Two Diasporas, One Exodus: Jewish Freedom and Jamaican Slavery in Grace Aguilar's Sephardic Histories

Richa Dwor

Abstract

The Anglo-Jewish writer Grace Aguilar (1816–47) took the Spanish Inquisition as a major topic, returning to its settings, events, and themes across three novellas, a novel, and several poems. Despite her assertions of historical accuracy and her knowledge of her family history in Jamaica, none of these Inquisition works describe transatlantic Jewish migration. Instead, her characters perish or else migrate directly to an idealized Britain. This paper establishes a new framework for Aguilar's writings on Sephardic history by bringing to light the financial benefits accrued by Aguilar's family from the ownership of enslaved people in Jamaica. It also emphasizes the influence of the messianic writings of her great-grandfather Benjamin Dias Fernandes. I argue that the intensity of Aguilar's identification with English literary forms and perspectives does not indicate a tendency toward assimilation. Rather, Britain was for her a site of redemption. Its status as a haven for persecuted Sephardim – as the end point of their exile and wanderings – is not merely a civic, but also an eschatological one.

Keywords

Anglo-Jewish literature; Sephardic history; Jews in Jamaica; slavery; Grace Aguilar

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Two Diasporas, One Exodus: Jewish Freedom and Jamaican Slavery in Grace Aguilar's Sephardic Histories

Richa Dwor

Introduction

In 1835, Nathaniel de Rothschild and Sir Moses Montefiore made a £15,000,000 loan to the British government to finance the compensation payments to slave owners in British colonies required under the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833. It was, according to Abigail Green, "bad business but good politics" (2010: 102). This was the only occasion on which Montefiore underwrote a major government loan, and it was not contracted on terms favourable to him. Nonetheless, the symbolic value of supporting the emancipation of slaves fortified the sympathetic links between influential Jewish figures such as Rothschild and Montefiore and the Quaker anti-slavery campaigners with whom they shared important ties of business and friendship. These same abolitionists frequently invoked the Jews' biblical forebears, whose flight from slavery is recounted in the Book of Exodus, as a potent metaphor of freedom from oppression. Indeed, the ancient Israelites' liberation was frequently deployed to galvanize a bible-centred justification for the liberation of modern-day slaves in the Americas (Coffey 2013: 80). For many abolitionists, then, the ancient Israelites provided moral inspiration while contemporary Jewish contacts presented operational and financial support. In compensating the slave owners and not the enslaved people, though, such networks revealed the limits of their liberalism. For these Jews, deeply schooled in the Exodus narrative through its annual recitation at the Passover Seder, the abolition of slavery in Britain and its colonies was the primary form of oppression with which they were involved, both as abolitionists but also as owners of slaves.

The Jewish loan to finance compensation payments to slave owners in the British colonies raises the question of how a British Jew might think of slavery, particularly a Sephardic Jew with strong ties to the Caribbean Jewish world. Grace Aguilar (1816–47) was the London-born descendant of two Sephardic families which had resided in and owned plantations in Jamaica. Aguilar's literary and theological writing attained a wide international readership during her brief life, and her works were anthologized and in print across the English-speaking world for over a century after her death. When the Slavery Abolition Act passed in 1833, Aguilar was seventeen and already at work on her earliest publications, which would soon include the first history of the Jews in England written by a Jewish author, as well as numerous novels, poems, sermons, and works of biblical exegesis which together comprised an extended apologia for Judaism and a plea for civil rights for British Jews. Aguilar also took the Spanish Inquisition as a major topic, returning to its settings, events, and themes across three novellas, a novel, and several poems. Despite her assertions of historical accuracy and her knowledge

of her own family history in Jamaica, none of these Inquisition works describe transatlantic Jewish migration, nor make any reference to the West Indies. Instead, her characters perish or else migrate directly to an anachronistically tolerant Britain.

For Jews living in British colonies in the Caribbean, where the labour of enslaved people was exploited on a large scale for the production of sugar and other lucrative commodities, the tensions in British liberalism were apparent long before a Jewish loan funded compensation payments to slave owners. Two eighteenth-century Acts of Parliament exemplify the Jews' precarious civic status under British rule. By removing the sacramental oath of allegiance, the Plantation Act of 1740 made it possible for Jews and Dissenters to become naturalized in a British colony if they pledged to reside there for seven years, a move which led to accelerated Jewish population growth in Jamaica especially (Mirvis 2020: 69). While the naturalization of Jews abroad was relatively uncontroversial, this was not the case when the Jewish Naturalization Act, passed in 1753 and swiftly repealed within a year, proposed a route to the same legal standing for Jews in Britain (Yuval-Naeh 2018: 487). The halting acculturation of the Jews in England persisted alongside the repeated failure of subsequent Jewish Relief Bills, which fell short where Roman Catholic Relief had succeeded in 1829. When Rothschild and Montefiore made their loan in 1835 to fund compensation of slave owners, Jews in Jamaica had enjoyed full civil rights since 1831 but Jewish emancipation in Britain was over twenty years off.

