

39. Harby, "Discourse," 71, 74, 77.
40. Cohen, *Jews*, 35.
41. Cf. discussion of Hymn 49 in the *Norton Anthology of Jewish American Literature*, ed. Jules Chametzky et. al. (New York: Norton, 2001), where Kathryn Hellerstein notes that "my hands I lift" substitutes for the Christian "knees I bend" (72). Hellerstein further notes paraphrases in the Hymn of the Declaration of Independence viz. "Light, being, liberty and joy," and that "Moise democratizes the divine covenant" in invoking the Jews as "the first elected nation" (73).
42. Harby, "Discourse," 66, 79–80.
43. Harby, "Discourse," 78. Cf. The leader of the Beth Elohim congregation in Charleston in 1806 described America as a "second Jerusalem" and a "promised land, praying for God to collect together thy long scattered people of Israel" in America. Sarna, *American Judaism*, 52.
44. Prayer book, p. 26. Naomi Cohen remarks that the Reform movement invoked a 'contract' between America and its Jews based on liberty and equality and harmony, which Jews fulfilled by effacing their Jewishness with an American identity, giving up ideas of return to Palestine, giving up sectarian schools for public ones with Jews aligning more with freethinkers (*Jews*, 70).
45. Stollman's discussion of "To Persecuted Foreigners" sees it as confronting "American anti-Jewish and anti-immigration sentiment . . . dismayed that a democratic and ideologically tolerant nation . . . could harbor xenophobic feelings" (78). But this poem seems to me be clearly directed against Europe in favor of America.
46. Cf. Wolosky, *Poetry and Public Discourse* and *Feminist Theory Across Disciplines*.
47. Notably absent from Moise is any real engagement with issues surrounding slavery, either politically or religiously. In general, Jews kept their distance from abolition, which was suspect in its association with missionary activism (Cohen, *Jews*, 39; Sarna, *American Judaism*, 110–15).
48. Zola, *Harby*, 128–29.
49. Liberal theology but also Second Great Awakening evangelicism granted far greater power to human agency than had the more orthodox Calvinist Eternal Decrees. Sarna points out that the Awakenings' Arminianism was more comfortable for Jews than Calvinist predestination (75).
50. *The Sabbath Service*, 6. As Zola notes, the Articles of Faith omits resurrection of the dead, p. 137.
51. Dorrien, *Making of American Liberal Theology*, 48–50.

## "THE SEVENTH ANGEL WOKE ME": ADAH ISAACS MENKEN AND THE RETURN OF ISRAELITE PROPHECY

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the development of a "prophetic" poetic mode in the writings of self-proclaimed Jewish poet Adah Isaacs Menken (1835–1868). Although Menken laid claim to a Jewish identity, it now appears all but certain that she was neither born Jewish nor underwent any sort of formal conversion. Nevertheless, her self-positioning is highly instructive, since it reveals how the symbolic meanings associated with Jewishness in nineteenth-century America could be pressed into the service of an experimental and culturally subversive literary project. I argue that Menken's "prophetic" or "Israelite" texts of the 1860s drew upon and mediated between two broader cultural trends: the resurgent apocalyptic strain in antebellum American Protestantism and the post-denominational naturalism and experimental poetics of Walt Whitman. Her idiosyncratic engagements with these trends enabled her to break free of the codes of literary sentimentalism that shaped her early poems and delimited her cultural role as a woman in American culture.

Rise up, O Israel! for it is I who passed through the fiery furnace seven times.

—from Adah Isaacs Menken, "Hear O Israel!"

man from Spain; in another, her mother was a French Creole and her father a "free man of color"; in others, it was her father who was Creole while her mother was a Jew from Ireland. Many versions of her life story were undoubtedly her own creations, while others (including the notion that she may have had African ancestry) seem to have been generated after her death. More often than not, she herself affirmed her Jewish birth, as in a public letter published in the London newspaper *The Illustrated News*, where she wrote, "I was born in [the Jewish] faith, and have adhered to it through all my erratic career."<sup>5</sup> This has never been confirmed, however, and multiple sources lead one to doubt its veracity.

According to the scholar Renee Sentilles, whose *Performing Menken* (2003) offers as accurate a reconstruction of Menken's life as we are likely to get, census records and city documents reveal that Menken was a "white protestant from Memphis who moved to New Orleans when she was fifteen" (24). It seems that Menken began to claim a Jewish identity in 1856, when she was around twenty-one and married to Alexander Isaac Menken, the son of a prominent Cincinnati Jewish family (after their divorce she borrowed his middle name, adding an *s*). The couple moved from New Orleans to Cincinnati, where she evidently presented herself to her husband's family and to the Cincinnati Jewish community as a Jew—and she seems to have been accepted as one. Between 1857 and 1859, she became a protégé of Isaac Mayer Wise, the leader of American Reform Judaism and a charismatic public figure in his own right. Wise welcomed her into his community, introduced her to Jewish liturgy, inspired her to study Hebrew, and accepted her poems for publication in his newspaper, *The Israelite*. Under Wise's tutelage, Menken took on the public identity of a Jewish poet and public advocate. She composed poems on biblical figures, the Cincinnati community (including Wise himself), and Jewish holidays, along with a handful of essays decrying anti-Semitism and celebrating the role of Jews throughout history.<sup>6</sup> On at least one occasion, at a synagogue in Louisville, she delivered a lecture on the history of Judaism.

