

4-7-2006

# Mocking Mohammad: Mark Twain's Depiction of Arabs and Muslims in *The Innocents Abroad*

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Mocking Mohammad: Mark Twain's Depiction of Arabs  
and Muslims in *The Innocents Abroad*

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of English  
College of Arts and Sciences  
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Date of Approval:  
April 7, 2006

Keywords: Middle East, Orientalism, prejudice, racism, West

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study on Mark Twain's *The Innocents Abroad* is to investigate the various personal and socio-historical reasons for Twain's disrespectful and intolerant depiction of the people of the Middle East in juxtaposition to his lighter treatment of Europeans of the Mediterranean, whom he also wrote about at length in the same travel narrative.

The research involves examining the main text, but also considers the long history of Western attitudes towards the Middle East, Twain's prejudicial upbringing, his strong penchant for exaggeration, his sense of opportunism, and the books and contemporary social attitudes that may have influenced his thinking.

Research reveals an intricate web of complexity behind Mark Twain's attitude in his writing. It also reveals that the many of his critics fall prey and become entangled in the very same web of complicated and skewing factors that trapped Twain nearly one hundred and fifty years ago.

## Foreword

Situated about one hundred meters from the main gate of the American University of Beirut is a busy little florist's shop run by a Shiite Muslim and his three adult sons. When I am in Beirut, I buy flowers from this establishment because the floral arrangements and bouquets are stunning in their beauty, easily surpassing anything I have seen anywhere in Europe or North America. These gifted florists also happen to be outspoken supporters of Hizbullah and regularly have their shop TV set on the political party's *Al-Manar* channel. I wish to describe a brief incident that occurred there one day several years ago; I believe it will help clarify my intention in my paper on Mark Twain's journey to the Middle East as described in *The Innocents Abroad*.

While waiting for my flower order to be processed on one particular occasion, I watched as the Hizbullah station aired a running critique of the movie *Lawrence of Arabia*. Clip by clip, the commentators dissected various scenes: "The Arabs will always be a little people, greedy, cruel and barbarous," railed Peter O' Toole. Then, Anthony Quinn, as a hook-nosed tribal leader, gleefully ran off a ransacked train with a ridiculous-looking clock held to his chest. These scenes not only provoked the ire of the Muslim commentators, who frequently interjected themselves to say, "Look, look how they mock us. Look how they think we are so stupid, so greedy, so petty," but the florists looked up

at the screen intermittently as they went about their work, grunting in disgust, and nodding their heads in agreement with the commentators.

It was a startling moment for me, because it was only then that I realized that a movie that Westerners might watch merely for entertainment value, a movie even I, an Arab-American, had enjoyed watching several times in the past, was recognized by these men as an active symbol of the pattern of humiliation and misrepresentation of Arab and Muslims by the West. How this is connected to Mark Twain's *The Innocents Abroad*, is very straightforward, in my view.

Twain's pen and access to publishing made him an authority he might not have ever intended to be on the Middle East. By the end of the nineteenth century, his *Innocents Abroad* was touted as the foremost travel book and authority on the Holy Land. Many travelers, including former president Grant, boasted that they carried it along just as they carried their Bible, as their guide to the Holy Land. In this manner, Twain's own prejudices, personal views, and exaggerations for the sake of humor and profit were elevated to a powerful, legitimated level. His travel account of the Middle East would contribute to the set pattern of what some scholars and thinkers label as "Orientalism." Regardless of the term one uses, what is apparent, and unfortunate, is that Twain's *Innocents Abroad* would effectively lend itself to categorizing and defining the Middle East and its people in an unfavorable and derogatory light. It would also play at the forefront of a wave of such negative attitudes as promoted by the various media, as in American movies or news stories even today.

The repercussions are real, long-lasting, and divisive, as evidenced so simply by reaction of the Muslims of the flower shop which, though on Arab soil, stands today in the shadow of an American university. Even during the month of February, 2006, and continuing today, the Muslim world is in an uproar over depictions in Norwegian, Danish, and French newspapers that have published cartoons viewed as mocking of Prophet Mohammad and the Islamic faith. Since we are, I believe, at a critical juncture in the relationship between the West and the Middle East, it is important to study this pattern of misrepresentation, if only to recognize its pitfalls and its consequences for both sides. Mark Twain's *The Innocents Abroad* reflects the intricate web of complexity behind this not-so-subtle mockery of the people of the Middle East. It therefore invites the discerning reader to take a closer look.

## Introduction

Mark Twain, although inclined to make fun of all people in his travel narrative entitled *The Innocents Abroad*, shows a disproportionate intolerance for the Arabs and Muslims of the Middle East. Although he claimed to have wanted to be impartial in describing his observations on his Mediterranean tour of 1867, he could not be objective, nor would he necessarily find impartiality to be the most lucrative approach. Because of growing American interest in the Holy Land on the heels of the Civil War and the unsettling introduction of Darwinism, Twain saw an opportunity to bolster his reputation by traveling to and writing about this locus of Christian faith. Since he was making his mark as a humorist, he used exaggeration and vulgar humor to maximize the draw on his audience. There were, however, other factors over which Twain had little or no control that influenced his reaction and description of the Middle East, and not just in the Holy Land, but across the region. Twain came from a racist background, from a slave-owning family that had instilled a racist view in him and made him far less likely to be accepting of people who were racially and culturally different. Twain also was part of the Christian/Western culture that had grown to abhor and fear Islam. This, coupled with his preconceived notions of the Middle East, shaped in part by his boyhood readings of

books like *Arabian Nights* and then his later exposure to melodramatic travel narratives, which alternately gave either a falsely romantic notion of the Middle East or a portrayal of the backwardness of its people, left Twain unprepared for the realities he would encounter once he actually visited. It is the combination of all these factors that helps explain Twain's disrespectful and derogatory depiction of the people of the Middle East, in juxtaposition to his lighter treatment of Europeans of the Mediterranean, about whom he also wrote at length in the same travel narrative.

In 1867, when he first embarked on his journey to Europe and the Middle East, Mark Twain was still a young man and only just beginning to find acclaim as a writer. Having only recently acquired a modicum of celebrity through the success of his short story, "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," Twain sought to propel his own career by tapping into America's "ongoing preoccupation with the Holy Land" (Obenzinger x). The United States was longing then for a period of healing and spiritual reconnection after the horrors of the Civil War. A renewed religious fervor, expressed mainly through a rise in devout Protestantism had emerged in the United States. Avid Bible reading and regular church attendance necessarily meant that Americans were more familiar with "biblical events, personages, and locales" (Vogel 29). This developing familiarity and thirst for a connection to the "Old World" from whence Christianity first sprang, grew into a massive desire on the part of the American public to discover for themselves the magic and mystery of the Holy Land (Obenzinger x).

The *Daily Alta California*, a newspaper for which Twain had done previous work, recognized this growing interest in the public and agreed to Twain's request to be

sponsored on the “Holy Land Pleasure Excursion”(Smith 22). He was offered a \$1250 cruise ticket, in exchange for regular letters in which he would describe his experiences. (Jacobs xvii). These letters, some lost and reinvented, some reshuffled, some later amended and embellished, would become the foundation of the immensely popular travel book titled, *The Innocents Abroad or The New Pilgrims’ Progress* (Robinson 27).

## Outward Bound: Background Information on the Holy Land Excursion

Published in 1869, *The Innocents Abroad* gives a more or less chronological account of Twain's observations, beginning with a description of the excited stirrings "everywhere in America" about the impending journey, and ending with a melodramatic reminiscence of his adventure in the last chapter. To inform the reader of the scope of the journey better, Twain inserts the text of the original program. It reveals a cruise to be taken on a fine ship, the *Quaker City*, with all the amenities and luxuries possible, including musical instruments and a modest library. The itinerary promises a five-month journey, steaming from New York, and across the Atlantic to stop at the Azores, Gibraltar, Spain, France, and Italy, then on to Turkey, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt.

Dignitaries such as the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher and Lieutenant General Sherman were expected to travel on board the ship, and this elevated the interest of the general public. Not just anyone could go; applications had to be submitted, and each passenger had to be approved. However, when the other celebrities backed out for various reasons, Twain found himself to be one of the biggest names on board the ship he would share with approximately seventy fellow passengers, most of whom were pilgrims eager to catch a glimpse of the Holy Land. This situation would prove a little awkward

for Twain, who now may have felt he always had to present himself as the boisterous humorist amidst the “pious quietude of this shipboard congregation” (Hoffman 124). He was dismayed to find that his fellow passengers were not only significantly older than he was, but they were far more conservative, outwardly pious, socially rigid, and more reserved than what suited Twain (Smith 63).