While the Jews of Jamaica engaged in a centuries-long contest with the Crown over their political and economic privileges, many of their counterparts in London understood themselves as inhabiting an outpost of the broader transatlantic Jewish world (Snyder 2006: 148). This was a world set in motion in the fifteenth century by the forced conversion to Catholicism and subsequent expulsion of Jews from Spain and later Portugal. This traumatic exodus produced a global diaspora of communities practicing Judaism with varying degrees of secrecy or openness according to the reach of the Inquisition and the religious and economic liberties extended to Jews in the lands in which they settled. Considerable mobility of Jewish individuals and trade ensued, particularly among Dutch, Portuguese, and British colonies in the Americas as well as in European cities such as Venice and Amsterdam. The confessional status of persons and families was likewise fluid, from New Christian *conversos* to those who had undergone "rejudaization" (Mirvis 2020: 14). In this polyglot world, the Jews of English-speaking Atlantic port cities like London, Philadelphia, and Kingston, Jamaica were connected, as Adam Kiron shows, by the circulation of periodicals which shared a Sephardic "self understanding" and an orthodox defence of Jewish ritual in the face of religious reformers and Christian missionaries (2006: 172). Jamaica in particular was an important centre for Jewish periodical print culture during the early nineteenth century, with the establishment by British expatriate Jews of the *Daily Gleaner* in 1834 and *First Fruits of the West* in 1844 (Casteel and Kaufman 2019: 10).[1]

This paper asks why Aguilar omitted the Jewish Caribbean world from her popular narratives of the Spanish Inquisition, even as the biblical Exodus narrative that she deployed to frame these tales was also in use by abolitionists to describe the status of slaves there. At the time that Aguilar was writing, the complexity of Jewish belonging within English history, landscapes, and polity was newly being explored in literary works designed to reach a broad, non-Jewish audience (Weisman 2018: 167-214). The Evangelical theological context of Aguilar's writings has been elaborated by Nadia Valman, particularly her efforts to align Judaism with Protestant values and away from associations with "popery" (2007: 96). Aguilar's anti-Catholicism can partly be understood as a strategy for establishing common ground with

[1] On the history of *First Fruits*, see Hurwitz and Hurwitz, 1966.

her Protestant audience, but she nonetheless sidesteps the abolitionist commitments of many of her Evangelical readers by keeping the Americas and the wider Jewish worlds there out of her stories. Judith Page offers a solution to this apparent omission by demonstrating the bibliocentrism that underlies Aguilar's insistence upon historical facts and family memory in her Inquisition tales (2016: 85-98). For Page, the historical record is important in Aguilar's works only insofar as it affirms biblical patterns of Jewish exile and redemption in the post-diaspora modern world.

For Aguilar, Exodus was not a metaphor which could be applied to any equity-seeking group. Instead, it was reserved for the Jews and therefore it did not lend itself to examining the other exiled population which impinged upon her world: enslaved Black Africans and their descendants. Although Aguilar was widely read and indeed later volubly mourned in Jamaica, she makes no mention of her family's tenure there. And while it is true that most British Jews were preoccupied by national allegiance and largely silent on the topic of slavery, it remains that those with familial and economic ties to the West Indies did engage in the religious and cultural life of Caribbean Jewry. Sarah Phillips Casteel and Heidi Kaufman refer to the "centrality of cultural transaction, translation, and exchange to the literary representation and production of the Jewish Caribbean" (2019: 12). In the case of Aguilar, however, such "crossings" were apparently a one-way street.

Here I aim to establish a new framework for considering Aguilar's writings on Sephardic history by bringing to light the financial benefits accrued by Aguilar's family from the ownership of enslaved people in Jamaica, as well as the messianic writings of her great-grandfather Benjamin Dias Fernandes, which form an unacknowledged part of her early influences. I argue that the intensity of Aguilar's identification with English literary forms and perspectives does not indicate a tendency toward assimilation. Rather, Britain functions for her as a site of redemption and so its status as a haven for persecuted Sephardim – as the end point of their exile and wanderings – is not merely a civic one, it is an eschatological one. This view can help to explain her apparent lack of interest in realities, such as the emancipation of slaves in Jamaica, which complicate this trajectory.

Jamaican genealogies of the Aguilar and Dias Fernandes families

Most biographers of Aguilar incorrectly describe her parents as having come directly from Spain and Portugal to England, but this was not the case.[2] Aguilar's maternal and paternal relatives were slave owners in Jamaica. Her mother, a Dias Fernandes, and her father, an Aguilar, were members of two prominent Sephardic families interlinked by marriages and business partnerships as West India merchants and owners of Jamaican sugar plantations.[3] Using documents digitized by the Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery, as well as probate wills held by the National Archives and other Jamaican land registry archives, it is possible to trace the fortunes of these two families and the transmission of funds from Jamaican plantations to relatives in England. According to Stanley Mirvis, plantation Jews were a "minority within a minority" of Jews in the region, most of whom resided in port cities (2020: 66). Indeed, a significant body of research has shown that Jews in the Americas, most of them

[2] See for example biographical entries on Aguilar by Galchinsky (1999) and Valman (2004). Galchinsky describes Aguilar's parents as "Portuguese Jews who had fled to England to escape the Inquisition." Lindsay Katzir (2023) notes the Jamaican connections of the Aguilar and Dias Fernandes families in her biographical entry on Grace Aguilar in the *Victorian Jewish Writers Project*.

[3] The Aguilars traced their origin to a small town of the same name near Cordova in Spain and the Dias Fernandeses were known to be of Portuguese origin (Abrahams [1947]: 138).

exiles from the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal and their descendants, owned a small proportion of the total population of enslaved people, in keeping with their typical occupations as merchants rather than as plantation owners (e.g. Faber 1998: 64; Kagan and Morgan 2009). Laura Leibman further demonstrates that Jewish racial and social identity became extraordinarily complex in the Caribbean due to unions between Sephardic Jews of European origin and people of indigenous and African ancestry, whose children bore shifting and secondary status within Jewish communities (2021: 21). While no evidence exists to suggest that such unions took place within the Aguilar and Dias Fernandes families, both were nonetheless entrenched in a society in which racial and civic status were fluid and often the subjects of religious and legal disputation.

Both families resided in Jamaica before certain members migrated to England in the eighteenth century and they were in business together as plantation owners long before Grace Aguilar's parents married in London (see fig. 1). Benjamin Dias Fernandes (dates unknown), the maternal great-grandfather of Grace Aguilar, moved from Jamaica to London during the second half of the eighteenth century, possibly with his married son Jacob (d. 1814), leaving another son, Isaac, behind in Kingston as well as the graves of a daughter and another son ("Jacob Dias Fernandes"; Barnett & Wright 1997: 142).[4] Isaac and his descendants continued to reside in Jamaica. Jacob's wife Esther, who died in Whitechapel in 1852, had been born in Kingston ("Jacob Dias Fernandes"). The third child of Jacob and Esther Dias Fernandes was Sarah (1809–1854), who married Emanuel Aguilar (1787–1845) and together they had three children, including the author Grace Aguilar (A. M. H. 1947: 148).