During the late 1850s and early 1860s, Menken apparently expressed a strong desire to convert to Judaism, but for reasons that are not entirely clear, Wise refused to authorize her conversion. He may have come to doubt her sincerity or even to fear that her daring public persona might ultimately cast aspersions on the faith.<sup>7</sup> Whatever the reasons, it is evident that in spite of Menken's subsequent claims to the contrary, she was and remained a non-Jew according to any traditional definition of Jewish identity.<sup>8</sup> In early 1860, she divorced Alexander Menken, moved away from Cincinnati, and married three non-Jewish men in short succession. She also had her child baptized, and never again joined any organized Jewish community. Nevertheless, throughout this period, she continued to lay claim to Jewishness. She continued to write poems and essays meditating on the meaning of Judaism, she refused to perform on the High Holidays, she insisted on having a rabbi visit her during her last hours

in Paris (where she is buried in the Jewish section of Pere Lachaise), and, when it came to collecting her poems for a book-length volume, she included works labeling herself as a "prophet to Israel."

One way to approach Menken's claims of Jewishness is to read it under the sign of self-conscious performativity, to include it among a repertoire of identities she donned to achieve a range of effects, some practical, others more diffuse. First, while she was still married to Alexander, there were potential financial rewards to be reaped from her husband's wealthy family, who were upstanding members of Wise's Cincinnati Reform community and who would have been more favorably disposed toward a couple they considered fully Jewish. Second, since Wise's community was still in formation and in need of energetic collaborators, Menken may have seen the Cincinnati Jewish community and *The Israelite* in particular as a launching pad for her literary career—which in fact it became. Third, and more generally, the figure of the Jewess was viewed in distinctly romantic hues in nineteenth-century European and American culture, and Menken could not have failed to recognize that her public persona might benefit from a dose of the exotic. Menken's work on the stage was straddled by the extraordinary stage careers of Elizabeth-Rachel Felix (aka Rachel; 1821–1858) and Sarah Bernhardt (1844–1923), both of whom were Jews whose mystique in the popular eye was strengthened by pervasive fantasies about the passion and spirituality of the figure of the Jewess. In the English-speaking world, the figure of the Jewess had a similar kind of resonance. As Nadia Valman has written, while the male Jew was often represented in nineteenth-century English public discourse as "archaic, legalistic, materialistic, intolerant, superstitious, and primitive," the figure of the Jewess was often imagined as "spiritual, cultural, patriotic, emotional, and modern."<sup>9</sup> From this perspective, Menken's Jewishness may be seen as a kind of mirage she conjured before audiences. Insofar as she laid claim to a Jewishness connected with these positive associations, Menken may be seen as a female version of the confidence man, a common nineteenth-century American type who skillfully manipulated the truth for the sake of profit.

But there are reasons to consider what might be called the *subjective* side of Menken's self-proclaimed Jewishness as well—how it affected not only her audiences but her own sense of purpose and role in the world. It is not unimaginable after all that she came to disregard the necessity of official recognition as a Jew precisely because she came to feel that an inner embrace of Jewishness was sufficient. She may have arrived at a kind of homespun Jewishness based on inner conviction alone, a kind of marginal identity bound up with the notion of a divinely inspired mission to renovate society. To be sure, Menken must be differentiated from somebody like Sydney Luska, the other prominent non-Jewish "Jewish" American writer of the nineteenth century. Luska was the pseudonym of Henry Harland (1861–1905), the creator of a moderately successful string of novels about Jewish life in the 1880s. As Josh Lambert has written, the pseudonym was

"basically a marketing tactic"; Harland wrote in a letter that if he put "a Jewish name on the title page the sale of the book would be vastly increased. I believe lots of Jews would buy it for that reason, if for no other."<sup>10</sup> By contrast, Menken's sense of herself as a Jew went deeper. It seems to have provided a model of selfhood and, ultimately, a form of poetic agency that helped her overcome problems endemic to the role of the female poet in nineteenth-century America. To understand this process it is necessary to divide Menken's poetic career into two stages, a "sentimental" phase followed by a "prophetic" phase, and to explore the broader cultural contexts in which they emerged.

### REFORM THEOLOGY, SENTIMENTAL POETICS

Menken's first attempts to construct herself as a Jewish poet came under the auspices of Isaac Mayer Wise's program for reshaping American Judaism. Historians have typically portrayed Wise as a pragmatic Americanizer intent on transforming American Jews from a dispersed group into an organized, respectable community. "He had no intention of creating a separate movement or denomination within Judaism," Jonathan Sarna has written. "His goal was to shape what he called *American Judaism*, a legitimate heir to the Judaism practiced by different waves of Jewish immigrants" (emphasis in original).<sup>11</sup> Wise embraced the fundamental outlines of German Reform, which he transposed into an American key. The theological underpinnings of Wise's American Judaism were hardly distinguishable from Enlightenment Deism, with its emphasis on a wholly transcendent God, associated with reason and natural law. A speech Wise delivered in 1869 before the Free Religious Association in Boston reveals the spiritual vocabulary that Menken absorbed from him. Here Wise distinguishes between the vagaries of rabbinic thought and the essence of Jewish theology, which is based on "the sublime Jehovah conception" that resists all human attempts at concrete formulation: "Jehovah is an absolute and infinite being, and the cause of all finite beings and their modifications. . . . Please, ye doctors of all ages and zones confess your inability [to press the infinite Deity into narrow human understandings]; you cannot add one iota to the word of the Decalogue, 'I Jehovah am thy God.'"<sup>12</sup> Wise's God is an Aristotelian Prime Mover who required moral seriousness above all—a view that made Judaism attractive to somebody like Menken, who was oriented toward ultimate questions but evidently impatient with Christian dogma.

