
American Palestine: Mark Twain and the Touristic Comodification of the Holy Land

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This presentation extends research from my book American Palestine: Melville, Twain, and the Holy Land Mania (Princeton University Press, 1999). While I am speaking of only one author, Mark Twain, the implications of his representations of the Holy Land extend deeply into late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American culture.

During a carriage ride with his wife Mary Todd Lincoln on Good Friday, April 14, 1865, the day of his assassination, Abraham Lincoln discussed taking a trip, now that the civil war had drawn to a close. They debated whether to travel to California or to take “a special pilgrimage to Jerusalem.”¹ One account even has Lincoln later that night turning to his wife moments before the assassin’s ball tears through his skull to whisper, “How I should like to visit Jerusalem sometime!”² His wife wrote in a letter a year later that the President “appeared to anticipate much pleasure, from a visit to Palestine,” although he was at least now “rejoicing in the presence of his Saviour, and was in the midst of the Heavenly Jerusalem.”³

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I often relate this anecdote to illustrate the seemingly polar-opposite “directions” of travel and cultural consciousness Americans faced in the post-Civil War period. Jerusalem represented the cultural core, the legacy to which increasing numbers of Americans, their sense of identity shattered by the war, would travel to reclaim, to reconfirm the validity and authenticity of Protestant-dominated American religious-national myth. California, on the other hand, offered the new Eden, a land of wealth and abundance, the newest inscription of America’s myth as the New Holy Land, a land of special, providential destiny. East and West: both destinies “manifest,” both directions of imperial “globalization” linked by expectations and anxieties expressed in both religious and secular registers, a link paralleled by the soon-to-be completed transcontinental railroad in the West and the Suez Canal in the East. The relationship between California (or America overall) and Ottoman Palestine involved an intertextuality – a layering of Bible, travel accounts, and millennialist fantasies — along with a convoluted interterritoriality, an overlap of geographic signifiers. The practice of determining an exegetical relationship to the land – of “reading” Palestinian as well as American landscapes with scriptural import, what Cotton Mather called “Christianography” – made this relationship even more complex.

Lincoln did not travel to the earthly Jerusalem, but General Grant, after his presidency, did make the pilgrimage during his 1877-79 globe-circling tour. As the General approached Jerusalem he carried three books to serve as his guides: the Bible, essential textual grid; Murray’s Handbook, the standard tour guide; and Mark Twain’s *The Innocents Abroad*, published in 1869, a satiric, comic burlesque of Holy-Land travel books and an irreverent send-up of self-satisfied sanctimoniousness.⁴ While Mark Twain’s travel book

was enormously popular – and it is still regarded as the most-read travel book in American literature — only a relatively modest portion of it focuses on the Middle East. Nonetheless, *The Innocent's Abroad* has played a crucial role in presenting Ottoman Palestine to the American imagination. Yet how did it become an essential part of Grant's tour, as well as those of other Holy-Land travelers during this period? How did the book's irreverent, "touristic" appropriation dramatize changes in American attitudes towards Ottoman Palestine, particularly with the launching of early Zionist colonization?

Mark Twain, already a celebrated journalist from California and Nevada, made the journey as part of the 1867 tour on board *The Quaker City*. "The Wild Humorist of the Pacific Slope" was hired by a San Francisco newspaper to write travel letters as part of the very first large-scale tourist excursion cruise. "I basked in the happiness of being for once in my life drifting with the tide of a great popular movement" (27), he writes of the explosion of post-Civil War travel to Europe. While traveling through Europe – and appropriating Europe's cultural legacy – comprised most of the journey, "the grand goal of the expedition" was the Holy Land.

Much of the book satirizes the pretensions of the Northern industrial and commercial elite who traveled with the crude Southerner reconstructed as a Westerner: "The pleasure trip was a funeral excursion without a corpse," he writes. "There is nothing exhilarating about a funeral excursion without a corpse" (644). At the same time, Twain lambastes seekers of high culture, articulating the newly-developing sensibilities of "the business of sight-seeing," albeit in parodic fashion: "I cannot think of half the places we went to, or what we particularly saw; we had no disposition to examine carefully into anything at all – we only wanted to glance and go – to move, keep moving!" (96-97). Linked to

the mode of the constant accumulation of tourist sights is the ambition to find the truly, authentically, exotic, something “thoroughly and uncompromisingly foreign,” such as in Tangier, the first Arab city he visits, which he finds “foreign from top to bottom – foreign from center to circumference – foreign inside and outside and all around – nothing anywhere about it to dilute its foreignness – nothing to remind us of any other people or any other land under the sun” (76). At the same time, using the figure of the Wandering Jew observing his group, Twain voices the view of the anti-tourist, who has “a consuming contempt for the ignorant, complacent asses that go skurrying about the world in these railroading days and call it traveling” (578).