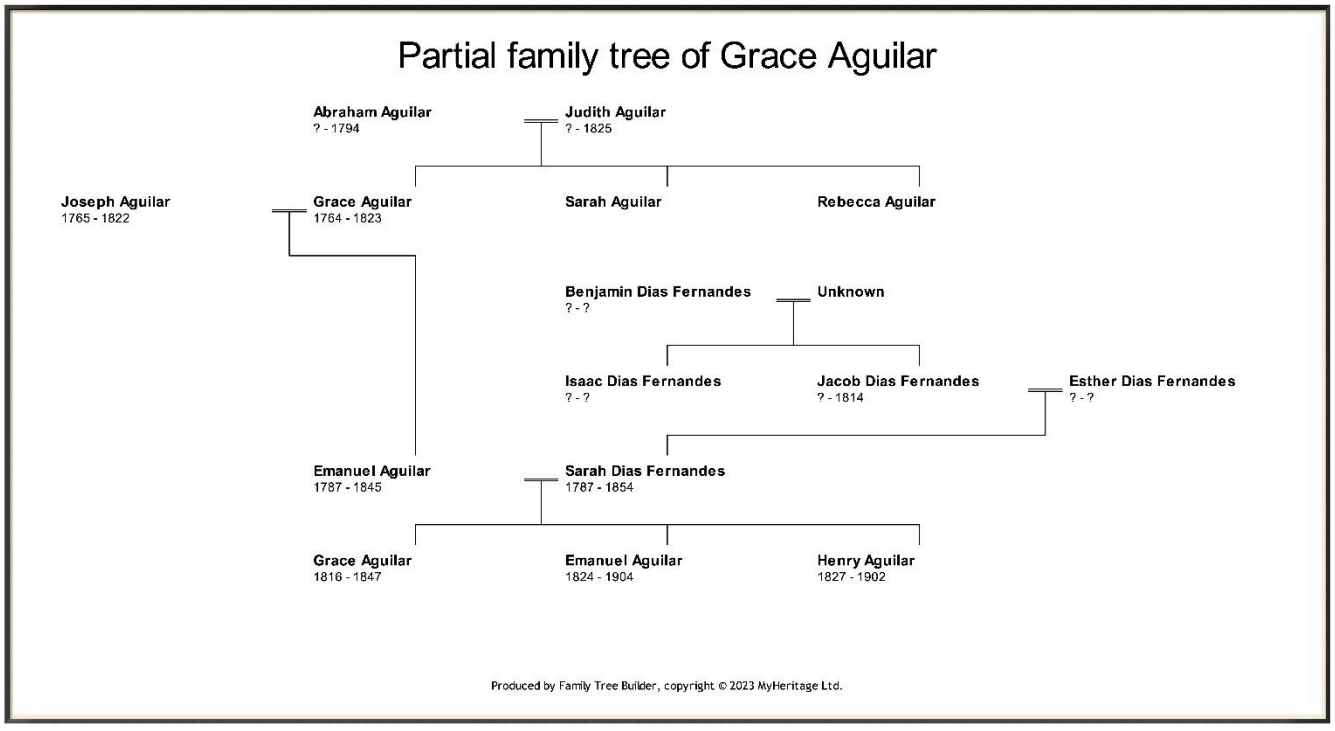

Figure 1

[4] At time of publication, no documentation of the birth and death dates of Benjamin Dias Fernandes has come to light. I am grateful to the archivists of Bevis Marks Synagogue and the Jamaican Jewish Cemeteries Preservation Fund for aiding me in my search for this information.

Benjamin and Jacob Dias Fernandes, father and son, formed a partnership with Isaac Aguilar, the Kingston-born brother of Abraham Aguilar, who was the paternal great-grandfather of Grace Aguilar. Trading as Aguilar, Fernandes, and Son, they were joint owners of Fair Prospect, a sugar plantation on the east coast of Jamaica. When acquired in 1810 (three years after the Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade of 1807, which legislated against the Atlantic slave trade), the estate included three hundred and seventy-six enslaved people ("Fair Prospect"). The partnership dissolved one year later, and the property was transferred to the sole ownership of Jacob Dias Fernandes ("Isaac Aguilar"). Jacob had died by the time the family's interest in the estate was sold in 1826, and so proceeds of the sale, including of two hundred and eighty-one enslaved people, were paid to his heirs, who included his daughter Sarah, the mother of Grace Aguilar ("Fair Prospect").[5] Aguilar was ten years old at the time that the family received this income.

These were not the only proceeds of slavery inherited by Aguilar's parents before and during her lifetime. When her wealthy great-grandfather Abraham Aguilar died in 1794, he left bequests to synagogues in London, Kingston, and Spanishtown, and the interest on £30,000 in trust to his wife Judith, along with the right to will £10,000 on the principle on her death ("Abraham Aguilar").[6] Judith also inherited all his "negro and other slaves both male and female with all the future … offspring … of all my said female slaves" excepting those on "the estate called Banks's in the parish of St. Ann" ("Will of Abraham Aguilar" [1794]: 113). Abraham Aguilar made further provision for his three daughters and their offspring, who included his grandson Emanuel Aguilar (1787–1845), son of his daughter Grace (1764–1823). To Emanuel Aguilar, the only grandchild mentioned by name in his will, he left £500, "to be paid to him with the accumulated dividends thereof on his attaining the age of twenty one years or on day of marriage which shall happen first" (116). Given that Emanuel turned twenty-one in 1808, he would have received this bequest well before a subsequent one received on the death of his grandmother. Judith Aguilar died in 1825, two years after the death of her middle daughter Grace. Consequently, her will makes various provisions for the children of her deceased daughter, who included Emanuel, by now the father of a daughter also called Grace Aguilar (1816–47, and the future author). This Grace Aguilar was nine years old at the time that her parents inherited £300 as well as other proceeds from the estate of her great-grandmother ("Will of Judith Aguilar" 1825: 70). Despite the considerable wealth commanded by earlier generations, her family was far from wealthy, and she and her mother faced financial difficulty after the early death of her father. These bequests, then, would have been all the more noteworthy to the family of five living in Hackney.