By the time Menken met him, Wise was well embarked on his program of reorganizing the American Jewish community under the banner of a modernized, universalist Judaism fully consonant with American civic values. Convinced that modernizing Judaism meant stripping it of all traces of parochialism, Wise broadcast the notion that Jews constituted a "religious community" rather than a nation. He endorsed the position, codified by the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885,

that Jews no longer hoped to return to their historic homeland but sought to "extend the hand of fellowship to all who cooperate with us in the establishment of the reign of truth and righteousness among men."<sup>13</sup> Like his German Jewish contemporaries, Wise displayed a particularly zealous patriotism toward his adopted home, an attitude summed up in his comment that "next to the Passover feast, the fourth of July is the greatest because it is a memorial of the triumph of liberty . . . the fourth of July tells us the glorious story of the second redemption of mankind from the hands of their oppressors."<sup>14</sup>

Wise recognized that in order to survive, American Judaism required a robust print culture, and in 1854 he founded the weekly English-language newspaper *The Israelite* to provide a "sharper weapon" for Judaism, a "fearless organ" that would foster "progress, enlightenment, spiritual striving."<sup>15</sup> Alongside programmatic writings designed to reach these goals, he published serialized historical novels on Jewish subjects (several of which he himself wrote) and poetical works that offered some sort of uplifting, "religious" (in a very general sense) message. This grab bag of poems included hymns by the Jewish poet Penina Moise (1797–1880); a few stanzas of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," published under the title "Prayer"; excerpts from Shakespeare appearing as epigrams for installments of Wise's historical fiction; and, representing the established American tradition, works such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Footsteps of Angels" and Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Good Bye."<sup>16</sup> In an ecumenical spirit, he also printed works such as a poem called "Jacob at Bethel," written by the United Presbyterian J. M. M'Kee, and a poem called "The Word of God," ascribed simply to the Reverend Hugh Stowell. Such selections reflect a spiritualization or (as Lucy Dawidowicz among others has argued) the Protestantization of American Judaism and the American Jewish self-image.<sup>17</sup> If a selection of poems on generally inspiring themes could adequately reflect the "message" of Judaism, the implication was that Judaism spoke for the same essentially inward faith as nineteenth-century Protestantism. Still it must be emphasized that Wise's own goal was not to dissolve Judaism but to revitalize it under the sign of American progress. Wise's institution-building and publishing work was animated by infectious energy and deep faith in America as a place where the authentic Jewish spirit could express itself unfettered and free.

Menken gained from Wise a language for describing the transcendent, all the more acceptable because of its abstractness. During her Cincinnati period (1857–1859), she adopted a poetic stance that enabled her admittance into this spiritualized American Judaism. Published in venues such as Wise's *The Israelite* and *The Jewish Messenger* (based in New York), her poems employ motifs common in the work of contemporaneous Protestant women poets (e.g., an emphasis on compassion, self-sacrifice, faith, charity, etc. . . .) while framing these motifs as part of a "Jewish" literary project. An example is "Moses" (1857), which draws a portrait of the Israelite leader as a moral figure—rather than a prophet chosen to deliver the Law. The poem begins

with the disquieting enigma of an Israelite nation bereft of a leader: when Moses died, "none could his place of burial tell."<sup>18</sup> The poem then moves backward in time to reflect on Moses's inner state as he ascended Mt. Nebo to gaze at the Promised Land. Moses is the "faithful servant" of a God who figures in the poem as "He on whom his love relied." This phrase redirects the prevailing association of Christ with love. Here it is the human Moses, not the divine Christ, who exemplifies the capacity to love: Moses's faith is perfect because it is secured by love of God. The poem concludes by celebrating Moses's humility before the divine will, his ability to rejoice in the knowledge that others will enter the land, though he himself cannot: "Though Death the Jordan he must tread, / He was content to know and die" (130). Moses's selfless devotion to others becomes a model for subsequent generations who must relinquish the assurance of a leader and forge ahead with their own inner moral compass as a guide.

A similar work of moral exhortation is "Rosh Hashanah," which once again borrows the language of agape, this time to gloss the traditional sense of the Jewish New Year as a time for self-reckoning. Affectionately inscribed to the "Dear Ones at Home," the poem urges Jews to delve into the "secret self" to calculate any moral failings from the previous year. Menken warns her readers that, although the future may appear "radiant with the smiles of hope," these smiles "will phantoms prove" unless the lesson is drawn that "man lives not for self / And self alone" (142). Self-regard must be overcome through an act of turning outward, an opening of the self to "that holy love for all the good / And beautiful of life" (142). The poem ends by promising that all who live according to this maxim will be cleansed by

The purity of feeling that, amid  
The cold and selfish world, remains untouched  
And unpolluted—that assimilates  
Degenerate man to those bright angels  
Who sing praises round the throne of Him,  
The Most High, the *Great Jehovah!* (142)

The point of the holiday of Rosh Hashanah, in Menken's rendering, is to move from selfish desires to an inner world of feeling, where human beings become angelic. The final lines borrow the image of the prophet Isaiah gaining access to the sacred throne, where the seraphim sing praises before God (Isaiah 6). But here the image of the prophetic call has become metaphorical: it is "purity of feeling," not the divine call, that leads to the presence of God.

Menken's poem, particularly the idea of "purity of feeling" as a bulwark against the "cold and selfish world," closely follows the rhetorical conventions of nineteenth-century sentimentalism. This was a ubiquitous expressive mode in Victorian American culture, emphasizing interiority, the values of domesticity, and "soft" emotions. Interestingly, Menken's "Rosh Hashanah" resonates

strongly with the work of a quintessentially sentimental, evangelical Protestant poet such as Lydia Sigourney (1791–1865). Like Menken's poem, Sigourney's "Consecration of a Church" (1841) also moves from a recognition of moral frailty ("all have strayed / Like erring Sheep") to the image of an ascent to heaven, accomplished through acts of penitence. Like Menken's final image from Isaiah, Sigourney ends by envisioning "the redeemed souls" that go "up on wings of glory to the house / Not made with hands."<sup>19</sup> In both cases, religious rituals are parsed and, as it were, simulated by the words of the poem, which offers itself as a gateway to moral regeneration. The poetess thus emerges as a center of religious authority and moral exhortation, reinforced by sincerity of conviction and elegance of speech.