With his reputation as the humorist under constant scrutiny, Twain sustained his expected role by setting up a smoking, card-playing, storytelling room, in which he was the man in command over a limited passel of like-minded renegades. The rest of the passengers were included in what he would write about as he observed their behavior and interactions with the natives in each country along the way, but they were also the kind of people for whom he would write, the well-to-do, pious Christians interested in travel, and overwhelmingly invested in seeing and experiencing the Holy Land. They were impatient American tourists who would consistently exhibit a simple and often naïve curiosity about the places they had wondered about all their lives (Vogel 87).

Twain spares no detail as he begins to recount his journey. He describes fellow passengers, green with motion sickness, his pleasure at finding well-made musical instruments in the parlor, and the cocktail-like atmosphere on board. He had initially called the trip something of a fancy picnic, writing in a letter to a colleague: “We have got a crowd of tiptop people, & shall have a jolly, sociable, homelike trip of it for the next five or six months” (Smith 54). Following chapters, however, which describe Twain’s actions and interactions, no longer within the safe and familiar confines of the ship, but with the people and places of Europe and the Middle East, show an increasing

erosion of the droll attitude with which he began and a disturbing increase of unforgiving sarcasm, cruel mockery, and undisguised horror, especially when he encounters people who are most unlike himself.

## Twain's Multiple Personae

Perhaps some clarification is in order of who Twain was as narrator aboard the *Quaker City*, all along the Mediterranean tour, and through the various revisions before the first publication of *The Innocents Abroad*. Making such a distinction is not an easy one, and may in fact be impossible to delineate. Twain himself probably laughs from the grave when he sees how various critics and Twain scholars attempt to explain the complex interplay between his various identities and personae.

Samuel Langhorne Clemens adopted the name Mark Twain in 1863, four years before the Quaker City excursion (Fishkin, *Historical* 14). The man who was born Clemens created the persona of Mark Twain, an invention which allowed him greater license to write and behave more wildly. It was not long, however, before “he himself began to elide the distinction between, even to merge the two identities” (Kaplan 1). Some critics go further to explain that the persona Twain invented yet another version of Mark Twain in *The Innocents Abroad* to act as the sarcastic, disillusioned narrator of experiences in Europe and the Middle East (Meeh 4). Many critics, such as Louis Budd, Forrest Robinson, Shelley Fishkin, and Andrew Hoffman, agree, however, that regardless of how one perceives the narrator Mark Twain, he was inextricably linked to the man

Samuel Clemens, some going so far as to say they were so alike in perspective as to be conjoined twins (Fatout xv). Twain scholar, Paul Fatout, refuses to even try to make the distinction “because the line of demarcation seems . . . so vague and shifting, so blurrily defined that it is difficult, at times impossible, to discern where Clemens yields to Twain and vice versa”(xv). Shelley Fisher Fishkin poses a similar question: were Samuel Clemens and Mark Twain “ultimately the same—or possibly too close to disentangle?” (Fishkin, *Historical* 6).

Repeatedly, commentators on Mark Twain will throw in a caution regarding his identity, but do not know what to do with it once it is presented. We pay attention to a certain distinction, but we cannot hold on to it for long. Fishkin points out that biographers, such as Andrew Hoffman, author of *Inventing Mark Twain: The Lives of Samuel Langhorne Clemens*, “has problems of his own in maintaining the distinction” between Twain and Clemens (15). Hoffman himself says “When Mark Twain ‘remembered’ something from his childhood, he remembered Sam Clemens’s childhood,” thus suggesting that Clemens’s experiences were the foundation for Twain’s various perspectives on important issues (Hoffman xiii). Everett Emerson also agrees that what Mark Twain wrote was necessarily influenced by and connected to the life of Samuel L. Clemens (x). It must suffice to say, then, that Sam Clemens used the persona of Mark Twain, with all the twists, assumptions, angles, exaggerations, to get certain, sometimes unconventional, ideas and opinions across to his varying audiences.

Louis Budd in “Mark Twain as American Icon” discusses Twain’s immeasurable devotion to his own publicity, and that he “tolerated – for decades, gratis – commercial

uses of his face and either of his names” (2). Twain/Clemens shifted back and forth to suit whatever agenda he had. At times, the shifting may not have been fully consciously intended, and even Twain could not always crisply maintain one persona or the other. His writing in *The Innocents Abroad* shows apparent “unguarded shifts in tone . . . [and] at particular times betrays “a conspicuous incapacity to sustain a tone of humorous impersonation,” in Forrest Robinson’s view (31). The resulting assumption is that the several identities of Mark Twain were expressions of the same man, a man who had at different times wished to portray himself in various and shifting ways. Mark Twain the writer, Mark Twain the narrator, and their creator, Samuel Clemens, all collaborated on *The Innocents Abroad*. To reduce any confusion to the reader while reading this paper on Mark Twain’s treatment of various people and locales in *The Innocents Abroad*, the various personae will be referred to heretofore simply as Mark Twain.

## Twain's Opportunism

This complex traveler's excursion to the Holy Land encapsulated what "was a sight, an experience, which each pilgrim had dreamed of since he started reading the Bible" (Walker 30). Widespread attraction for the Holy Land experience spurred a wave of enthusiastic travelers, as well as a multitude of eager listeners at home who wanted to hear news and viewpoints by those who had ventured abroad (Kane 1). The hype extended to the nature of the books recommended one should take on the journey to the Middle East. For example, *The Land and the Book: Or Biblical Illustrations Drawn from the Manners and Customs, the Scenes and Scenery of the Holy Land* (1858) by William M. Thompson, was one highly recommended travel book. Its introduction magnifies the importance of the Holy Land and advises readers that "Palestine may be fairly regarded as the divinely prepared tablet whereon God's messages to men have been graven in ever-living characters" (IA <http://etext.virginia.edu/railton/innocent/iahompag.html>). The fascination with the Holy Land, thus, had little to do with the reality of the actual place as it existed in the present. Rather, it was the mystical, religious link to the past that made it a priority on any traveler's list (Vogel 7).

Twain, with his acute sense for the leanings of the American public, regarded this journey as the ideal vehicle for the foundation of his reputation and fame as a writer (Davis xvi). “Americans were on the move,” (Melton, *Travel Books* 5) and Mark Twain would maximize this golden opportunity to move with them, to surf on the wave of their momentum (Melton 59). He may have had a personal interest in seeing the Holy Land, and he certainly loved to travel, but Twain was also a shrewd strategist when it came to promoting himself as a writer. Hilton Obenzinger, author of *American Palestine: Melville, Twain, and the Holy Land Mania*, asserts “Twain [was] well aware of how much Palestine was a particular ‘mania’ in the minds of so many Americans”(xiii). Early on, Mark Twain wanted to establish his reputation and name as an author. This “mania,” concerning the Holy Land, he recognized, would fuel his ambitions to become one of America’s literary giants (Gribben 40). Consequently, Twain, though himself not a deeply religious man, had his curiosity piqued “by the hoopla that had much of New York aroused” and set about the business of ensuring his own passage on the ship that would take him and other pilgrims on this once-in- a-lifetime voyage aboard the *Quaker City*, the luxurious ship which would carry Twain and others to the coveted locale (Vogel 44).

It is worthy to note that at the time of the Holy Land excursion, America was not only recovering from the brutality of the Civil War, but was also nursing what many perceived as a diseased soul, corrupted by industrialization, urbanization and the seeping threat of Darwinism (Vogel 36). The “spiritual crisis of the Gilded Age” had begun, and Twain would simultaneously condemn it and be a part of it (Bush, *American Adam* 291).

A man of many faces, Mark Twain, was as “disenchanted by the national scramble for wealth as he was fatally attracted to it” and looked upon the upcoming trip with the exploitative eye of a hawk and the excitement of a boy (Fishkin, *Historical* 43). His financial ambitions would later become readily apparent on hearing a proposal for a contract to publish a “Quaker City Book” based on the precious letters he wrote during his journey. In a letter to his mother he writes-- “But I had my mind made up to *one* thing- --I wasn’t going to touch a book unless there was *money* in it, and a great deal of it” (Paine *Mark Twain* 82). That money, he knew, would come from publishers wishing to please the people of this healing, reeling America.