Tourist sensibility is rendered even more problematic in the Holy Land because of the complex intertextuality beyond, even, the Bible. “I can almost tell, in set phrase, what [travelers] will say when they see Tabor, Nazareth, Jericho and Jerusalem – *because I have the books they will ‘smouch’ their ideas from.* . . . The Pilgrims will tell of Palestine, when they get home, not as it appeared to *them*, but as it appeared to Thompson and Robinson and Grimes – with the tints varied to suit each pilgrim’s creed” (511-12). The vast library of American Holy Land books, along with accounts by British and Continental writers, created a thick textual lens and an elaborate set of travel and literary conventions through which engagement with the actual place was mediated. The landscape of Palestine was seen as evincing proof of the Bible’s authenticity. With deep involvement with millennialist scenarios, particularly those promoting the doctrine of Jewish restoration, Palestine was also seen as presenting evidences of prophecies and the site of their dramatic fulfillment, even of projects to “facilitate” prophecy, such as the Adams colony in Jaffa. As Rev. De Witt Talmage put it, “God with His left hand

built Palestine, and with His right wrote the Scriptures, the two hands of the same Being. And in proportion as Palestine is brought under close inspection, the Bible will be found more glorious and more true.”⁵

These dynamics became part of a developing, American nationalism as a covenantal settler colonial society. Dramatic examples include the fact that one of the first official acts of the Mormon church was to send Elder Orson Hyde in 1844 to Jerusalem in order to hold a ceremony announcing the imminent, simultaneous restoration of the Jews to the old Holy Land and the Latter-Day Saints to the New Holy Land; and Lt. William Lynch’s 1847 voyage down the Jordan and around the Dead Sea, a commission granted at the time of the American victory in the war with Mexico which, more than the scientific expedition it purported to be, afforded the nationalist opportunity for the American flag to wave over sacred waters.⁶

Along with these conventions, a sense of sacred theatricality, of the traveler imagining that he or she is participating in biblical scenes, joined orientalist theatricality, of travelers imagining themselves in Arabian Nights tales or dressing up in Turkish and Arab costumes, of participating in a sort of cultural transvestism. Another convention was the sense of disappointment with the material Palestine when compared to the imagined Holy Land, a feature found in all holy-land books, but especially in the more secular works, such as those by Bayard Taylor and J. Ross Browne. Palestine is a discrepancy between its textuality – the “large impressions in boyhood,” as Twain describes it – and its actuality, such as its smallness: “I could not conceive of a small country having so large a history.” In order “to profit by this tour,” Twain decides he must “unlearn a great many things I have somehow absorbed concerning Palestine,” and he devises what he calls “a system of

reduction” (486), bringing Palestine within an American context: “The State of Missouri could be split into three Palestines, and there would then be enough material left for part of another – possibly a whole one” (479). The Galilee, a “solemn, sailless, tintless lake . . . looking just as expressionless and unpoetical (when we leave its sublime history out of the question,) as any metropolitan reservoir in Christendom,” is a disappointment and cannot stand up against Lake Tahoe. The Galilee can “no more be compared to [Lake] Tahoe than a meridian of longitude is to a rainbow” (508).

These conventions – of expectation, of theatricality, of discrepancy, of disappointment, and even of affirmation of the sacred character of the American landscape – have all been displayed by previous writers, so much so that Twain can parody all of them while incorporating new dimensions. To expectation, discrepancy and disappointment, Twain adds appropriation, an Americanization of Palestinian realities through comic, mock violence. “We are camped near Temnin-el-Foka,” he relates, “a name which the boys have simplified a good deal, for the sake of convenience in spelling. They call it Jacksonville” (438). Coming across a group of Arab villagers, he makes the usual comparison of Arabs with Indians, but adding how the villagers “sat in silence, and with tireless patience watched our every motion with that vile, uncomplaining impoliteness which is so truly Indian, and which makes a white man so nervous and uncomfortable and savage that he wants to exterminate the whole tribe” (472-73). Such violence would be dismissed as crude chauvinism, except that the narrator undermines himself continually: his colonial fantasies reveal ironies, such as the “savagery” of the white man and the burlesque cowardice of the narrator. Nonetheless, the effect is to take the Holy Land and figuratively Americanize its geography and population.

While this could be seen as transforming the Holy Land into an American theme park, the semiotics of tourism are most clearly displayed – and enacted – at the shrines. Because the Christian shrines were controlled by the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, American Protestants felt great discomfit with them, particularly in accepting their authenticity. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre in particular was regarded as a “pious fraud,” so much so that Edward Robinson, the pioneering biblical archaeologist, refused even to study the building. One consequence of this discomfit was to privilege the landscapes of Palestine over the shrines, promoting “tent-life” for travelers in the Holy Land. Another consequence was the ability, under the guise of criticism of so-called “nominal” Christians, to mock the visible signs of religious piety, particularly since the poverty and perceptions of tawdriness interfere.