According to Ann Douglas, sentimentalism may be understood in part as a strategy whereby disempowered members of the culture such as disestablished clergymen and women registered a mild dissent against materialistic values linked to an expanding capitalism in an effort to assert some measure of cultural authority for themselves.<sup>20</sup> From this perspective, the sentimental poet carves out a discrete sphere where her own word has authority, while surrendering any hope that the values she speaks for will truly reverse the material thrust of society. From this perspective Menken's sentimental poems can be seen as her bid to participate within the highly scripted bounds of Wise's bourgeois Jewish community in Cincinnati. To be sure, a slight "Jewish" difference may be discerned in Menken's sentimentalism when her works are read alongside those of her Protestant contemporaries. For one thing her image of heaven demands to be read in largely metaphoric terms, while Sigourney's heaven demands more literalism. For Menken, the afterlife functions less as a palpable, hoped-for destination than as a metaphor for human action in the here and now (i.e., when "degenerate men" transform they become *like* the "bright angels"). Moreover, and most obviously, Menken does without an embodied Savior: as in "Moses," here too it is "the great Jehovah" who makes an entrance, though this is a substantially inactive version of God, an emblem of power to be praised and honored—not relied upon to offer a gift of grace. Still, such differences hardly represent a wholesale renovation of sentimental poetics: Menken's Cincinnati poems reveal above all a poet bound by the conventions of mid-nineteenth-century women's religious poetry.

#### THE PROPHETIC TURN

By 1860 Menken had divorced her Jewish husband, abandoned Cincinnati, and installed herself amid New York City's burgeoning bohemian cultural scene. This was a tumultuous period in the national culture at large, when the desperate attempts at compromise that had animated political debates a decade earlier gave way to armed sectional conflict. In religious terms, these first months of

the Civil War were also a period when certain apocalyptic strains in American Protestantism were reaching a feverish pitch. After a partial eclipse during the early 1800s, the eschatological element in American Protestantism had come to life again in the abolitionist crusade against slavery and countdown to war (pro-Confederacy advocates in the South wielded a similar discourse with opposite ends in view).<sup>21</sup> In Menken's personal life, this was a moment of intense upheaval as well, which included the death of her infant son and a widely publicized scandal involving the world-famous prizefighter John Heenan, to whom she was briefly married. In this context, Menken developed a new poetic style that eschews the formal balance and moral equanimity of her earlier sentimental work. Written almost exclusively in free verse verging on prose, these poems strike a high emotional register, focusing on an agonized and isolated first-person speaker in the thrall of barely containable emotions, passions, dejections, and desires.<sup>22</sup> Several poems address an elusive lover; many are marked by mournful forebodings; others articulate pent-up longings and dreams of renewal or escape. Many works also point ahead to some kind of dramatic redemptive event in the future, a time when, as Menken writes in "Myself," "night will roll back from the still, gray plain of heaven" (69). When describing her creative process in these new works, she claimed that she had been overcome by a kind of divine influx. These poems were not so much the product of conscious labor as that of visionary experience: "the soul that prompted every word and line is somewhere within me, but not to be called at my bidding—only to wait the inspiration of God"<sup>23</sup>

When Menken eventually collected her poems for a single volume (which appeared a few weeks after her death in 1868), she omitted all of the poems written in Cincinnati between 1857 and 1859, including only poems in this new style. The volume as a whole as well as the poems that bookend it are all given Latin titles—"Infelicia" (Unfortunate), "Resurgam" (I will rise again) and "Infelix" (Unhappy). This neoclassicism transforms the speaker into a timeless, symbolic figure, as if the poems were sketches for a tragic character she might play on the stage. Seen against the background of Menken's Jewish poems from the 1850s, these titles would seem like a deliberate attempt to move from anything approaching a parochial "Jewish" sphere toward a universal mode of address.

But if the sentimental piety and narrow communal focus of her earlier work disappears, a new kind of "Jewish" persona begins to emerge in Menken's poetry: that of a "prophet of Israel," summoned by a divine call to defend her people and to proclaim their imminent regeneration. It would have made more sense, perhaps, for Menken to have left behind any sense of herself as Jew when she left Cincinnati and the publicly recognized roles she played there as a member of the organized community and contributor to Wise's newspaper. Her ongoing embrace of a Jewish identity suggests that it came to play an integral role in her emerging self-conception as a "visionary" poet. As these works suggest, her new self-styled Jewishness enabled her to position herself

as a spokesperson for biblical traditions without requiring her to submit to essentially Protestant models of feminine identity. In this move she drew upon Wise's teachings about the priority of Israel in salvation history, while incorporating a vivid apocalypticism that took her beyond the bourgeois Judaism that Wise endorsed.

Menken's "prophetic" poems reflect a broader tendency among her fellow women poets to discover and assert their voices while engaging directly with biblical material. As Shira Wolosky has shown, biblical revision is itself "a distinctive subgenre" in nineteenth-century American women's poetry.<sup>24</sup> In particular, as we will see, Menken uses a common strategy of focusing attention on "neglected or suppressed texts, especially those involving female figures generally passed over in the official church culture."<sup>25</sup> By positioning her project as that of a "Jewish" rather than Protestant poet, Menken reinforces the oppositional force of her work: this is not a subtle rereading of biblical traditions from within the dominant cultural framework; it is a thorough relocation of authority to the margins of Christian society.