To cater to the interests of this audience, Twain would seek to exploit a special angle and distinguish himself from the pack of writers who had gone to the Middle East before him. Certainly, there was also public interest in Europe, but the Holy Land was the jewel on which all of his compatriots set their eyes as America emerged from a war that had pitted brother against brother, and during a time in which doubt about the creation of man had thrust a sword of vulnerability into the hearts of the Christian faithful. New scientific and intellectual discoveries had put cracks in the Christian faith and in biblical infallibility as the absolute, indispensable, nonnegotiable word of God, and the consequent growth of a gnawing doubt ate at the souls of most Americans (Bush, *American Adam* 292). In the midst of these changes within society, Twain believed he could achieve fame through his writing if he could only seize the right moment (Hoffman 57). When he realized there was an audience eager to read about the main earthly locale that still anchored them to their religion, he saw that his moment had arrived (Davis xvi).

Twain would capture this audience through humor and would use the people he encountered along the way as the richest fodder for his work. The more outrageous his writing, the more attention his work would draw. “[T]o put the matter bluntly,” Louis Budd comments, “Twain did not just welcome publicity; he eagerly sought it . . .” and was often willing to compromise reality at times to get it (78). Truth was always a complicated matter to him anyway and his “prodigious memory often found congenial company with a contrary impulse; the tale teller’s impulse to improve memory with fiction” (Powers 51). Twain believed a story had to be told a certain way, and that only an artist could tell a story properly (Twain, “How to Tell . . .” 155). Thus, his mission was not so much to portray the truth about his journey, but rather to reflect a humorous, exaggerated version of it, which would be more entertaining to his audience.

Twain admitted that he could not see anything that had not been seen before in the “Old World,” and in an effort to be original, he would deliberately transcend the bridge from mere observer to that of caustic critic, grabbing the readers’ attention by exaggerating and denigrating what he saw, especially in the Holy Land (Melton, *Travel Books* 63). He would distinguish his writing by infusing his own personality and making it the core attraction of his narrative. Consequently, instead of just reporting what he saw, Mark Twain concentrated on describing his often outrageous opinions and reactions to what he saw, and he spent less time describing the sites themselves. Because he felt, too, a sense of competition in the form of other passengers who also were writing letters to various newspapers, Twain knew his writing had to scream for attention (Hoffman 125). Furthermore, since “his strength was comedy, he prepared ridiculous expectations so that

actual experiences would unsettle him,” thus providing for rich commentary throughout his narrative (Emerson 48).

Ironically, *The Innocents Abroad* begins “innocently” enough, with a preface in which Mark Twain professes his aim to “suggest to the reader how *he* would be likely to see Europe and the East if he looked at them with his own eyes instead of the eyes of those who traveled in those countries before him.” He was referring to travelers such as Eliot Warburton, Bayard Taylor, and William C. Prime, and had Twain written a typical, essentially complimentary, travel narrative like his predecessors, he may have dissolved into obscurity; but he chose to write, in what would become his trademark fashion, a biting, sarcastic, overwhelmingly disapproving criticism of what he saw. His writing betrays a complex man, inevitably influenced by his own needy character, as well as by the history, faith and culture of his country and ancestors. Twain may have sought to be impartial yet, his attitude towards Muslims and “his apparently unvarnished construction of Palestine is as partial and prejudiced as any of the other creedal travelers...” (Obenzinger 49). Twain’s notion that he could present a completely independent view, uncomplicated and uncorrupted, was not true.

## Treatment of Europe vs. Treatment of Middle East

*The Innocents Abroad*, which launches with a humorous poking fun at the “slow, poor, shiftless, sleepy, and lazy people of the Azores” and the customs, habits and idiosyncrasies of people, animals and landscape across Europe, abruptly shifts into a horrified, brutal criticism of the people and places of the Middle East (32). At the beginning of the journey, such as when he is still in the Azores, Twain is more lighthearted in his criticism. The natives are ignorant, perhaps, but essentially harmless. His tone is condescending, yet not condemnatory. He finds the people simple; they eat without a “thirst” for knowledge, and are childishly naïve, believing, for example, that a sliver of wood is that of the original Cross (33). His mood is still very much a happy one, as he exclaims “[i]t was fun, skurrying (*sic*) around the breezy hills and through the beautiful canons” (35).

His attitude throughout Europe is similarly light in comparison to what he will later say about the people of the Middle East. For example, though he chooses to focus on the horrors of the dungeons and prisons of Morocco, in “elegant” France, he writes about the champagne and “stylishly dressed women”(65). He plays delightedly at French expressions, sprinkling his narrative with phrases such as, “*Madame, avez- vous du vin?*”

He further embellishes by describing gardens: “Surely the leagues of bright green lawns are swept and brushed and watered every day and their grasses trimmed by the barber” (71). When he does mention the prisons of France, it is in a romantic fashion, waxing poetic about the travails of the Three Musketeers or some lonely prisoner who etched a poignant poem “full of pathos” into his cell wall (69). Baffled by the extraordinary politeness with which French guards told him he and his traveling companions were trespassing on ground reserved for royalty, Twain confesses “We [Americans] are measurably superior to the French in some things, but they are immeasurably our betters in others.” One would be hard pressed to find in Twain a similar appreciation for anything Arab or Muslim.

His overwhelming preference for the European people and customs is apparent in numerous lines of his narrative. “In France all is clockwork, all is order,” Twain reports (73). He further revels over “the Prado—that superb avenue bordered with patrician mansions and noble-shade trees” (67). He exalts “Versailles! It is wonderfully beautiful!” (107) This, compared to his description of the Grand Bazaar of Istanbul as a “monstrous hive of little shops,” clearly shows how Twain is partial to the European culture (264). He describes the bazaar in Turkey as crawling with “. . .weird-looking and weirdly dressed Mohammedans . . .” (265). In Twain’s opinion “[t]he English know how to travel comfortably, and they carry soap with them. . .” (131). But by contrast, in Turkey, “. . .the only solitary thing one does not smell when he is in the Great Bazaar, is something which smells good” (265).

His trek through Italy conjures up additional favorable images like that of Romeo and Juliet, of romance, in contrast to the condemnatory tone he espouses throughout the Middle East. In Italy, Mark Twain expresses a desire to interact with the locals: “We wish to learn all the curious, outlandish ways of all the different countries . . . [w]e wish to excite the envy of our untraveled friends” (164). Clearly, his attitude is robust and positive. Ironically, he is so impressed with the beauty and richness of the Cathedral of Milan that he says “it was an Aladdin’s palace” (125), but the Mosque of St. Sophia in Istanbul “is the rustiest old barn in heathendom” (261). While the Bois de Boulogne “is simply beautiful, cultivated, endless, wonderful wilderness” (95), Twain chooses to describe Constantinople as “the very heart and home of cripples and human monsters” (261). The kind of description he gives of Magdala of Syria as “thoroughly ugly, and cramped, squalid, uncomfortable and filthy . . .” (372), will remain the predominant theme of just about every town and village across the Middle East.

His portrayal of European cities, people and landscape is nowhere near as critical, and never so consistently critical as are his depictions of the same in the Middle East. For instance, in Venice, he casually pokes fun at people’s blind faith in Christian myth and superstition, but he does not appear threatened by it. He is patronizing, but not pulverizing. He comments, for example, on how different chapels each claim to hold the ashes of John the Baptist. It is a ridiculous claim, in his view, as is expressed when he exclaims: “but isn’t this relic matter a little overdone?” (116). Of Versailles he says, “I used to abuse Louis XIV for spending two hundred millions of dollars in creating this marvelous park, when bread was so scarce with some of his subjects; but I have forgiven

him now” (108). His tone is playful, and more or less gentle in its mocking nature. His criticism is even less abusive when he mocks how Italians pronounce the names of artists like Michelangelo or Leonardo da Vinci. He jests: “foreigners always spell better than they pronounce” (128). While in Venice, he feels comfortable enough to say “[h]uman nature appears to be just the same, all over the world” (163). He feels safe enough to include the Italians in his world, but it is worth noting that he does not profess to share the same human platform when he encounters Muslims and Arabs.