Aguilar's other inheritance was intellectual. Indeed, it was only through her intervention that the reputation of her great-grandfather Benjamin Dias Fernandes as a theologian was restored, long after his death. The date of his relocation to London is not known, but it may have been after 1754 as records show that he paid rent on 300 acres in St. James parish in Jamaica that year ("A List of Landholders in the Island of Jamaica" [1754]). Upon his arrival in London, Dais Fernandes began a series of letters to an unknown interlocutor which ultimately comprised a book-length defence of Jewish scripture and prophecies in opposition to Christian interpretations of these materials. These were eventually published under the title *A Series of Letters on the Evidences of Christianity* (1853). Although Dias Fernandes wrote the letters in

[5] When compensation payments to slave owners were paid in 1836 just a few years after this sale, the two-thirds owner of the Fair Prospect estate was John Gladstone, father of the future Prime Minister William Gladstone. Gladstone received a half share of the £4295 3s 3d awarded in "compensation" for the 231 enslaved people who then resided there ("Jamaica St Thomas-in-the-East").

[6] Mirvis describes Abraham Aguilar as "a quintessential Jewish absentee" who, "after retiring to London, … continued to live off the profits of his plantation in St Anne Parish called "Banks"' (2020: 77).

English, he drew principally upon the Spanish- and Portuguese-language works of three prominent authors: *Fortificacion de la Fé* by Rabbi Isaac, son of Abraham, whose riposte to Luther's disciples was written in Hebrew before its translation into Spanish; the anti-Catholic polemic *Verdad de la Ley* by Saul Levy Morteira (1596-1660), a Sephardic rabbi in Amsterdam whose pupils included Spinoza; and *Divinas Contra La Vana Idolatria de las Gentes* by the Portuguese philosopher and one-time crypto-Jew Isaac Orobio de Castro (c. 1617–87).[7] Dias Fernandes also referred frequently to *l'Histoire des Juifs* (1707) by Jacques Basnage de Beauval, a Protestant French theologian (Segal 1983: 303).[8] Dias Fernandes's writings, and those of his principal sources, can be understood in the context of Jewish literary efforts to dispute Catholic theology and to address so-called *conversos* in vernacular languages in order to transmit rabbinic knowledge and inspire a return to Judaism (Mirvis 2020: 36).

It was the deeply informed history of Sephardic thought underpinning the "cogency and gentlemanly tone" of Dias Fernandes's writings that caught the attention of Isaac Leeser, the American rabbi and publisher, when they were first published under the misattribution "Dea's Letters" in *The Jew*, a short-lived (1823–5) periodical based in New York (Leeser 1843: iv). When, in 1843, Leeser began re-publishing the letters in his periodical the *Occident and American Jewish Advocate* (1843–69), he prefaced the first one with an appeal for help in discovering the identity of its author. This note was seen by Grace Aguilar who was by then a contributor to Leeser's periodical. Aguilar recognized the letter as the work of her great-grandfather, with which she was familiar due to the striking transmission history of the original manuscripts. Dias Fernandes had made two copies of his works, one for each son. The London-based son, Jacob (the grandfather of Grace Aguilar), loaned his copy out and never saw it returned, although Leeser traced this copy to a private owner in the US and speculated that it was the origin of the version eventually published in *The Jew*. The copy sent to the Jamaica-based son, Isaac, was later returned to England after his death as a gift from his children to their widowed aunt Esther, who then passed it on to her daughter Sarah, the mother of the author (Leeser 1843: v). The young Grace Aguilar pored over this textual inheritance, which connected her both to her family's complex and ongoing ties to Jamaica, as well as to a deep and multi-lingual history of Sephardic theology.

I contend that Dias Fernandes's messianism influenced Aguilar's thought to a degree that has not been recognized hitherto. Her translation from French of Isaac Orobio de Castro's *Israel Avengé* (1770) as *Israel Defended* in 1838 is well known, as are the scathing reviews it garnered for its rendering of Orobio's critique of Christianity into something gentler and more universalizing. Michael Galchinsky claims that it was Aguilar's father who suggested the project, and David Ruderman speculates that the Sephardic intellectual Moses Mocatta encouraged her work on this controversial refutation of Catholicism (Galchinsky 2003: 21; Ruderman 2018: 107). Still, her initial encounter with Orobio's thought, and the context for her significant revisions, may in fact derive from the pages of her great-grandfather's letters.

It is also possible to trace his messianism in her later works. Dias Fernandes's disputation of Catholicism is grounded in a discussion of the characteristics of the Messiah and the denial that this figure has already appeared as Jesus Christ. In the final section of the *Letters*,

[7] Orobio de Castro was born into a family of *marranos*, a derogatory term for Jews who chose or were forced to convert to Catholicism in order to evade persecution and maintain their social status, but who practiced Judaism in secret. This practice began before the Inquisition was opened in 1478 and increased dramatically from that point onward. Such Jews were also called *conversos* ("converts") in Spanish and *anusim* (meaning "those who are coerced") in Hebrew (Jacobs and Kayserling 1906: vol. 3, 318). In current scholarship, the term crypto-Jews is preferred.