Another key context for Menken's development as a poet in the early 1860s was her association with the literary culture surrounding Pfaff's beer cellar in Greenwich Village, where Walt Whitman was a central personality. Menken was powerfully inspired by Whitman, whom she knew personally and who embodied a model for the "enthusiastic" poet encountering the world through direct experience and recording them in lines constrained only by the length of the breath. Menken proclaimed her affiliation with Whitman's cultural project in a review essay for the *New York Sunday Mercury* upon the publication of the third edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1860. In this essay, entitled "Swimming Against the Current," Menken envisions a cultural landscape divided between those brave souls willing to defy convention on the one hand and the mass of humanity who acquiesce in "the current of popular sentiments, fashions, weak, driveling notions, idiotic principles" (177). Among those whom Menken singles out for their "individuality of intellect, and an affinity with God" are the abolitionists Wendell Phillips, Elijah Lovejoy, and William Lloyd Garrison; the Transcendentalist orator Theodore Parker; and the writers Edgar Allan Poe and Whitman. According to Menken, these latter figures are distinguished by the same passion that animates the biblical prophets: "they hear the divine voice of inspiration . . . and they could not help responding 'Here I am—send me!'" (177). The association between abolitionism and biblical prophecy here is not surprising. As James Darsey argues in *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* (1997), Phillips and other abolitionists commonly adopted a rhetorical stance that positioned slaveholders and the complacent nation at large as indulgent sinners.<sup>26</sup> To bring Whitman into this company is more surprising. While his cadences clearly evoke biblical precedents, his insistently forward-looking project ("I chant the new") typically relegated the scripture itself to an outmoded way of organizing experience.

Menken's reading of Whitman thus proposes a biblical and, more specifically, a Judaic deep structure to the most radical trends in American culture. At the conclusion of "Swimming Against the Current," Menken emphasizes that the sensibility that emanates from Whitman's verse is precisely that of the Israelite nation: "If there is any truth in the above," she writes, alluding to her preceding points about the moral courage of these men, "it is also morally certain that thus Israel will rise to perpetual glory! So the house of Jacob will be rescued from the grave, and a proud monument assigned us in the history of the world" (179). These rousing words hark back to Wise's linkage between Israel and the moral law, but they move far beyond Wise's actual politics (Wise endorsed an essentially conciliatory, middle-of-the-road politics, and he was notoriously silent on the question of slavery). What Menken accomplishes in this essay, which proved to be an important early notice about *Leaves of Grass*, is thus to define a cultural space where political dissent (especially abolitionism), literary innovation, and fidelity to the underlying message of the Israelite prophecy all come together.

#### A POETICS OF BIBLICAL PASTICHE

Menken embraces her own "prophetic" vocation most clearly in "Hear, O Israel," a poem she wrote at the very same time she was responding in print to Whitman. This poem responds to the *Shema*, the traditional watchword of Jewish faith, by offering a narrative of self-discovery. The poem begins by recalling a moment of crisis when the poet found herself divided from her people in an "ungodly" nation: "Midst the terrible conflict of Love and Peace, I departed from thee, my people, and spread my tent of many colors in the land of Egypt" (92). This image transforms the sign of Jacob's special love for Joseph into an image for the poet's unrealized potential: she has misused her blessing, and as long as remains enslaved on foreign soil (i.e., Egypt), she cannot fulfill her lofty vocation. Like the Egypt of the Puritan preachers who typically glossed Egypt as a type of bondage to sin (e.g., Thomas Hooker referred to the unregenerate state as "a more than Egyptian bondage"), Menken's Egypt is an allegory for moral and psychological confusion. Her sojourn there is described as a time of slumber "midst the vapor of sin" (92). Nevertheless, her longing for her people proves strong enough to liberate her, and the poem proclaims her return, along the lines of a prodigal daughter retracing the steps of the Exodus, to Israel's "goodly tents" (92).

The poem's language incorporates a pastiche of biblical references. In its density of biblical quotation and paraphrase Menken's work represents what is arguably a new mode of poetry in nineteenth-century America, a collage-like form drawing on biblical texts to create a discourse of personal transformation:

Like as the harts for the water-brooks, in thirst, do pant and bray, so pants and cries my longing soul for the house of Jacob.

....

My soul was cast out upon the waters of Sin: but it has come back to me.  
My transgressions have vanished like a cloud.  
The curse of Balaam hath turned to a blessing.

....

Rise up, O Israel! for it is I who passed through the fiery furnace seven times, and come forth unscathed to redeem thee from slavery, O my nation!  
And lead thee back to God. (92-93)

Nearly every line here takes a citation from the King James Bible and directs it toward the poem's narrative of personal liberation. Two stages are outlined in these lines—one that stresses *conversion*, a movement from a state of sin to one of purity ("My transgressions have vanished like a cloud"), another that stresses *constancy*, an unswerving devotion to a divinely appointed mission. The first movement is embodied by the figure of Balaam, the non-Israelite prophet who comes to bless Israel after being sent by the Moabite king to curse them (Num. 22-24). Read biographically, this may be a tacit reminder of Menken's own non-Jewish origins. More generally, it underscores the sheer power of the transformative principle working in the world, a principle strong enough to reverse a misguided life. The scene of Balaam's "conversion" moves to Daniel's trials in the fiery furnace in Babylon (Dan. 3), which also resonates with a well-known midrash about Abraham's youthful defiance of idolatry. In this context, the poet's "Israelite" identity is now fastened to the image of the persecuted outsider, the true believer whose loyalty is constantly tested. Having moved into the House of Jacob, the poet insists that she will never deviate from her new path.