“When one stands where the Saviour was crucified,” Twain writes of the Church of Holy Sepulchre, “he finds it all he can do to keep it strictly before his mind that Christ was not crucified in a Catholic Church. He must remind himself every now and then that the great event transpired in the open air, and not in a gloomy, candle-lighted cell in a little corner of a vase church, up-stairs – a small cell all bejeweled and bespangled with flashy ornamentation, in execrable taste” (572).

In Italy Twain had already commented on Leonardo Da Vinci’s “The Last Supper.” Observing artists painting reproductions of the famous Old Master, Twain notes that the copies looked better than the originals. Twain addresses the question of authenticity – and the cultural capital invested in recognizing authenticity – through the humorous realization that the reproducible signs of a tourist site can altogether dis-

place the original as anything other than the inspiration for endless semiotic duplication.

But at least in Italy there was an original, a referent. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre has no validity, except, as Twain proceeds, the validity of its historicity. He remembers the building's "tremendous associations," such as the fact that, during the Crusades, "the most gallant knights that ever wielded sword wasted their lives away in a struggle to seize it and hold it sacred from infidel pollution" (573). It is the building itself – that site of Crusader battles and contemporary imperial rivalries, whose authenticity as a historical site supplants its authority as the scene of biblical events – that carries cultural value.

Twain deepens this secular designation when he comes to The Tomb of Adam to offer the comic epiphany of his tour of the shrine. Adam's grave located conveniently alongside the tomb of the second Adam in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre would present itself as the height of inauthentic "pious frauds" to the skeptical Protestant, making the site perfect for discursive transformation. "The tomb of Adam!" Twain exclaims – and this excerpt needs to be performed with the exaggerated, bombastic style of nineteenth-century speechifying.

"How touching it was, here in a land of strangers, far away from home, and friends, and all who cared for me, thus to discover the grave of a blood relation. True, a distant one, but still a relation. The unerring instinct of nature thrilled its recognition. The fountain of my filial affection was stirred to its profoundest depths, and I gave way to tumultuous emotion . . . (567)."

The mock lament careens from one parodic or burlesque performance to another – self-pity, sentimentality, bromide, "funerary flapdoodle" – hitting upon a series of major chords

of oratorical bombast of the time, its effect readily going beyond mere Protestant scoffing at Catholic and Orthodox impostures.

One critic a few years later hailed the passage as the height of “serio-comic weeping and wailing” and as an example of the “humorous sublime” – and the eulogy over Adam’s grave became one of the most celebrated passages in the book.⁷ Laughter could mock American sentimentality – the type of sentimentality that pervaded Holy-Land books, including William C. Prime’s *Tent-Life in the Holy Land* which Twain specifically parodied – but, as the critic Louis Budd rightly points out, the passage’s meaning “lay in the daring burlesque of reverence itself,” the satire of sanctity itself.⁸ The passage was so popular that years later, in 1902, a St. Louis newspaper could jokingly query, “Who is Mark Twain?” and answer:

The man who visited Adam’s tomb, the man who wept over the remains of his first parent. That beautiful act of filial devotion is known in every part of the globe, read by every traveler, translated into every language. Even the dusky savages of the most barbaric corners of the earth have heard of Mark Twain shedding tears at the tomb of Adam. By this time the ancient monument is fairly mildewed with the grief of Mark Twain’s imitators.⁹

Indeed, President Grant, upon visiting The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, participated in what had become a peculiarly American tourist practice: Grant was, at least in part, visiting the Tomb of Adam because it was the place where Mark Twain wept. Twain enforced the historicizing, secularist process,

inscribing himself upon the shrine, and therefore transforming the sacred site into a modern tourist attraction.

Through comic appropriation, values and identities, once exploded, can become cleared fields ready to be “settled” or “occupied” by new meanings. Once the numinous quality of religious sites, like the numinous quality of Da Vinci’s Last Supper, is punctured, the application of invented use values and exchange values begins to alter the uniquely holy into the profanely exchangeable. Religious values inherent in a place or a building – suspiciously akin to a too-Catholic sensibility of incarnation – are now able to be detached or moved or replicated or regarded as separate from the embodiment of its meaning. While this dynamic – the comic disruption of all authority — becomes an important part of Twain’s later writing, perhaps most evinced in Huck Finn’s declaration, “Alright, I’ll go to hell,” rather than turn in the escaped slave Jim – Twain has little occasion to repeat it in the Holy Land or the Middle East in other works.