Twain also is biased not just about the landscape, architecture, and outward appearance of the Turks and Arabs, but also disapproves of how they behave and live their lives: “And would you suppose that an American mother could sit for an hour, with her child in her arms, and let a hundred flies roost upon its eyes all that time undisturbed?” he says in ridicule of an Arab mother (349). He expresses a deep loathing for the manner in which the Turks treat their animals, which he believes they torture to “the very verge of death, and then they leave them to live and suffer” (270). Determined to portray only what is negative, Twain ignores the many achievements of Arabs, such as their history of leadership in the fields of science and medicine (Maalouf 131). His sweeping disapproval of Arabs is revealed when he claims, “They never invent anything, never learn anything” (327). Although Arabs had a “tradition of religious and legal learning,” as well as “other traditions of secular literature, philosophical and scientific thought, and mystical speculation . . .” Twain conveniently dismisses anything honorable in Arab tradition or history (Hourani 81). Instead, he describes Damascus as “the most fanatical Mohammedan purgatory out of Arabia” (338). The people of Naples may

“swarm about you, and sweat and smell offensively, and look sneaking and mean, and obsequious,” he declares (224), but the “Damascenes are the ugliest, wickedest looking villains we have ever seen” (338). Fundamentally, Twain reduces the Arabs to the level of animals. One example of this is when he says “the tents are tumbling, the Arabs are quarreling like dogs and cats, as usual . . . ,” thereby implying this is how they have always been and this is how they will continue to be (360).

Indeed, there are countless examples where Twain mocks the cutthroat barbers of Italy and France, and compares them to skin-scalding, barbarians of a guillotiner nature, and so on, but his mood throughout remains lightly sarcastic. He also mocks his guides throughout Europe. Indeed, Twain complains and ridicules everything along the way, but the change in the level of intensity and venom in his description of the Arabs and Turks is undeniable. His outlook changes significantly when he encounters Arabs and Muslims, whom he consistently describes in only the most derogatory terms, usually as freaks dressed in “strange oriental costumes,” and as filth and vermin (338). The reasons why he consistently does so are varied and complex.

Twain may have wanted to believe he could write objectively, and was arrogant or confident enough to believe he could convince others that he possessed this impossible talent. The title itself suggests the “innocent” image he liked to project of himself and his fellow travelers. But Twain, like all men, could not escape his own history. He was opportunistic but was not, as John McCloskey attempts to assert in “Mark Twain as Critic in *The Innocents Abroad*” merely “stirring these ant hills . . . [to] exercise his function as a journalistic humorist” (140). Twain could not escape several things, one of which is any

writer's tendency "to judge foreign nations by his own and eventually, if he is not narrow-minded, his own country by foreign countries" (Fleck 39). Beyond the façade of humor and cleverness, lay Twain's own prejudices as a white man, a Christian, and an American.

## Twain's Engrained Racism

Twain once said in an essay titled "Concerning the Jews": "I am quite sure that (bar none) I have no race prejudices, and I think I have no color prejudices nor caste prejudices nor creed prejudices. Indeed, I know it" (238). This sounds benevolent, and no doubt he meant it as he said it, but one need only look at some of the letters he wrote to his mother, which express his disgust and lack of patience with the blacks, to know he had not been able to overcome his biases. In addition, he disliked American Indians, whom his mother had described to him as bloodthirsty savages who had attacked her family in the past (Powers 23). In fact, he once claimed that the two "ugliest things he could imagine [were] Indians and Negroes" (Pettit NIW 58). Since Twain frequently drew parallels between Arabs and the American Indians, for whom he had low regard, it is easy to see that he held Arabs in equally low esteem (Vogel 77). Lester Vogel argues that Twain's comparison of the two peoples "even jocularly," suggested that his "perception of the Arab populace [was] essentially primitive" (Vogel 85).

Twain's virulent dislike for the Arabs and Turks also can be measured in terms of his dislike of the Chinese, whom he had verbally abused oftentimes in the past. The destructive power behind his complaint that "I never disliked a Chinaman as I do these

degraded Turks and Arabs” then becomes quite evident (341). He complains of the “combination of Mohammedan stench, to which the smell even a Chinese quarter would be as pleasant as the roasting odors of the fatted calf to the nostrils of the returning Prodigal”(297). Twain not only contradicts his initial statement of exuding pure neutrality and absence of prejudices with these examples, but also does so when he admits, “[n]early all of us have an antipathy to a stranger, even of our own nationality” ( “How to Tell . . .” 248). His “antipathy” towards those in other countries, *The Innocents Abroad* would show, would only be greater.

Although prominent writer and critic William Dean Howells referred to him as the most “deSouthernized” man he had ever known, Twain could never shake off his somewhat negative view of other races, particularly, and most obviously, that of African Americans (Paine 400). Twain had been born into a slaveholding family, and grew up in a culture that defined blacks as an inferior people (Fishkin, *Historical* 127). In his autobiography, Twain admits that he had no “aversion to slavery” as child and did not know then that there was anything wrong with having slaves (8). Even if as an adult he came to believe that they should not be mistreated, he could never accept that they were his equals because the “America into which Sam Clemens was born in 1835 was marked by an ideology of racial hierarchy so pervasive and so firmly entrenched . . .” that the likelihood of his being able to shed his prejudices was not viable (Fishkin 127). Emotionally, Twain remained a racist (Fishkin 133).

Renowned Twain scholar, Arthur Pettit, discusses the duality of Twain’s personality regarding race. He suggests that Twain vacillated back and forth between

feeling great compassion for his darker brothers and his outright rejection of their assumption that they could ever be his equals (88). Twain may have been outraged at any violence perpetrated against a black man and would speak out vociferously against such abominable behavior, but he also made a career out of his “nigger jokes” and frequently spoke of blacks in highly derogatory terms. He would make comments about their odor or about their “greasy” appearance, and “continued to be offended if Negroes chose to dispute their proper position of hierarchy” (Pettit 90).

Twain’s engrained feelings about the hierarchy of races in the U.S. is relevant to his treatment of Arabs and Muslims of the Middle East because if he believed that racial hierarchy in America was valid, and that blacks, Indians, Chinese, and others who were not white had lesser degrees of ability and potential as human beings, then this personal philosophy of his necessarily extended into his perception of a need for a “global hierarchy” (Baram 7). Thus, if Mark Twain, as the evidence above suggests, in his gut believed that he and other whites were cleaner, smarter, dressed more appropriately, were more civilized, and superior in every way to those who were darker or different, it necessarily affected how he would perceive, react to, and write about the people he encountered while traveling abroad.

His reaction to the Arabs and Turks, whom he would on several occasions in *The Innocents Abroad* compare directly to blacks and Indians, comes as no surprise (Obenzinger 221). Because they were people of a darker complexion, had different habits of dress and conduct, and could not speak English well, Twain responded negatively to them. Never mind that he could barely splutter a few words in any of their languages. His

view was that he and his kind were the standard, and anything else was necessarily lesser. His depiction of his travels through the Middle East, therefore, sounds less like the “pleasure cruise” he refers to in his preface and more like a ship caught in a maelstrom. Therefore, while he is not exactly positive in his reaction to the Europeans, those who might argue that he is equally negative toward the lighter-skinned, more culturally familiar Europeans as he is to the Middle Easterners, need only be directed to the definite schism and shift in his vocabulary upon his first encounter with the North African Arabs in Tangiers. Upon leaving Spanish territory for Arab territory in Tangiers, Twain exclaims:

Elsewhere we have found foreign-looking things and foreign-looking people, but always with things and people intermixed that we were familiar with . . . [Tangiers is] something thoroughly and uncompromisingly foreign—foreign from top to bottom – foreign from centre to circumference—foreign inside and outside and all around—nothing anywhere to dilute its foreignness . . . (49).

## Rejection of Islam

Twain's depiction of the Arabs and Muslims moves beyond humor to a barely controlled disgust, not only because of the racism he cannot squelch but also because of a deep fear and abhorrence of Islam, not just any religion other than Christianity, but specifically Islam (Lewis 82). Ironically, it was also Twain's sliding faith in biblical Christianity that made him even more sensitive and less secure about his encounter with the Muslims. Twain experienced "an antagonism against Christianity" (Baender 1). Later in life he would exclaim, "I don't believe in this Bible. It contradicts my reason. I can't sit here and listen to it . . ." (Paine, *Mark Twain*, 411). The advent of Darwinism and the doubt it cast on the literal translation of the Bible would flatten Twain's faith yet make him especially sensitive to an "enemy" faith whose presence, as he viewed it, sought to undermine his own. The more intercourse he experienced in the Holy Land the more "the only God he had ever known began to lose his identity with distressing finality" (Bridgman 21). As Twain and his fellow traveling companions entered the reality of the Holy Land, disgracefully shed of its biblical grandeur and allure, "things became progressively more miserable, more concentratedly appalling, and much less inspiring" (Bridgman 24).