The trope of purification recalls the tradition of Puritan spiritual autobiography, with its emphasis on personal salvation. But the figure of a movement toward God is displaced by that of a regenerated collectivity.<sup>27</sup> Thus, when Menken incorporates the opening verse of Psalm 42 ("As the hart panteth after the water brook, so panteth my soul after thee, O God"), she swerves from the Psalmist's text and declares her longing for "the house of Jacob." The substitution is significant, since it reinforces the poem's theme of joining a new collectivity, a nation chosen by God and immersed in struggle against the powers of opulence and arbitrary might. There is something secular or this-worldly about the poem's conversion narrative: what is at stake is not so much a journey to God but the poet's affiliation with a new collectivity. An analogous revision of the biblical text comes later when the poet summons upon her fellow Israelites to free themselves from a condition of enslavement. She calls upon them, "Come forth with signs and wonders, and thy strong hands, and stretched-out arms, even as thou didst from Egypt!" (94). Once again Menken borrows biblical images used to describe God's acts (i.e., "signs and wonders" and the "mighty hand and out-stretched arm"), and uses them to describe human

agents. The hands and arms here are those of her fellow Israelites, enjoined to enact the same kind of liberation that the poet herself has achieved.

The climax of "Hear, O Israel" outlines an eschatological vision in which God's original promise to Israel will finally be fulfilled:

We, the Children of Israel, will not creep to the kennel graves ye are scooping out with iron hands, like scourged hounds!

Israell! rouse ye from the slumber of ages, and though Hell welters at your feet, carve a road through these tyrants!

The promised dawn-light is here; and God – O God of our nation is calling! (94)

Menken's eschatological language reflects, as we have seen, a broader rhetorical stance adopted by poets, preachers, and political activists in the years leading up to the Civil War. In works such as Theodore Parker's "Sons of Men" (1854), James Russel Lowell's "The Present Crisis" (1845) and, most palpably, Julia Ward Howe's "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" (1861), the present moment is met with the language of biblical eschatology, most commonly a mixture between the Hebrew prophets and the Book of Revelation. Menken reflects this trend, but her denial of Christological language creates a very different sense of the movement of history. Howe's "Battle Hymn," for example, moves from a scene of the poet reading "a fiery gospel" to the moment of Christ's return: "He is coming like the glory of the morning on the wave, / He is Wisdom to the mighty, He is Succour to the brave, / the world shall be His footstool, and the soul of Time His slave."<sup>28</sup> This focus on Christ as triumphant King creates a framework for visualizing (and poetically depicting) an endpoint of history. Menken shares Howe's urgency and moral stridency, but her implicit historical narrative is more open-ended, dependent not so much on Christological intervention as human initiative. Her model of engagement is inspired and even typologically foretold by biblical precedents, but the particular details surrounding the drama of salvation remain vague. What she focuses on chiefly is a reanimated collectivity heeding "the call" and moving toward the "promised dawn-light."

When Menken consults the Bible for images to describe this process, she reads the New Testament as well as the Old. On more than one occasion, the figure of Jesus or images associated with him are used to parse the heroic journey at the center of her work. Thus, in another poem, "Where the Flocks Shall Be Led," when the poet imagines her darkest moment in the throes of despair, she calls out to the reader: "But, oh! see this iron crown hath crushed the purple blood from my temples until the roses are drowned from it" (96). The image of the poet merges here with that of the hounded Jesus, an emblem here for the embattled victim of an immoral society. Once again, however, Menken avoids the strict model of Christological salvation, turning

toward images that resonate more strongly with Whitman's master trope of the "open road." The journey motif emerges in this poem, for instance, through a series of questions (e.g., "Where shall I lead the flocks to-day? / Is there no Horeb for me beyond this desert?") that give way to a resolution to save herself through movement: "And yet I will escape. . . . Above the tumult I hear the voice of Aaron. . . . When the sun rises the chains shall be unsealed" (97). The trope of the Exodus authorizes a movement to freedom, which once again is identified not with the afterlife or final judgment but the imminent future on earth.

Menken's technique of biblical pastiche performs especially complex work in "Judith," a work that many have considered her most powerful and idiosyncratic effort. Originally published September 2, 1860, under the title "The End," the poem is a dramatic monologue spoken by the heroine of the deuterocanonical Book of Judith. In the original account, Judith dramatically saves her people by moving into the Assyrian enemy camp, seducing the general Holofernes, and cutting off his head after a banquet in his tent. Judith displays the severed head of the dreaded general to the Israelite soldiers, who gain renewed confidence and strength to persevere. The text may have been kept out of the Hebrew Bible because of its late composition or possibly its blatant errors of fact (e.g., Nebuchadnezzar is described as the King of Assyria), but some have also maintained that the powerfully seductive and violent woman at the story's center may have disturbed the early Rabbis.<sup>29</sup> The early church saw great value in the text once its heroine had been safely consigned to allegory (Jerome read Judith as an example of the holy widow and a type for the church).<sup>30</sup> Menken's poem dramatizes the moment just before Judith beheads the Assyrian general. It is a poem of yearning and anticipation, envisioning a righteous murder figured also as a sadistic crime of passion ("What wild passionate kisses will I draw up from that bleeding mouth!" [52]).

In a revision of the account in the Apocrypha, Menken adds a scene in which an angel wakes Judith, gives her a sword of flame, and points to a "blood-ribbed cloud, that lifts his reeking head above the mountain" (50). The original Judith is spurred by faith in the God of Israel, not direct commission. Here, then, Menken's addition to the original text constructs Judith in a way that recalls Menken's description of the divine origin of her own "wild soul poems":

I have slept in darkness—

But the seventh angel woke me, and giving me a sword of flame, points to the blood-ribbed cloud, that lifts his reeking head above the mountain. Thus am I the prophet.

I see the dawn that heralds to my waiting soul the advent of power.

Power that will unseal the thunders!

