Review Essays

Grace Aguilar, The Women of Israel

Reviewed by Yael Shemesh
Bar-Ilan University
yael.shemesh@biu.ac.il


Reading this heavy tome was a fascinating experience in many ways, including the encounter between its two creators: the author, Grace Aguilar, an English Jewish poet and writer of the first half of the nineteenth century, who aspired to better the status of women and expressed a clear position in favor of women’s education, but who was in some senses very far from being a feminist; and the editor, Mayer Gruber, a twenty-first century scholar of the Bible and Ancient Near East, born in the United States, who now lives and works in Israel and holds much more advanced feminist positions than Aguilar, his research subject.1 Although he obviously admires her greatly, he does not hesitate to criticize her stance when it is far from his own outlook.

Grace Aguilar, born in London in 1816, was an English Jewish poet and author, the daughter of a family of Portuguese origin. She died young, at only thirty-one, but in her short life she was a prolific artist in many genres. Her work includes poems, liturgies, plays, and historical novels. Her books were

---

1 This is evident from his wide academic interests, which relate to women of the ancient Near East and the Bible. See, for example, in this book, p. 389, n. 18, which expresses how much he esteems women’s contributions to society in all spheres of life.
popular among both Jews and non-Jews. One of the best known is *The Vale of Cedars*, about the crypto-Jews of Spain, which was published by her mother three years after her death. *The Women of Israel*, the book subject to Gruber’s treatment, was published in 1845 and was considered her masterpiece even in her lifetime. Despite her great popularity when alive, she seems to have been forgotten today.

*The Women of Israel* is divided into several periods. The first deals with Eve and the matriarchs, from Sarah through Leah and Rachel. The second covers the period of bondage in Egypt, the important role played at the time by women, and the divine laws that relate to women. The third period runs from Miriam to Hannah, while the fourth is that of the monarchy, from Michal through Huldah. The fifth period is the Babylonian exile and the return to Zion. Here Aguilar deals at length with the figure of Esther. Sixth is the Second Temple period, with a survey of the Jews’ history from the Second Temple’s construction until its destruction. Her goal is to show that in this period, too, women enjoyed high status. In the seventh period Aguilar refers to the talmudic literature about women, in order to show their lofty status even in the post-biblical era, as well as the history of Judaism and the Jews from ancient times until her own day. This section includes suggestions for further reading, especially for women.

Throughout the book, it is clear that Aguilar had a double goal in view: on the one hand, bettering the situation of women and raising their status in Judaism; on the other hand, improving the image of Judaism both externally and internally, for the Jews themselves, whom she wants to be proud of their religion, and for the outside world, meaning Christians. Aguilar defends Judaism against Christian onslaughts, especially the claim of women’s inferiority in Judaism.

In this presentation of Aguilar’s work, Gruber aims to make her book accessible to the public at large. At the same time he wishes to show the error in the prevalent assumption that women began writing about the Bible only with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the group of bluestockings she gathered to produce *The Woman’s Bible*, which she edited (1895, 1898) (p. xxxiv). It bears noting in this context that Stanton’s volume in fact represents feminist writing, whereas Aguilar’s book cannot really be assigned to this category, as will be made clear below.

One of Gruber’s motives in publishing this book is interesting in its own right. As he states in his introduction, his study of the *Union Hymnal* included hymns by Jewish women, among them liturgical poems by Aguilar. But a

2 On some of the ways to achieve this goal, see below, §17.