From a cultural standpoint, it was impossible for Twain to remain neutral in his observations in the “East.” Whether he liked it or not, Twain was on a particular side, that of the Christian West; he was an American culturally allied to the Europeans, whose forefathers led the Crusades to reclaim the Holy Land from the “barbarous infidels” who had wrestled it from them. With the British, many Americans “shared a heritage of Holy Land lore as Anglo-Saxon Protestants” (Vogel 194). Common European and American representations portrayed the Muslim as a primitive, degenerate and unnecessarily violent (Baram 4). Thus it is perhaps natural, considering his environment, that Twain feels justified in his criticism of the people of the Holy Land. It was common for Westerners to interpret whatever misery, poverty and disease they viewed in Arab culture as a fault of the society itself and in need only of the superior Westerner to expose them to the redemptive power and ingenuity of “the forces of western modernization” (Mitchell 198, Zwick 227). There was also a general bitterness felt by the Westerner because the Holy Land was seen as really belonging authentically only to the Christians. This incurred a “sense of injured pride, of molested personal property...”(Christison 20). Westerners bristled at the thought of “their” land under the control of “neglectful Turks as heirs of the Saracen victory over the Christian Crusaders centuries before” (Vogel 5).

The history of the relationship between the Muslim East and the Christian West is central to Twain’s reaction to the people of the Middle East. Historically, Christians regarded Islam as a bastard religion, fraudulent, evil, and dangerous. They were more likely to be tolerant of Jews, though they were “Christ-killers,” simply because Judaism was seen as a legitimate precursor to the Christian faith (Lewis, *Islam* 176). By contrast,

since Islam emerged after Christianity, Muslims were seen as the followers of an intruding anti-Christian faith promoted by a false prophet. Thus, the Prophet Mohammed and his followers were vilified, demonized, and met with a kind of horror. This in part helps explain, for example, Twain's remarkable "bigotry and prejudice" in depicting a benevolent French emperor versus an abominable Turkish sultan (Zughoul 85).

Twain was all too conscious as well of how he was seen as an unwelcome Christian. For example, he felt that "If ever we caught an eye exposed [from a Muslim woman] it was quickly hidden from our contaminating Christian vision . . ." (338). Repeatedly, Twain shows his distrust of the followers of Islam: "The Koran does not permit Mohammedans to drink. Their natural instincts do not permit them to be moral." (266). Unlike his relative feeling of belonging in Europe where he feels all humans are members of one global family, in Syria, he feels acutely like an unwelcome outsider: "How they hate a Christian in Damascus!" The vehemence of his words suggests his sense that he treads in cultural enemy territory. The tone is not emphasizing only a surface exasperation or annoyance as he experienced in Christian towns in Italy, for example.

Twain, who describes Turkish coffee as the worst "[o]f all unchristian beverages that ever passes [his] lips," exaggerates his representation of the Muslims as outrageous, dangerous freaks. But this was not a novel idea. Through each successive battle of the Crusades, and savagery displayed on both sides, the Western image of the Turkish and Arab Muslim would grow in its mythological grotesqueness. It was widely believed that the followers of Islam were involved in horrible vices and that their mock-prophet

Mohammed was the “epitome of lechery, debauchery, sodomy, and a whole battery of assorted vices” (Said 62). Muslim leaders, portrayed as child-eating, bloodthirsty savages, became the bogeymen of Europe. Mothers would threaten their children that if they did not behave, Sultan Mehmet would catch them in the middle of the night and eat them alive (Wheatcroft 25). The Turks in particular were painted either as lustful predators who exhausted their sexual prowess on their captive harems, or on children, or were seen as primitive, animalistic brutes, incapable of restraining their own murderous tendencies.

Furthermore, Twain’s mockery of Islam and its adherents came at the pinnacle of a gradual shift in Western attitude towards the East. As Europeans gained power, fear of the Muslims was evolving into disgust. Muslims of the Middle East were seen as backwards and ignorant, still savage and lustful, and in need of European discipline and reform. Since Islam was still regarded as a false religion, Europeans resisted giving it an air of legitimacy. For example, instead of referring to Muslims as Muslims, they preferred to refer to them as Mohammedans, as Twain does throughout the narrative, a term deliberately meant to de-legitimize the faith (Said 60). From the eighteenth century onwards, Christian Europe assumed an air of absolute superiority over the Orient. In all spheres that had any connection to the Middle East, this Christian European arrogance was perpetuated. The myth had solidified that the people of the Middle East were savage, incapable of using logic or restraining instinctual desires, incapable of proper self-government, and worse, that they would not and could not ever change (Lewis, *Islam* 26). This attitude is echoed by Twain when he says things to the effect that the Arabs never

invent or learn anything.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the time of Mark Twain's excursion to the Middle East, the myth had become ingrained in the consciousness of the Western world, and "anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic sentiments were as American as apple pie" (Little 4). Whether in Shakespearean plays, paintings, European diplomatic letters, personal accounts or travel books, the same message was always that the Orient was stagnating because its people were misguided, barbaric, incapable of mature thought, and in need, whether it realized it or not, accepted it or not, of the mature, sophisticated, Christian interference of the West. The Christian West effectively saw itself as the wise parent, right in its faith and its culture. Conversely, it saw the Middle East not only as a misguided child that needed discipline, but a retarded, hook-nosed child with violent tendencies, which would never and should never be allowed to be independent or to define itself (Said, *Orientalism* 38). Furthermore, the Westerner always indulged in a "certain freedom of intercourse . . . because his was the stronger culture, he could penetrate, he could wrestle with, he could give shape and meaning to the great Asiatic mystery . . ." (Said 44). Inevitably, Twain, an avid reader and active socialite in his Western-American milieu, would harbor this same attitude as he ventured into the Middle East, and though his tendency to poke fun at people was a part of his nature, and some may say, his gift, the venom with which he depicts the Arabs and Muslims is directly linked to this history.

## Preconceived Notions

Another highly significant factor that played a role in Twain's depiction of Arabs and Muslims in *The Innocents Abroad* is the overwhelming influence of his social-literary environment and exposure:

In 1776 what little the average American knew about the Middle East and its peoples likely came from two sources: the King James Bible and Scherazade's *Thousand and One Arabian Nights* (Little 11). Few Americans could have found Baghdad or Beirut on a map . . . [b]ut most Americans remembered the Gospel according to St. Matthew and the tale of Ali Baba and his forty thieves, most recalled the crucifixion and the crusades, and most regretted that the Holy Land was peopled by infidels and unbelievers, Muslims and Jews beyond the pale of Christendom (Little 11).

Twain emerged from a culture that had potent, sometimes misleading, ideas about the Middle East and its people. To begin with, Twain harbored boyhood fantasies about Arabs. It was a fantastical impression he had picked up from reading stories such as those in *Arabian Nights* as a child. What Twain really wanted to see and expected to see in the Middle East were two vastly different things, and his disappointment in the reality of the

place was profound. What he wanted was “To see a camel train laden with spices from Arabia and the rare fabrics of Persia . . . marching through the narrow alleys of the bazaar” (301). Such an image, he suggests:

. . . casts you back at once to your forgotten boyhood, and again you dream over the wonders of the Arabian Nights; again your companions are princes, your lord is the Caliph Haroun Al Raschid, and your servants are terrific giants and genii that come with smoke and lightning and thunder . . . (301).

These preconceived notions about the people and place of the Middle East would necessarily set Twain up for bitter disappointment when he faced the dust, poverty, dirt and misery of the Arab and Muslim people. The view on his journey was surely disappointing when compared with the imagined wealth of silk carpets, gold, crystal, lush gardens, and the scent of sandalwood as depicted in the tales of Scherazade (*Arabian Nights* 298). Instead of the heroic Sinbad, the clever Ali Baba, and the “instruments of music and mirth and lovely slave-girls playing and singing” (Burton 332), Twain observes a “[w]retched nest of human vermin . . . rags, dirt, sunken cheeks, pallor of sickness, sores, projecting bones, dull aching misery in their eyes and ravenous hunger . . .” (334). Nowhere does Twain witness any of the noble service of eunuchs crying “hearing is obeying!” in obeisance to resplendent kings (Burton, *Arabian Nights* 165). Nowhere does he hear the moving plea of a sultan crying “verily I fear lest my kingdom be lost when I die, for that I have no son to succeed me” (Burton 217).

Twain’s experience, on the contrary, falls decidedly short of his desire. The only cries he seems to hear are those money-grubbing Egyptians, whose relentless begging for

“bucksheesh” does little to enhance his imagination of splendor regarding the Middle East (Little 13). Undeniably, the flesh-and-blood Arab cannot compete with the boyhood image Twain has constructed and held for decades; he now feels “to glance at the genuine son of the desert is to take the romance out of him forever” (406). His experience in the Turkish baths does not seem to help him sustain his fantasies or expectations either. Twain reflects that the “cadaverous, half nude varlets that served in the establishment had nothing of poetry in their appearance, nothing of romance, nothing of Oriental splendor” (273).

