to Zangwill's Melting Pot in favour of "cultural pluralism," while advocating Jewish settlement in Palestine. The proto-fundamentalist William Blackwell would circulate the first petition advocating Palestine for the Jews in 1891, couching his pre-millennialist dispensationalist theology in secular, humanitarian terms,

while advocating religious freedom in America and world peace.

An important project would be to examine the links between how Zangwill and others developed apparently contradictory visions of America linked to Palestine. My rough thesis at this point is that assimilationism and Zionism may seem contradictory but at root they have deep connections. They both flow from utopian visions arising from settler-colonial "modernist" utopian societies. Certainly, for Zangwill and for others of his time, colonialism was seen as a progressive movement, a civilizing mission, and Cecil Rhodes was a great humanitarian. The United States was at a later stage of colonial development than early Jewish settlement in Palestine (which could be considered to be at the initial, Puritan stage), and that may account for the differences in ideology. The Melting Pot solves a problem that exists only after the native population is eliminated or marginalized, just as the Melting Pot of Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Mizrahi, and Ethiopian Jews is a problem to be addressed by the Jewish state today, a pot that does not intend to "melt" Arab Muslims, Christians, and Druze into a single Israeli identity.

From the 19th century to today, every visit, every American discourse of Palestine, raises questions of the nature of the New Israel, as well as the fate of Palestine. The contemporary Israeli-Palestinian conflict is unquestionably an important geopolitical concern of America's imperial agenda, separate from its ideological genealogy. But the America-Palestine dynamic also resonates throughout the American imaginary in ways that raise questions of colonial settlement, identity, and providential destiny crucial for both countries.

A poet, novelist, and critic, Hilton Obenzinger is a recipient of the American Book Award, among other honours. He is the author of American Palestine:

Melville, Twain and the Holy Land Mania (Princeton, 1999), and he teaches writing and American literature at Stanford University. This essay is adapted from a panel presentation given at the American Studies Association conference in Houston, Texas, in November, 2002.

Endnotes

¹ Herman Melville, *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Alma A. MacDougall, Hershell Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle, with Walter Bezanson (1876; reprint, Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1991). Parenthetical references to this edition will be in roman numerals according to part, canto, and line.

² William M. Thomson, *The Land and the Book: or, Biblical Illustrations Drawn from the Manners and Customs, the Scenes and Scenery of the Holy Land*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Bros., 1859), 2:xv. This becomes a shared trope throughout American Holy Land travel literature. "God is careful to attest his word," according to Bishop Henry White Warren. "He hath left all Palestine as one great comment on the Bible." *Sights and Insights; or, Knowledge by Travel* (New York: Nelson and Phillips, 1874), 250.

³ Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana; or, The Ecclesiastical History of the New-England* (1702; reprint, New York: Russell and Russell, 1967), 42.

⁴ Carl Frederick Ehle, Jr., "Prolegomena to Christian Zionism in America: The Views of Increase Mather and William E. Blackstone Concerning the Doctrine of the Restoration of Israel" (PhD. diss., New York University, New York, 1977), 331.

⁵ Levi Parsons, in Daniel O. Morton, *Memoir of Rev. Levi Parsons, Late Missionary to Palestine* (1824; facsimile, New York: Arno Press, 1977), 217-18.

⁶ Justin G. Turner and Linda Levitt Turner, *Mary Todd Lincoln: Her Life and Letters* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 218, 400; Dorothy Meserve Kunhardt and Philip B. Kunhardt, Jr., *Twenty Days* (Secaucus, NJ: Castle Books, 1965), 29; see Lester I. Vogel, *To See a Promised Land: Americans and the Holy Land in the Nineteenth Century* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 41.

⁷ Rev. Stephen Olin, quoted in Moshe Davis, "The Holy Land Idea in American Spiritual History," in *With Eyes toward Zion: Scholars Colloquium on America-Holy Land Studies*, ed. Moshe Davis (New York: Arno Press, 1977), 13.

⁸ Warren, *Sights and Insights*, 246.

⁹ Mark Twain (Samuel L. Clemens), *The Innocents*

Abroad, or The New Pilgrim's Progress (Hartford, CT: American Publishing Co., 1869), 486, 479.

¹⁰ Herman Melville, *Journals*, ed. Howard C. Horsford with Lynn Horth (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1989), 94.

¹¹ Herman Melville, *Journals*, 94.

¹² See Warder Cresson, *The Key of David* (1852; facsimile, New York: Arno Press, 1977).

¹³ Herman Melville, *Journals*, 91.

¹⁴ Israel Zangwill, *The Melting Pot* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1909), 184-5.

¹⁵ Israel Zangwill, "Jewish Colonial Trust," in *Speeches, Articles and Letters of Israel Zangwill*, ed. Maurice Simon (London: The Soncino Press, 1937), 277.

¹⁶ Israel Zangwill, "The East Africa Offer," in *Speeches*, 210.

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