[8] *l'Histoire des Juifs* was translated into English in 1708, so it is possible that Dias Fernandes read it in that language.

Dias translates and interprets the prophecy of the four kingdoms from the Book of Daniel (2:31-45).[9] Each kingdom, represented by gold, silver, brass, and iron, must be passed through before the Messiah will arrive. Dias Fernandes engages in the longstanding practice of mapping these kingdoms onto world events to gauge global progress toward this end, an interpretive mode widely popularized through Protestant eschatology (1853: 256). Aguilar took up this exegetical challenge decades later in an essay that that she chose not to publish but which her mother published after her death. While her great-grandfather mused on whether the Roman or German empires represented the Kingdom of Iron, Aguilar posits the Christian religion itself as the final kingdom. Believing that the final kingdom must attain global dominance before eventually fracturing and heralding the arrival of the Messiah, she celebrates the advance of Christian influence even as she works to defend the Jews' rights to religious liberty:

> Therefore when I hear of pious and good men, seeking distant countries to convert heathen nations, I too rejoice, even as would a Christian, for I know it is thus God's word will be fulfilled.
>
> (Aguilar 1853: 3)

Reversing the popular Evangelical fixation on converting Jews to Christianity, Aguilar presents imperial Christian missionary activity as a welcome fulfilment of the prophecy that will see the return of "*our* Messiah, the Saviour of the Jews" (ibid.). In this view, the object of contemporary imperial expansion is that "the Christian nation … receive the Jew once more as the chosen of God" (ibid.). This is a slight but significant indication of Aguilar's views regarding British imperialism, a view which appears to have been informed by ideas that she encountered in the writings of Benjamin Dias Fernandes. Such engagements with her great-grandfather's works indicate the degree of Aguilar's familiarity with her family's ties to Jamaica and to the Sephardic anti-Catholic theology which flourished there. Both contexts deeply informed her thinking, even underpinning her universalist message.

Grace Aguilar's Inquisition fictions

In light of her hitherto unrecognized familiarity with the Jamaican histories of the Aguilar and Dias Fernandes families, Aguilar's insistence on England as a site of redemption in her Inquisition stories is all the more striking. Aguilar's most enduringly popular novel, not published until after her death, was *The Vale of Cedars, or, the Martyr: A Story of Spain in the Fifteenth Century* (1850), which recounts the trials of Marie, a Jewish woman who faces violent and coercive pressures to renounce her faith once the secret of her Jewish identity becomes known. Marie's fate is complicated by her relations with Arthur Stanley, an exiled Englishman. As a Christian and a foreigner, Stanley presents various threats to Marie: he is first her suitor and then the man falsely accused of murdering her husband, and she ultimately risks her life to save his. After Marie's death, Stanley embraces a kind of religious universalism that causes him to oppose the edict for the Jews' expulsion from Spain. The novel ends in Westminster Abbey, at the wedding of Arthur, Prince of Wales to Catherine of Aragon (an historical event which took place in 1501), where Stanley is heralded as a great and humane man because of his efforts on behalf of the Spanish Jews. Thus, the stage is set for England to act as protector of the Jews, who are understood to be impervious to attempts at their conversion. The late publication date

[9] In making these translations, Dias Fernandes writes of the difficulty of doing so with "no concordance" (1853: 248). He was apparently not referencing the King James Version to inform his translation. A complete Jewish translation of the Hebrew Bible into English was not published until 1853 (Leeser 1853).

of this novel belies its importance to Aguilar's project of dramatizing the persecution of Sephardic Jews. Work on the book began while she was still in her teens and although she did not live to see its publication, she had already drawn on the setting, characters, plot, and themes of *The Vale of Cedars* to animate several other short fictions depicting the fate of Jews in Spain and Portugal under the Inquisition.[10]

In 1844, Aguilar published *Records of Israel*, a short volume containing two novellas: "The Edict: A Tale of 1492" and "The Escape: A Tale of 1755." In the preface, Aguilar is careful to note that the narratives aspire to the status of factual "records" in contrast to "historical romance," and makes further assertions throughout both stories of their absolute historical veracity (1844: v). Scholars have responded with scepticism to Aguilar's claim to have written historical records, both by examining the historiographical sources on which she based her narratives, and by excavating the biblical tropes which structure the plots of these stories. Leonard Stein calls these works "diasporic identity construction" which owe more to highly biased contemporary histories of Catholic Spain, such as John Joseph Stockdale's *The History of the Inquisitions; Including the Secret History of Those Horrific Tribunals* (1810), than to the transmission of ancestral memories connecting the author to the historical moments that she depicts (2021: 34). For Page, the narrative trajectory of these stories can be read as biblical journeys from exile to redemption: the expulsion of the Jews from Spain echoes the original expulsion from Eden, and the escape of a young Jewish couple from the 1755 earthquake of Lisbon recalls the flight from Egypt (2016: 86). Both Page and, later, Karen Weisman note the ways in which Aguilar intervenes in British Romanticism to imbue landscapes with national belonging (2018: 167-214). These readings unite in viewing Aguilar's Inquisition fictions as largely ahistorical uses of her family's Sephardic history to advocate for the Jews in contemporary England. What we can now add to this discourse is recognition of the degree to which Aguilar omitted aspects of this family history. Given that these omissions include ownership of slaves by Jews once exiled from Spain and Portugal, they place in a new light the intensity of Aguilar's insistence upon England as a site of liberty and redemption.