Furthermore, his long-held fantasy of the noble Arabian horses riding majestically across the desert sand is “punctured” by “an array of sickening, sore-infested horses” (Vogel 69). Twain betrays his bitter disappointment when he expresses his “hope that in the future I may be spared any more sentimental praises of the Arab’s idolatry of his horse. In boyhood I longed to be an Arab of the desert and have a beautiful mare, [but] their love for their mares is a fraud” (351). Twain’s boyhood illusions are irredeemably shattered “when he discovers that Arabs do not ride the wonderful stallions he pictured in his youth” (Kravitz 5). Although he does indeed express a level of disappointment in Europe when he views things such as the paintings of the masters, the extent of his disillusionment in the more romanticized aspects of Arabian lore is far more crushing.

But the romanticized elements of tales of the Arabian Nights were not the only misleading effects of such stories. As contradictory as it may seem, the very same stories helped to provide a certain expectancy of the savagery and barbarism Westerners, including Twain, expected to find in Arab and Muslim culture:

European travelers and merchants, abetted by the translation into European languages of the *The Arabian Nights*, began to identify Arabs and Muslims with the images from those tales, and in European eyes all Arabs became indolent, obstinate, sensual—‘wild, cruel, savages or robbers . . .’ (Little 11).

These images and impressions of wild, unruly, primitive Arabs were readily adopted by Americans, well before they had read Scherazad’s tales for themselves (Little 11). Therefore, Twain and other travelers to the Middle East did not really come in search of a new understanding of the region but rather came to “reconfirm their preconceived notions of the way the world was and is”(Kravitz 2). The result was necessarily always one of two alternatives: either the American travelers would be “disappointed with the reality of Ottoman Palestine or [would] have their previously held assumptions [usually negative] reinforced” (Vogel 93).

Beyond the stories of *The Arabian Nights*, and the like, the influence of beloved Bible stories drummed into young heads at church on Sundays left Twain and his fellow travelers under the impression that they would find something somewhat glorious, particularly in the Holy Land, to support their cumulative impression of their Savior’s birthplace. Images conjured up by hymns and stories of baby Jesus born in a manger, among docile animals, and visited by benevolent kings led by a glowing star, are irretrievably shattered by the hard, coarse reality of life in and around Palestine. Twain admits “we would not have in our houses a picture representing Joseph riding and Mary walking; we would see profanation in it, but a Syrian Christian would not. I know

hereafter the picture first spoke of [that of Mary riding] will look odd to me” (356).

Things were not at all as Twain thought they would be, and he and “his companions [are quickly] overwhelmed by the spiritual and physical graveyard that the biblical world had become” --if indeed they had ever been anything more (Kravitz 9).

Inevitably, Twain soon finds himself battling his own misconceptions, at least the ideas that were once full of promise. He complains “One gets large impressions in boyhood sometimes, which he has to fight against all his life” (359). He provides the example of his long-held impression of the kings of the Bible, whom he had pictured as grand monarchs, decked in velvet robes, gold crowns, and living in marble palaces. He suggests that the Bible phrase “all these kings” had conjured such a feeling of grandeur, but once in the Holy Land, his understanding changes so that these kings are “only a parcel of petty chiefs--ill-clad and ill-conditioned savages, much like our Indians” (359). He feels duped and decides, “I must studiously and faithfully unlearn a great many things I somehow absorbed concerning Palestine”(359). The Holy Land, he accepts with great reluctance, is smaller, more sterile and desolate than anything he had imagined.

The enduring influence of the preconceptions held by Twain and fellow passengers cannot be overstated. On the one hand, they were prepared to see, and fully got to see, their constructed notion of “infidel Muslims” because this is what they looked for and found (Vogel 59). But they also had constructed preconceived notions about the shape and flavor of the cities, sites, topography, coloration,” and so on (Vogel 3).

Fundamentally, the Westerners had built their impressions not on firsthand experience or reality, but on centuries of myth, exaggeration, glorification, and alternately,

bastardization, of a place that loomed larger in the imagination, in both its charm and its horror, than it could ever present itself in reality (Vogel 32).

It is crucial to reiterate that Twain was a writer emerging at the forefront of the rise in realism in post-Civil War America. The war, the shifting sands in evolutionary science, and the unsettling pace of capitalistic industrialism left many, especially deep thinkers like Twain, reevaluating once staunchly held beliefs (Sundquist viii). “Both the ideals and the public idealizations of the founding fathers seemed at best badly shaken, and at worst impossibly irrelevant, following the Civil War . . . ,” and thus, Twain was compelled to take a more exacting look at his own society as well as of those abroad (Sundquist viii).

In step with fellow budding realists such as William Dean Howells, Twain attempts to “aim towards objectivity” (Pizer 2). Instead of following the steps of his misty-eyed predecessors who had traveled to the Middle East, and whose “creations of romance are self-consciously artificial and fictive, and so may seem to deviate from reality,” Twain was busy “demystifying the romantic and supernatural codes that had held sway through the Civil War and the immediate postwar years” (Greenwald 3, Borus 19). “With no secure religious underpinnings” Twain attempts to create his own structure for how he sees and depicts the Middle East (Fulton 7).

Unfortunately, though this rising realism dictated less focus on the imagination and the inner world of the writer and more on the details and evidence of the concrete outside world, Twain’s exaggerated subjectivity sabotages his initial stated intent to describe things as they are (Greenwald 3). His resulting work in *The Innocents Abroad* is

that of a frustrated rebel, so intent on puncturing absurdities and romantic depictions of a by-gone era, he errs by going too far. Instead of rectifying the image of the Middle East and its people, he completely rips that image to shreds, leaving a different impression, yet still another kind of distortion. In Twain's personal journey amidst the "national transition from antebellum innocence to post-Civil War maturity," he writes with the absolute and extreme opinion of a disgruntled adolescent, disgusted by the lies he has discovered and unwilling to stand on neutral ground (Howe 423).

It is possible that Twain's inability to reconcile his carefully constructed image with what the Middle East revealed to him was compounded by his fatigue and illness in the Middle East, where he spent much time towards the end of his journey. Franklin Walker, author of *Irreverent Pilgrims*, believes this could have been a factor, for it was a five month long journey, and Twain had fallen ill sometime after he first reached Damascus. Walker conjectures that "As he traveled south plagued by fatigue, fever, and daily discomfort, the dream of a picturesque land of Arabian Nights or Biblical patriarch dissolved under the glaring Syrian sun into an awareness of a people more miserable than any he had ever seen –even than the Goshoot Indians of Nevada" (Walker 174). However, the consistency of Twain's expressed disgust for the Arabs and Muslims, which begins with his first stop in Tangiers, and continues through his visit to Turkey and then on to the Holy Land, suggests that although illness might have made him even less tolerant, he never was accepting of the Muslim or Arab culture, landscape, or people.

Twain was misled in his anticipatory perception of the Middle East, even he believes, by the numerous travel books he had read about the region. He fumes, "that was

the picture, just as I got it from incendiary books of travel. It was a poor miserable imposture. The reality is no more like it than the Five Points are like the Garden of Eden” (273). “When I think how I have been swindled by books of Oriental travel,” he reflects as he tries to cope with his disappointment, “I want a tourist for breakfast. For years and years I have dreamed of the wonders of the Turkish bath; for years and years . . .” (272). Of course, the Turkish bath was nothing like he imagined it would be. The theory born out of his disappointment is that travel writers write what they think their audiences want to read; they do not write what is there. And those who travel to such destinations as described in such travel books, go determined to duplicate the experiences as described in the books. Therefore, the deceptive concept of the author is perpetuated by the self-deceiving perception of the reader who so fervently wishes to have the “right” experience. Thus it is that “. . . the people who go into ecstasies over St. Sophia [the mosque in Istanbul] must surely get them out of a guidebook . . .” because, in Twain’s view, no independent observer could be naturally enthralled by such a sight (262). His disappointment therefore, becomes translated into an even more embittered depiction of what he sees.

Twain sees himself as able to correctly perceive what he sees -- not entirely true, of course, for the many reasons already discussed, but he does react with some force against the “deceptive” nature of various narratives, which he feels have inadequately prepared him for his own encounter in the Middle East. He conveys his growing distrust of travel narratives he has read when he writes: “Nearly every book concerning Galilee and its lake describes the scenery as beautiful. No—not always so straightforward as that.