Power that will give voice to graves! (50)

he figure of the "seventh angel" comes from one of the climactic moments of the book of Revelation: "Then the seventh angel sounded: And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, 'The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ'" (Rev. 11:15). Menken evokes the same text that Julia Ward Howe does in the central images of her "Battle Hymn of the Republic," which likewise builds on Revelation 11. But once again Menken obscures the eschatological ethos of the Christian salvation narrative. She underscores Judith's anticipation of worldly delight ("I will revel in my delight"): the angel heralds an influx of power into the soul of Judith. The image of the "sword of flame" in this same line evokes the swords wielded by the cherubim guarding the way back to Eden (Gen. 3:24), but the biblical text is inverted: the sword points onward to an uncharted future (it is *she* who wields the "sword of flame," and who knows for what ultimate purpose?). Yet another allusion from a later section of the poem makes explicit Menken's defiance of Christianity. As Judith anticipates her assault on Holofernes, she exclaims: "I am no Magdalene waiting to kiss the hem of your garment. . . . See ye not what is written on my forehead? / I am Judith!" (52). Menken rejects the archetypal penitent Christian woman, celebrating an earthy, unrepentant Israelite figure who has been excised from the canonical traditions of Jews and Protestants alike.

A glance at a rather different depiction of Judith in nineteenth-century women's poetry clarifies Menken's subversive work. In her collection *The Leper and Other Poems* (1853), the Philadelphia-born poet Rebekah Hyneman (1812–75) published twelve sketches of women of the scriptures, including one about Judith. Born to a Jewish father and a Christian mother, Hyneman claimed a Jewish identity for herself, marrying a Jewish man and observing Halachah throughout her life (far more closely than Menken). In her portrait of Judith, she affirms prevailing standards of feminine virtue while adhering closely to nineteenth-century rhetorical conventions. We first view Judith as a "fair, lovely flower"; when she contemplates her mission, her "lovely form . . . trembles like a timid dove"; and before she enters Holofernes's tent, we read that "the Hebrew matron takes her way / Among her native hills to pray."<sup>31</sup> The scene of the murder itself is omitted, and the poem culminates with an epigrammatic statement about self-sacrifice as so necessary a virtue that it can bring a woman to kill: "Oh! not by woman's gentle hand / Should blood be shed or victory won / Yet, for her God, her love, her land, / What hath not woman done?" (52). By asserting Judith's gentleness even at the end, Hyneman squeezes the Israelite heroine into the prescribed roles of nineteenth-century women. The effect of Menken's version of Judith, by contrast, is to celebrate passion, martial assertiveness, female sexuality, and defiant force. In her version of Judith, she lays out an alternate vision of female agency that could hardly be more different from the sentimentalism of Hyneman's work and indeed of her own earlier Cincinnati poems. Thus Menken's poetic development, realized in her prophetic poems of the 1860s, shows how a culturally subversive cultural project could be pieced together using Jewishness as a key ingredient. This is, to say the least, a version of Jewishness hitherto unseen in American Jewish literature. In place of a sentimental model

unrepentant, and earthy—a form of subjectivity oriented toward liberation and satisfaction in the here-and-now rather than salvation in the hereafter.

## CONCLUSION

Based on a survey of Hebrew and Yiddish texts, Dan Miron draws attention to the ways that modern Jewish literature has adopted and renovated tropes from biblical prophetic discourse.<sup>32</sup> Poets such as Chaim Nachman Bialik and Uri Zvi Greenberg turn to prophetic discourse to respond to the vicissitudes of Jewish nationalism, particularly moments when the Zionist project has suffered a slackening of resolve. For the English-language Jewish poet in America, the situation is different. Given the density of the Christian context, including the background of the Puritan Jeremiad and the pervasive biblio-centrism of American society, the Jewish American prophetic is a much more intercultural proposition. It engages not only with biblical precedents and with changing fortunes of the Jewish nation in the present but also (and perhaps most importantly) with surrounding Christian discourses. Insofar as it draws on the King James Bible, for example, its very language for biblical quotation comes from an avowedly "Christian" source.

It makes sense, therefore, that those Jewish American writers that engage most intensely with biblical prophetic tradition often appear to be hybrid creatures of a particularly conspicuous sort. Emma Lazarus proclaims a new rising of the Jewish nation using a language shot through with Christian tropes; Henry Roth represents his young immigrant protagonist David Shearl as a New World Isaiah who undergoes a kind of sacrificial death and rebirth at the novel's climax; Allen Ginsberg draws heavily in "Howl" on a prophetic discourse that is wide-ranging enough to lead him to name his poem as an "eli eli lamma lamma sabacthani saxophone cry," an image that links Jesus's words on the cross with jazz, all the while conjuring the atmosphere of a Buddhist chant. In this essay, I have described Adah Isaacs Menken's prophetic project as a similarly multivalent performance at the intersection of biblical, Christian, and "Israelite" discourses. What distinguishes this project—and what makes Menken a serviceable figure in the development of a Jewish literary discourse in America—is her insistence on the distinctiveness of a "Jewish" sensibility or mission in the context of Christian society. Though she herself can hardly be considered Jewish by any institutional definition, her work itself organizes prevalent cultural codes in the service of a "Jewish" literary project. Among her premises is that "Jewish" signifies a collective undertaking dependent on "national" regeneration, that the details of the drama of salvation must remain ambiguous until they are upon us, and that the Hebrew prophets presage not the coming of Christ but the appearance, throughout history, of a series of spokespeople endowed with a mandate to advocate spiritual, moral, and psychic renewal—an Exodus-like liberation from the constricting forces of evil. Menken numbered herself among these prophets, and in so doing