Despite the lurid events depicted in the Inquisition stories, Aguilar insists that they are presented not for gothic entertainment but instead to suggest the notion of Jewish martyrdom. Compared with the violence directed towards Jews throughout history, "the sufferings of other creeds are light as air," and so contemporary readers can look to the Jews as exemplars of fidelity to their faith and to each other (1844: vi). As Valman argues, Aguilar emphasizes martyrdom here in order to refute the Christian association of Jewish suffering with divine retribution and instead to re-frame this suffering as a proof of the truth of Jewish beliefs (2007: 93). *Records of Israel* was read widely for decades after Aguilar's early death as both novellas were included by her mother, Sarah Aguilar, in *Home Scenes and Heart Studies*, the immensely popular posthumous collection of her daughter's short fiction.[11] There they were anthologized alongside another narrative of Jewish persecution in the Iberian peninsula, "The Fugitive: A

[10] Various sources report that Aguilar began work on *The Vale of Cedars* at the age of 15 and completed it four years later. I have found no evidence to support this timeline. Instead, the biographical note written by her mother implies that Aguilar "wrote the tale of the 'Martyr'" after 1835 (at which point she was 19), during a time when the life of the family was made "depressing and arduous" through a series of trials, namely the departure of both brothers and the mother's poor health (Sarah Aguilar 1870 [1852]: xiii). Rachel Beth Zion Lask Abrahams affirms that "*The Vale of Cedars* belongs to Aguilar's early, Devonshire period," which matches the timeframe implied by her mother, as the family were back in London by 1842 ([1947]: 147).

[11] *Home Scenes* was published simultaneously in London and New York 1853 and was in print in England and America into the early decades of the twentieth century.

True Tale."[12] Taken together, these three short works – "The Edict," "The Escape," and "The Fugitive" – posit an arc which begins with Catholic persecution in Spain and Portugal, and ends with Protestant toleration in England. No other route to safety, nor outcome for the Jews, is acknowledged.

"The Edict: A Tale of 1492" marks the beginning of this harrowing phrase of modern Jewish history, and the date in its title is an aspect of its claim to historical veracity. Running parallel to its offerings as a historical record, however, are the story's biblical allusions. The community of Jews whose peace will soon be shattered lives in the valley of Eshcol, situated by Aguilar in the Sierra Morena mountains, but taking its name from the Canaanite valley where spies sent by Moses cut down a massive cluster of grapes to show the Israelites still decamped in the wilderness what awaited them in the Promised Land (Num 13:17-27). Aguilar's Spanish Jews, by contrast, already feel themselves to be living in divine harmony with the landscape, in a place hallowed by generations of belonging. Their isolated settlement was founded by "the unhappy fugitives from the destruction of Jerusalem," thus marking both a previous exile and an unbroken lineage from ancient Israel (Aguilar 1883a [1853]: 125). The ancient exile is restaged when a wedding is interrupted by news of the banishment of all Jews from Spain. The newlyweds, Imri and Josephine, witness the violent deaths of their relatives and encounter the corpses of other Jews killed in their desperation to flee. In their last moments on land, they are met by Josephine's wayward father, already a convicted murderer, who offers them "life, with every luxury" if only they will profess Catholicism and practice Judaism in secret (156). Refusing such "perjury and falsity" (157), they board a ship, accepting that "the exiles of Jerusalem have no resting" (143). Soon after, their ship is struck by lightning. Imri holds Josephine as she faints and dies, and all aboard ship are killed soon after. So terrible is the Spanish edict that no futurity but martyrdom is possible. The young couple perish, faithful to the end. The utter devastation unleashed upon the Jews, and the fortitude of the doomed lovers, arrogates to them the status of victims of as great an injustice as has ever been perpetrated against one group of people by another.

"The Escape: A Tale of 1755," which picks up this history some 263 years later, stages the imprisonment and torture of "disguised and hidden" Jews against the backdrop of the cataclysmic earthquake that destroyed Lisbon in that year (Aguilar 1883b [1853]: 167). This story also begins with a wedding, but one which is doubled rather than interrupted; Alvar and Almah are married once in public and again in a concealed room, in a ritual conducted in a "strange yet solemn-sounding language" (164). Due to their shared secret, the Jews of Lisbon are bonded through mutual dependence. When the couple are betrayed and sentenced to death, the lovers display the same selfless devotion to one another and to their faith as did Josephine and Imri. Here too a natural disaster intervenes, but now it assists rather than destroys the Jewish couple. At the very moment that the flames are lit for their *auto da fé*, an immense earthquake interrupts their martyrdom and allows them to flee. As they evade the fires and floods which kill thousands of others, Almah faints but does not die. They escape the devastated city to learn that their child and "the bulk of their property" have been safely conveyed to England (185). On arrival there, they discover a land far better than the one they have fled:

> The veil of secrecy was removed, they were in a land whose merciful and liberal government granted to the exile and the wanderer a home of peace and rest, where they might worship the God of Israel according to the law he gave.
>
> (ibid.)

[12] Although "The Fugitive" appears before "The Edict" and "The Escape" in *Home Scenes and Heart Studies*, it may more properly be considered the third, rather than the first, instalment in this trio of Inquisition narratives. "The Fugitive" also appeared in other collections of Aguilar's works, such as *The Fugitive and Other Stories* (1899).

Leaving secrecy and persecution behind, they find freedom and safety in England where they remain faithful to Judaism, even when prosperous. The significant wealth that they enjoyed in Lisbon and that was successfully transferred to England would in reality have likely represented the proceeds of international trade in commodities such as Caribbean sugar.

A footnote to "The Escape" promises that aspects of the story are factual, although the migration from Lisbon to London is surely not, at least not for Aguilar's relatives who fled via Jamaica. Instead, this conclusion constructs an ahistoric Sephardic diaspora in England, forever aware of its "providential preservation" but nonetheless fit for total emancipation (ibid.). Focus on the emancipation of the Jews in Britain occludes any mention of the other significant act of enfranchisement which took place in the years before Aguilar wrote these stories, and to which they are to some degree connected: the emancipation of slaves in British colonies. By sending her characters directly to England rather than to any of the myriad other migration routes taken by Sephardic Jews, Aguilar maintains a tight focus on her primary aim of advocating for the Jews in Britain, and she also avoids the moral complications of invoking other contemporary uses of the Exodus narrative. As Page has shown, "The Edict" and "The Escape" work together to "chart the movement from exile to redemption" that is the central narrative pattern of the Hebrew Bible (2016: 86). Adding "The Fugitive" to this reading highlights the provisional nature of the "redemption" represented by England, as well as the limits of the Jewish international sphere as it is imagined by Aguilar.