Sometimes the *impression* intentionally conveyed is that it is beautiful . . .” (378).

Twain’s conclusion is that he has been misled. “I am sure,” he declares with some disgust, “from the tenor of the books I have read, that many who have visited this land in years gone by, were Presbyterians, and came seeking evidences in support of their particular creed; They found a Presbyterian Palestine, and they had already made up their minds to find no other, though possibly they did not know it, being blinded by their zeal”(379). Again and again, previous travelers to Palestine in particular, shaped the image of the place according to its place in biblical history and what promise it might hold for the faithful. Palestine was not viewed objectively by Westerners but “was seen as the place to be possessed *anew* and reconstituted” (Said, *Idea 4*).

Twain himself is guilty of what he accuses others, and, unfortunately, is so negatively affected by his disappointment that he refuses to see anything but the glaring negatives in his own experience, which are in turn aggravated by his own annoyance at their existence. Twain “struggles to maintain some pleasing and honest balance between the stark desolation of the present and the imagined beauty of the past,” but he does not reach a balanced perspective (Melton, *Keeping* 72). Twain is disappointed and disgusted by the very same engine of Orientalism of which he is a part and a contributor. His “memory” of what the place should be does not congeal with the reality, so Twain repudiates it all (Melton, *Travel* 77). He decides the whole place is a “sham,” refuses to see any value in the place or its people; he reduces its reality to meaninglessness and suggests “Its history and its associations are its chiefest charm, in any eyes, and the spells they weave are feeble in the searching light of the sun” (380). The Orient, Twain

concludes, is only worth something in the imagination. Reality disappoints so profoundly that he sums up his opinion by saying “Oriental scenes look best in steel engravings,” meaning only false representations of the Middle East can be appealing to the cultivated and the civilized (405).

Shockingly, the very books Twain believes misled him are still the books on which he bases his reaction to the Middle East. He continues to give these sources validity by comparing the reality of the Middle East to the skewed depiction in them. Because Twain often relied on “pre-texts-to shape both his humorous and his realist agendas” the finished product of *The Innocents Abroad* is simultaneously influenced by the same works which he condemns! (IA <http://etext.virginia.edu/railton/innocent/iahompag.html>). His reliance on these flawed sources increased even further when some of Twain’s letters to the *Alta* were lost. In a letter to his family sent while off the coast of Turkey, Twain writes: “Do the *Alta*’s come regularly? I wish I knew whether my letters reach them or not” (Smith 87). He then offers a list of letters he has written and ends that particular correspondence by saying, “I don’t prepay postage. Letters are too uncertain” (Smith 89). Consequently, in order to finish the quota of letters demanded of him, he was forced to rely on some of these guidebooks to jog his memory and to embellish whatever gaps were present (Kane 3).

Thus, while he is aware that his own reliance on various travel books is not so reliable, Twain, at his hypocritical height, angrily spews that his fellow travelers, 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 tints varied to suit each pilgrim’s

creed” (379). What he does not acknowledge is that he tells of Palestine as it appears, not on its own merit, but in contrast to the very books he is condemning. His use of those sources as any measurement for comparison is one of Twain’s biggest mistakes.

The author Grimes to whom he refers in the previous quotation is an invented name really meant to poke fun at real travel writer William C. Prime who wrote *Tent Life in The Holy Land*. Twain has absolutely nothing good to say about him, neither in *The Innocents Abroad*, nor in private letters. He condemns him as “the worst guidebook author . . . a gushing pietist; religion was his daily tippie; he was always under the influence of religion (Phipps 77). What authors like Prime had to say about the Holy Land was very misleading because they, caught up in a religious, almost orgasmic fervor regarding the Holy Land, frequently waxed unrealistically romantic about most locales in the Middle East, all the while making a distinction, however, between the majesty and hallowed nature of the place itself, and the savage, backward nature of the pestilent Arab and Muslim who desecrated it.

Travel narrators who were Twain’s predecessors oozed with the sense of a long sought after experience because “here was a sight, an experience, which each pilgrim had dreamed of since he started reading the Bible” (Vogel 12). Their distorted writing thus affected the image of the place in the American psyche (Vogel 12). The lack of objectivity in these writers is evident in their reactions upon reaching the Holy Land: “Eliot Warburton and his companions knelt at the first sight of El Kuds. William C. Prime prostrated himself upon the ground and wept. The much-traveled Bayard Taylor felt a moment of ecstasy and fulfillment” (Walker 30). These were the self-described

reactions of each of the travel writers, all whose books were studied by Twain. It is no wonder then that their descriptions would leave Twain, who was not ensconced in a similar religious fervor, unprepared for what he did see when he visited the Holy Land.

The conflicting messages about the Middle East and its people are rampant in the various books on which Twain had relied. Prime's narrative, for example, provides a two-pronged effort to mislead the reader. On the one hand, there is a consistently derogatory view of the Arab and the Muslim, yet on the other, is a weirdly almost religiously masturbatory infatuation with the place itself. For example, while in Egypt, Prime describes "a strange majesty in the appearance of the earth, and air and sea . . . (Prime 18). He seems in awe when he says ". . . we saw the desire of our eyes, the Land of Promise" (Prime 24). His emotion drives his narrative as he claims, "It is no shame to have wept in Palestine. I wept when I saw Jerusalem . . . in the starlight at Bethlehem . . . on the blessed shores of Galilee" (Prime 60). And even in the Holy Land he manages to infuse the specter of American nationalism. The picture is complete in Prime's mind when he sees the "American flag was floating over Miriam's tent"(29). The American flag, so familiar a symbol to the American people, becomes a symbol of their ownership of the Holy Land. It is as if Prime is saying, "this is the Holy Land; it is wonderful, and it belongs to us Christian Americans."

This also explains Prime's decidedly negative depiction of the Arabs in the very same travel narrative. The Arabs, Prime implies, need constant direction from the superior Westerner. They certainly do not get any respect from Prime. He says, "I commanded perfect silence, for the Arabs could not long keep their lips shut . . ." (Prime

18). To imply the ignorance and stupidity of the people he writes, “the crowd of Syrians stood at a distance eyeing us as if they had never seen white men before” (Prime 31). The Turkish guard at standing as the sepulcher is labeled “stupid”(Prime 72). In fact, all Arabs and Muslims are stupid because “Twelve Arabs of various sorts were there, but you might have thought every one of them shot six times through the brain” (Prime 86). He further suggests that Arabs are ignorant of facts concerning basic commerce: “Money is of no use to an Arab . . . his mare is his life . . .” (117). The fundamental message of Prime’s travel book, then, is that while the place is fascinating, glorious, and desirable, the people who live there do not deserve it.

Prime’s *Tent in the Holy Land* was one of the most prominent of travel books, but there were countless other sources which described the Middle East in a similar fashion. Twain had read a vast variety of travel books. For example, *Appleton’s European Guide Book for English-Speaking Travellers* describes Constantinople as a place of “barbarous extremes of magnificence and wretchedness” . . . and a place of “unrestrained sensuality” (IA <http://etext.virginia.edu/railton/innocent/iahompag.html>.) Vogel quotes other travelers who went before Twain: “And Frank Hass, a former American consul at Jerusalem observed, ‘No other land is so fruitful a theme for meditation or so hallowed in its association. . .’” (Vogel 4). He also quotes American tourist Charles Elliot, who in 1867, the same year as Twain’s excursion, writes about the Holy Land: “Upon it the eyes of Christians are turned with love and adoration, as the spot on earth where the beauty and majesty of God have been revealed to man” (Vogel 4).