1. John Cofran. "The Identity of Adah Isaacs Menken: A Theatrical Mystery Solved," *Theater Survey* 31 (1990): 47–54. The most comprehensive and reliable source of biographical information about Menken is Renee M. Sentilles, *Performing Menken: Adah Isaacs Menken and the Birth of American Celebrity*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003). See also Gregory Eiselein's introduction to Adah Isaacs Menken, *Infelicia and Other Writings*, ed. Gregory Eiselein (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2002); Jacob R. Marcus, *American Jewish Women, 1654–1980* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1981), 33.
2. See *Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. Paula Hyman and Deborah Dash Moore, vol. 2, *M–Z* (New York: Routledge, 1997); and *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology*, ed. John Felstiner et al. (New York: Norton, 2000). In the biographical sketch of Menken in the second of these, we read, "Whether, as some believe Menken was raised as a Catholic and converted to Judaism . . . the adult Menken was Jewish with a passion" (87).
3. On the emergence of a "prophetic mode" with Romanticism, see Ian Balfour, *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).
4. For a reading of Menken through contemporary theories of performativity, see Noreen Barnes-McLain, "Bohemian of Horseback: Adah Isaacs Menken," in *Passing Performances: Queer Readings of Leading Players in American Theater*, ed. Robert A. Schanke and Kim Marra (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 63–79. See also Sentilles, *Performing Menken*.
5. Qtd. in Sentilles, *Performing Menken*, 132.
6. See "Shylock," *The Sunday Delta* (New Orleans), Sept. 6, 1857, 1; and "The Oppression of the Jews Under the Turkish Empire," *The Israelite*, Nov. 6, 1857, 137.
7. Wise's son Leo Wise wrote years after his father's death that "Menken . . . was not a Jewess, but she most ardently desired to become one, and often requested Dr. Wise to receive her into the fold, going so far at one time as to implore him on her knees . . . to accept her as a convert. For some reason unknown to me he steadfastly refused to do this." See Leo Wise, "Israelite Personalities: People Who Wrote For the Israelite and Other Things of Interest in Connection Therewith," *The Israelite*, July 24, 1924, 31–32.
8. There are obvious biblical precedents for joining the Israelite people through personal conviction alone, and these may very well have inspired Menken (the locus classicus is the Book of Ruth). Beginning with Ezra's reforms, however, lineage became decisive in determining Jewish identity, though formal procedures for conversion were also developed (see Shabbat 135a and Gerim 2:2). For a useful discussion, see Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
9. Nadia Valman, *The Jewess in Nineteenth-Century British Literary Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 209.
10. Josh Lambert, *American Jewish Fiction* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2009), 14–15. See also Leslie Fiedler, *The Jew in the American Novel* (Jerusalem: Herzl Institute, 1959).
11. Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 98.
12. Isaac Meyer Wise, *Selected Writings of Isaac M. Wise: With a Biography*, ed. David Philipson
13. "The Pittsburgh Platform," in *Textual Sources for the Study of Judaism*, ed. Philip S. Alexander (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 137.
14. Isaac Meyer Wise, *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology*, ed. John Felstiner et al. (New York: Norton, 2000).
15. Isaac Meyer Wise, *Reminiscences* (Cincinnati, OH: Leo Wise and Company, 1901), 267. See also Michael P. Kramer, "Beginnings and Ends: The Origins of Jewish American Literary History," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*, ed. Hana Wirth Neshet and Michael P. Kramer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 25.
16. The dates for publication for these poems are as follows: Longfellow (Feb. 2., 1861); Coleridge (Aug. 2, 1862); Emerson (Jan. 10, 1862). See *The American Israelite*, <http://americanjewisharchives.org/collections/wise/home.php>.
17. Lucy Dawidowicz, *The Jewish Presence: Essays on Identity and History* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), 104.
18. Adah Isaacs Menken, "Moses," in *Infelicia and Other Writings*, ed. Gregory Eiselein (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2002), 129. Subsequent quotations from Menken's poetry and prose refer to this volume and are cited by page number.
19. Lydia Sigourney, *Poems by Mrs. L. H. Sigourney* (Philadelphia: Key and Biddle, 1836), 136–37.
20. Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1977).
21. See James H. Moorhead, "Apocalypticism in Mainstream Protestantism, 1800 to the Present," in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, ed. Stephen J. Stein, vol. 3, *Apocalypticism in the Modern Period and the Contemporary Age* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 72–107.
22. Her ambivalence about the role of the sentimental poetess might also help to explain a curious episode in which she published under her own name a half dozen poems written by other poets (one by John Greenleaf Whittier, five by Penina Moise). These acts of plagiarism were discovered and widely condemned, and whatever else they indicate about her (uncertainty about her talent, mythomania, sheer opportunism), they also hint at an impatience or even disdain for the established poetic forms in which she had been working.
23. Eiselein, *Infelicia and Other Writings*, 204.
24. Shira Wolosky. "Women's Bibles: Biblical Interpretation in Nineteenth-Century American Women's Poetry," *Feminist Studies* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 191–211.
25. *Ibid.*, 191–92.
26. James Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 71.
27. See Patricia Caldwell, *The Puritan Conversion Narrative: The Beginnings of American Expression* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
28. Julia Ward Howe, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," in *Poetry of the Civil War*, ed. John Boyes (New York: Gramercy Books, 2007), 27.
29. *The English Bible, King James Version*, ed. Gerald Hammond and Austin Hirsch, vol. 2, *The New Testament and the Apocrypha* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2012), 1026.
30. Jerome, "To Salvinia: Letter 79," par. 10; see United States Council of Catholic Bishops, <http://www.usccb.org/bible/scripture.cfm?bk=Judith&ch>.
31. Rebekah Gumpert, *The Leper and Other Poems* (Philadelphia: A Hart, 1853), 52.
32. Dan Miron. *H. N. Bialik and the Prophetic Mode in Modern Hebrew Poetry* (Syracuse.