"The Fugitive: A True Tale" is set partly in the eighteenth-century London to which Aguilar's ancestors first arrived, and in Portugal, where Jews still faced death (Aguilar 1883c [1853]: 109). Judah Azavedo is the son of Jewish merchants who fled Portugal for Holland in order to escape "the fearful proceedings of the Inquisition" (ibid.). Able to retain their property, the Azavedos soon became wealthy and upon removing to England they are looked upon as a leading family among the "proud and aristocratic" Portuguese Jews (ibid.). Despite the strong ties which unite this community in the face of English prejudice and indifference, Judah Azavedo feels painfully isolated by the "natural disfigurement" of his features and so shuns close society, especially of women. In an excess of romantic isolation, he leaves England for "the East" and risks death by returning through Spain and Portugal in order to learn about the conditions for his co-religionists there. While there, he falls in love with a woman briefly glimpsed during an opera. He returns to England and, while pining for the unknown woman, acts as a benefactor to the Sephardic community.

The woman is the now widowed Inez, a dark-eyed beauty whose Jewish identity has been denounced. Warned that agents of the Inquisition will shortly appear at her home, Inez runs bravely to an English ship at harbour, which is then detained until the captain scornfully retorts:

> "I halt not at any man's beck or bidding! … England owns no Inquisitional supremacy. Had any such fugitive taken refuge in my ship, no power of the Inquisition, backed by the whole kingdom, should force me to give her up."
>
> (118)

Arriving destitute and alone, Inez is soon given shelter by Sephardic Jews in London. Through this network, she encounters Azevedo, who recognizes her as the woman he adores and although she openly admits that she does not love him "in the general acceptation of the term," the two are soon married (121). Despite this unromantic beginning, she grows to love him in the years that follow and is a "tenderly affectionate" wife all the rest of their lives (ibid.). In this story, the Inquisition acts as a malign matchmaker, sending the lovers from Portugal to England decades apart. While Inez's exile completes the pairing, "The Fugitive" is a romance

of gradual adaptation and not of immediate assimilation. England is not the only nation in which Jews can engage in business and practice their religion openly, but it figures here as the noble, Protestant antithesis to the horrors of Catholic persecution and the true site of Jewish safety and liberty. This liberty cannot be attained in an instant, though. Like Inez's love, it will grow in time.

Each of the Inquisition narratives is structured around a marriage plot. The married couples are instrumental in affirming one another's commitment to their Jewish faith and, where possible, assisting in physical survival. The emphasis on marriage and family life emerges prominently in "The Perez Family," another story in *Home Scenes and Heart Studies*, which represents the domestic life of Jews as compatible with that of their Protestant neighbours. Use of the marriage plot is an important feature of Aguilar's wider assertion of Jewish domesticity as a rationale for emancipation. Aguilar herself did not marry, but these stories are not autobiographical; instead, they are acts of Jewish self-representation, calling for the end of a culture of concealment and the dawn of full social integration or, as Michael Ragussis puts it, "full disclosure of Jewish identity, without reprisal" (1995: 150). Taken together, these three stories perform a narrative arc of Jewish martyrdom leading to salvation in England. Scenes of violence, imprisonment, and torture indicate that Jews are paradigmatic of these forms of suffering. Aguilar's extended plea for an end to religious concealment nonetheless itself enacts the total omission of Inquisition-era transatlantic Jewish migration that would detract from the stories' simple logic. While attention is drawn to the characters' wealth, and the transfer of property to England is central to their happy salvation there, no mention is made of the international trade which generated and perpetuated this income.

The Jewish press in England shared Aguilar's tendency to think of slavery in terms of the Israelites in Egypt rather than of the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire. Nonetheless, Aguilar also published often in the American Jewish press and in British women's and evangelical periodicals where slavery was a much-discussed topic. It is in a poem initially published in *The Christian Lady's Magazine*, edited by the Protestant novelist Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, that we find a rare acknowledgement in Aguilar's work of Britain's role in ending the slave trade.[13] In 1843, Czar Nicholas I of Russia decreed that all Jewish communal organizations be dissolved and the Jews themselves relocated to the Pale of Settlement, a region connecting the Baltic and the Black seas. Soon after news of this event was reported in England, Aguilar wrote a poem called "The Hebrew's Appeal: On Occasion of the Late Fearful *Ukase* Promulgated by the Emperor of Russia" in which she calls not only on all Jews, but also upon the English state to come to the aid of her persecuted co-religionists, asking:

> Will none arise! And with outstretched hand to save!
> No prayer for pity, and for aid awake?
> Will SHE who gave to Liberty the slave,
> For God's own people not one effort make?
> Will SHE not rise once more, in mercy clad,
> And heal the bleeding heart, and Sorrow's sons make glad?
>
> (Aguilar 2003 [1843]: ll. 25-30)

The speaker invokes the abolition of slavery in the British empire as a precedent for extending "liberty" to oppressed groups outside of England's borders (l. 27). She apostrophizes her birthplace as a haven of "peace, liberty, and rest" for the Jews and begs: "Then, oh once more, let Israel mercy claim, / And suffering thousands bless our England's honour'd name" (ll. 39,

[13] The poem was first rejected by the *Voice of Jacob*, then enthusiastically published in *The Christian Lady's Magazine* before Aguilar sent it to the US-based *The Occident*, believing that "a Jewish paper is the natural channel for the public appearance of the poem" (cited in Galchinsky 2003: 200).