Two other major writers on whom Twain relied were Eliot Warburton and Bayard

Taylor. *The Crescent and the Cross* by Eliot Warburton endorses the same theme as Prime's book does. While describing his trek through Egypt, he promises "Water-carriers, calendars, Armenians, barbers, --all the *dramatis personae* of the Arabian Nights, are there" (Warburton 47). His own infatuation with the Holy Land is also obviously slanted by his own religious excitement. He declares: "Yet it is not mere history that thrills the pilgrim to the Holy Land with such feelings as no other spot on the wide earth inspires; but the belief that on yonder earth the Creator once trod with human feet, bowed down with human suffering . . ." (Warburton 305). On travel through Palestine that Twain would find grueling, Warburton gushes that "the rainbow mists of morning are still heavy on the landscape while you sip your coffee; but by the time you spring into the saddle all is clear and bright, and you feel, while you press the sides of your eager horse, and the stirring influence of morning buoys you up, as if fatigue could never come" (V. 2, 15). And contrary to Twain's experience with the "sore-infested" mounts, Warburton had described them as "noble animals, and are no less remarkable for their chivalrous disposition than for their strength and endurance: gallant, yet docile; fiery, yet gentle, full of mettle, yet patient as a camel. . ." and on and on (Warburton 111). His narrative is absolutely peppered with light, happy phrases such as "bubbling spring," the "mountain's brow," the "carpet of wild flowers," (Warburton V. 2 16). Unlike Twain's flat disappointment at the miniscule size of the Dead Sea, which he thought miserably unimpressive compared even to Lake Tahoe, Warburton chimes that "The Dead Sea itself seemed to come to life under that blessed spell, and shone like molten gold among its purple hills"(103). Moreover, despite his passing reference to "screaming

Arabs” (301), he sighs that “There is something very romantic in the Arab mode of life, which never seems to lose its zest. . .”(109). Finally, when in Damascus, Warburton describes “the luxury of a Turkish bath,” a portrayal radically different than what Twain thought of his own lackluster experience there (Warburton 152).

Bayard Taylor was one of the other highly significant writers in whom Twain had initially put his trust. Taylor describes Palgrave’s 1862 account of his travel through Palestine-- “the great Wahabee state of Nedjed, the early home of Arabian poetry and also of the famous Arabian horses” (Taylor 86). His narrative also projects a romantic, unreal quality of the surrounding landscape “where the moonbeams gleamed white on little intervening patches of clear sand . . .” (Taylor 89). Even in describing the difficulty of the journey, there is a romantic tenor to the description: “The days wore by like a delirious dream, till we were often almost unconscious of the ground we traveled over and of the journey on which we were engaged” (Taylor 93). The ultimate sense is one of intoxication and transcendent experience, not an objective report of what is present.

The aforementioned narratives were sources on which Twain directly relied for his impressions and notions of the Middle East. Some passages would mislead him into believing he would capture some of that wonderful essence of *The Arabian Nights*, and other passages would prepare him to see the only worst depravity and primitiveness that the Arab and the Muslim could offer. These were his direct sources, but his Western culture harbored in its collective consciousness similar messages filtered through sources as varied as Shakespeare’s *Othello*: “Where a malignant and turban’d Turk/ beat a Venetian . . .” -- to John Milton’s *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*: “If an

Englishman, forgetting all laws, human, civil and religious, offend against life and liberty . . . he is no better than a Turk, a Saracen, a heathen” (Lewis, *Fragments* 10-11). The collective distorted nature of the depictions of the Middle East and its people would act like a tidal wave on Twain’s own perceptions.

The complexity behind Twain’s descriptions of the people in the Middle East necessitates caution and attention. It would be easy, yet incorrect, to point to only one root cause. In his introduction to *Orientalism*, renowned scholar Edward Said states his two greatest fears regarding the study of Orientalism are “distortion and inaccuracy, or rather the kind of inaccuracy produced by too dogmatic a generality and too positive a localized focus” (8). In essence, his warning is that one must carefully examine all the variables when studying the general pattern of misrepresentation of the East by the West. Thus, to paint Mark Twain simply as a nineteenth-century Crusader, or as a money-grubbing mercenary humorist, would be foolish and irresponsible. A careful study of Twain’s treatment of Arabs and Muslims in *The Innocents Abroad* reveals some of the varied and significant influences on this particular work of his.

## Lasting Effects of Twain's Work, and Various Attitudes

*The Innocents Abroad* would become the most popular travel book ever, primarily because of Twain's uniquely unabashed writing style. His powerful desire to be original and to do things "because they *haven't* been done before," an attribute he believed to be exclusively American, would make him a noticed and celebrated artist (Powers 16). He had stated in *The Innocents Abroad* his intention "[to] be the first—that is the idea. To do something, say something, see something, before anybody else – these are the things that confer a pleasure compared with which other pleasures are tame and commonplace . . . ." (Twain 188). He tried always to present himself as "grand and special" (Rubin 56). Most scholars, and the majority of his readers would have to admit that Twain's strategy worked; he is one of the most widely read authors in the world, and *The Innocents Abroad*, which helped launch his career, would remain one of his most popular, rivaling even *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* or *Huckleberry Finn*.

Reactions to Twain's travel narrative are varied and wide-ranging. Howells believes "the idea of a steamer-load of Americans going on a prolonged picnic to Europe and the Holy Land is itself almost sufficiently delightful," and he continues to praise Twain's masterful storytelling (Howells 107). Howells stresses, however, that while the

book's strengths reside in its entertainment value, *The Innocents Abroad* does not offer enough authentic or useful information about either Europe or the Middle East (Howells 108). Howells leaves no doubt, though, about his belief the success the book will garner. His predictions will be proven true as Twain will reap fame, reputation, and riches for *The Innocents Abroad*. Twain himself admits he became "notorious through the publication of *The Innocents Abroad*. . ." (Devoto 150). He may have kicked, screamed and complained the whole way through, but this painful "waltz through the Holy Land" would be the best investment he ever made (Kaplan 210). The *Alta* announced Twain's success and declared "his letters have caused a sensation greater than anything ever before published in California . . ." (Smith 207). With this book, Twain's future as one of America's greatest writers was set.

Twain's *Innocents Abroad* would become the hallmark of "a new age of Holy Land awareness" (Vogel 47). Despite his own many distortions about the Middle East and its people, Twain would crush the long-standing myths formed by at least decades of narratives told through the invariably distorting lens of blind religion. The residual effect of his lambasting and lampooning of the places and people of Europe and the Middle East, long hailed as more glorious and sophisticated or important than the relatively "new" country of the United States, would also finally make Americans feel that in some important ways, maybe their country had more to offer (Ward 63).

Among his greatest fans, his biographer Alfred Bigelow Paine, would endorse Twain as some sort of messiah who "preached a new gospel in travel literature—a gospel of seeing with an overflowing honesty; a gospel of sincerity in according to praise to

whatever he considered genuine, and ridicule to the things he believed to be shams” (Paine 10, *Twain’s Letters*). Others, though appreciative of the entertainment value of Twain’s work, express dismay that his distorted portrayal, especially of the Arabs and Muslims of the Middle East, will bear a stamp of legitimacy far beyond what it deserves. As Douglas Little suggests, “To be sure, some readers of Twain’s account must have marveled at the author’s sarcastic wit, but many more probably put down *Innocents Abroad* with their orientalist images of a Middle East peopled by pirates, prophets, and paupers more sharply focused than ever” (Little 14).

This is the inherent danger of Mark Twain’s book, because what was written as part of one biased man’s goal to elevate his personal success as a writer, has ended up as an authority on a people who have been unjustly misrepresented. Twain himself confesses in his revised version prepared for publication in England that the “English reader doubtless knows much more about the Mediterranean lands than the writer does” (Scott 45). Interestingly, they seem to agree with him, for it is mainly British newspapers and commentators of Twain’s time who give the least praise for his work. All acknowledge its entertainment value, but many, including *The Atheneum*, and *The Saturday Review* accuse him of profound ignorance and express no small measure of disgust at the distorted representations of Europeans and Middle Easterners (*IA* <http://etext.virginia.edu/railton/innocent/iahompag.html>). Even a few American cries of caution from contemporaries like Bret Harte and Howells warn Twain’s book, though surely an enjoyable read, “is not to be commended” as a travel book (*Overland Monthly*, <http://etext.virginia.edu/railton/innocent/iahompag.html>). Meanwhile, Twain’s

exaggerations, no longer just used for amusement, have become an entrenched and nurturing part of the Orientalist machine which promulgates the conception or belief that Arabs and Muslims are an inferior people who cannot and do not deserve to represent themselves (Said MERIP 5).

Even more ironical is the paucity of scholarly commentary regarding Twain's treatment of the Arabs and the Muslims of the Middle East in *The Innocents Abroad*. There are several pivotal books and essays written, and this paper is indebted to those critics. However, the small number of works available in contrast to works that discuss Twain's treatment of the Europeans begs the question as to why. Since the majority of Twain scholars are overwhelmingly of Western-European origin and influence, one reasonable conclusion is that these scholars follow in the steps of their forefathers, and in their own minds have minimized the importance of the Middle East and its people; perhaps that is why they would rather focus on the Christian-European passages of Twain's book. Considering that over 289 pages of his nearly 500-page book are devoted entirely to his reflections and experiences in the Middle East, this dismissal and lack of attention by so many scholars is a highly significant one, one at least partially rectified, one hopes, by this essay.

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