However, *Tom Sawyer Abroad*, published in 1894, gave Twain one more opportunity to supplant religious with bourgeois, secular values regarding the Holy Land. This potboiler, although not one of Twain’s more memorable works, carries Tom Sawyer, Huck Finn, and Jim in a balloon ride across Africa to Egypt. Before their arrival, however, Tom attempts to recruit Huck and Jim to join a Crusade in a characteristic logomachy or word-war, a sort of brilliantly absurd Socratic dialogue. “A crusade is a war to recover the Holy Land from the paynim,” Tom asserts, against the Socratic questions of Huck and Jim. “Why, the Holy Land – there ain’t but one” – although we know, considering the dual-Holy Land sensibility, how ironic that statement is. Eventually, Tom explodes in frustration to counter Huck and Jim’s assertions that it would be theft to steal someone’s land: “They own the land, just the

mere land, and that's all they do own; but it was our folks, our Jews and Christians, that made it holy, and so they haven't any business to be there defiling it. It's a shame, and we ought not to stand it a minute. We ought to march against them and take it away from them." Tom ultimately quits arguing with people who "try to reason out a thing that's pure theology by the laws that protect real estate."¹⁰

What Tom presents is the rationale for the "Peaceful Crusade," the particular movement of Europeans and, to a lesser degree, Americans, whether or not they were sanctioned by their respective governments, to participate in the Eastern Question through fervid Christian intervention and colonization in Palestine. Published at the dawn of Herzlian Zionism, the dialogue could also be seen as critiquing that latest form of "recovering" the land for "our Jews and Christians." Here "the laws that protect real estate" are those of bourgeois relations, the same "laws" that have, through irreverence, placed the Tomb of Adam in the realm of the tourist site. One of Twain's favorite burlesque techniques was to take a high-minded spiritual value, such as "pure theology," and render it in terms of mundane, commercial language. But as Tom asserts, and Twain satirizes, religious and national narratives can counter even property rights, just so long as a "higher" right, notably the needs of empire, is asserted. Twain's satire is directed more broadly than only the appropriation of Palestine — rather, it targets all imperialist rationales, such as those that would soon lead the United States to expropriate the Philippines after its war with Spain. In *The Innocents Abroad* Twain uses comic subversion to strip religion of its aura in favor of bourgeois, "tourist" values; decades later, in *Tom Sawyer Abroad* he employs commonsensical, bourgeois "property rights" to strip away the aura of the "natural" from the religious rationales of imperial ideology. The secular, American encounter with the

Holy Land entails other dynamics – and as the twentieth century progressed that would also include humanist, secular support for colonization – but in Mark Twain we see one strand of American cultural tradition: the transformative power of irreverence.

Notes

¹ Justin G. Turner and Linda Levitt Turner, *Mary Todd Lincoln: Her Life and Letters* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 218. Lester I. Vogel brought the Holy Land-Lincoln connection to my attention in *To See a Promised Land: Americans and the Holy Land in the Nineteenth Century* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 41.

² Dorothy Meserve Kunhardt and Philip B. Kunhardt, Jr., *Twenty Days* (Secaucus, NJ: Castle Books, 1965), 29.

³ Mary Todd Lincoln, letter to James Smith, 17 December 1866, quoted in J. Turner and L. Turner, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 400.

⁴ Mark Twain (Samuel L. Clemens), *The Innocents Abroad, or The New Pilgrim's Progress* (Hartford, CT: American Publishing Co., 1869). All parenthetical references are to this edition.

⁵ Thomas De Witt Talmage, *Talmage on Palestine: A Series of Sermons* (1890; facsimile, New York: Arno Press, 1977), 140.

⁶ For accounts of both expeditions, see Elder Orson Hyde, *A Voice from Jerusalem, or a Sketch of the Travels and Ministry of Elder Orson Hyde* (Boston: Albert Morgan, 1842) and William F. Lynch, *Narrative of the United States' Expedition to the River Jordan and the Dead Sea* (1849; reprint, Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1850).

⁷ Samuel S. Cox, *Why We Laugh* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1880), 58-59.

⁸ Louis J. Budd, *Our Mark Twain: The Making of His Public Personality* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 38.

⁹ *St. Louis Republic*, 1 June 1902, quoted in Budd, *Our Mark Twain*, 37.

¹⁰ Mark Twain, *Tom Sawyer Abroad* (New York: Charles L. Webster, 1894), 21-25.

When Twain read an advertisement for a voyage to Europe and the Holy Land, he sensed a golden opportunity. He persuaded the Alta California newspaper to cover the \$1,250 cost of the trip in return for weekly columns. Twain, however, found the Holy Land disappointing. Israel was not all what he had expected. Benjamin Shapell, president of the Shapell Manuscript Foundation, observes, "Musing about the voyage in a passage later published in *Innocents Abroad*, Twain so aptly noted: "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness." The exhibit features letters by such notable fellow travelers to Palestine as President Ulysses S. Grant, Gen. William T. Sherman and Theodore Roosevelt.