41-2). The calculation here is that because England has freed enslaved people in its colonies and has extended limited toleration to the Jews within its borders, it will act on behalf of Jews in the international sphere. This is a unique instance in Aguilar's work of the word "slave" being used with reference to the contemporary slave trade, and a rare framing of England as having a global role beyond offering sanctuary to the Jews.

The association of England with freedom is cemented, in Aguilar's view, by its Protestantism, and she elsewhere points to the Reformation as an event which has improved the lives of Jews in all the lands where it has been adopted. In such countries, "the Hebrew … is FREE! and the mind and spirit, released from the shackles of darkness and persecution, can once more resume the native dignity and mental superiority, and spiritual aspirations, peculiar to his race and creed" (Aguilar [1845]: 560). The implication is that Catholicism is antipathetic to Judaism and that true freedom for Jews, as for slaves, is achieved with the material assistance of a Protestant state. For Jews living in Catholic countries, the stakes were necessarily different in asserting national belonging. Noëmie Duhaut has shown how, beginning in the 1860s, French Jews used the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* to position Jews in France as the bearers of modern, humanistic values (Duhaut 2021: 645-64). By invoking Black slavery in the Americas to frame inequalities faced by Jews elsewhere, especially in Southern Europe, French Jews "[articulated] a Jewish emancipatory discourse beyond the national framework of France" (646). Aguilar, it is clear, does no such thing. She is aware of and interested in Jews elsewhere but apart from the plea on behalf of coreligionists in Russia, she displays very little political will toward the idea of international Jewish emancipation, instead bending her idea of Sephardic history entirely toward the status of Jews in England.

This may be because of the heretofore unrecognized messianism of her thinking. For Aguilar, Jews are united in kinship and, in awaiting the messiah, they seek their place in a global Protestant empire whose success is a necessary precursor to the Kingdom of God on earth. Thus, her strong affiliation with evangelical readers nonetheless does not imply a shared investment in their social or ethical concerns, including the abolition of slavery. Of course, evangelicalism was itself a spectrum of positions, not all of which were concerned with social justice. Many evangelicals, especially from the 1830s onwards, like Aguilar prioritized the imminent coming of the Messiah over systematic solutions to social problems (Brown 2007: 675-704). Aguilar's anxiety regarding Jews' civil rights and security, however, *does* derive from her inherited memories of persecution and exile, and may be the truest expression of her Sephardic inheritance, even while the facts of her family history are bent and omitted beyond recognition in her creative works.

Conclusion

Aguilar wrote frequently about the Jews of medieval Spain, contrasting brutal accounts of their torture, forced conversion, and exile to the tolerance of an ahistoric, imagined Britain of the same era. In several works of historical fiction, she collapses the temporal distance between Inquisition-era Iberian Jews and her contemporary Jewish readership. By depicting the migration of persecuted Jews from Spain and Portugal to England, her works stage a contrast between Catholic repression to Protestant liberality, a contrast which also implies a supercessionist history in which British Protestantism replaces earlier, misguided forms of Christian practice. This collapse presents a continuity of Jewish life across time and nation, a universality that is the foundation of Aguilar's authority as a Jewish author to expound on Jewish history and theology. To this universality is added her personal history as the descendant of Spanish and Portuguese conversos who had fled their homelands under the conditions narrated in her fiction. Fiction it is, though, for the true history of Aguilar's antecedents, with which she was demonstrably familiar, is scrupulously excised from these narratives. Fidelity to

family history need hardly be expected of works of fiction, and in any case the partial nature of the written records of this family and the irretrievability of oral narratives makes it impossible to determine what is "true" in Aguilar's prose. Nonetheless, Aguilar's likely knowledge of her family's involvement in the slave trade complicates her rapturous insistence upon British tolerance and liberality. Her deployment of biblical narrative patterns and apparent faith in messianic redemption indicate that her true commitments are to the vindication of the Jewish religion. That Aguilar's primary sphere of influence for achieving this end relates to the Jews of Britain results in a strong but partial identification with middle-class, Protestant British culture and attitudes.

The particular case of Aguilar as an Anglo-Jewish writer active during the 1840s points to broader questions regarding Jews and liberalism. Indeed, issues of national belonging and legal equality were always fraught for Jewish authors in this period because their freedom was felt to be provisional. There is, importantly, a broader canvas for Jewish ideas about liberty that does not map exactly onto the British one. A British Jew, particularly a Sephardic Jew with inherited memories of the Spanish Inquisition, could imagine herself to be unfree through a lack of civil rights and subjection to various commercial inequalities in a way that a Briton could not, and while the Czar posed a threat to Jewish liberty across Russia throughout the nineteenth century, this had little no impact on British liberty or religion. With the rise of a new Jewish internationalism and an international Jewish press, Jews in England had access to the views of their co-religionists in Catholic countries such as France who did not share Aguilar's anti-Catholicism. That many Anglo-Jewish writers side-stepped participation in this sphere demonstrates a preference for intervening in Christian sectarian debates as the grounds for Jewish admission to Englishness, rather than highlighting sectarian and racial tensions within Judaism.

Ultimately, Aguilar's association of Jews' civil rights in England with messianic redemption outweighed any rationale for positioning her Jewish characters in British colonial contexts. That chapter of her family history was excised in order to maintain close narrative focus on the appeal for Jewish emancipation in Britain. Her aim was to deploy Exodus as a paradigm for modern Jews in England by insisting upon that biblical narrative as unique to the Jews and therefore not also applicable to a Black African diaspora similarly straining for enfranchisement and redemption. Exodus as a narrative structure could therefore be detached from the Torah and used – in a manner that resembled or borrowed from Protestant exegesis – to celebrate the journeys of modern Jews towards "freedom." There the flexibility ended, though, not least because the journey of West Indian Jews towards prosperity was uncomfortably predicated upon the enslavement of Black Africans and their descendants.

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