**Mark Twain’s *The Innocents Abroad*, the *Survey of Western Palestine*, and the Desolation of the Holy Land**

Mark Twain traveled through the Holy Land in 1867 and was dismayed by what he saw. At the end of the Holy Land section of his travelogue *The Innocents Abroad* (1869), Twain summed up his impression, writing, “Palestine sits in sackcloth and ashes. Over it broods the spell of a curse that has withered its fields and fettered its energies . . . Palestine is desolate and unlovely. And why should it be otherwise? Can the *curse* of the Deity beautify a land?” This bitter final assessment stands as the culmination of eleven chapters of descriptions of the barren fields, treeless deserts, brackish waters, and wretchedly poor villages. A dozen years later, and after the publication of thirteen British editions of *The Innocents Abroad* by three separate London publishing houses, the English explorer and geographer Claude Conder began a report entitled “The Present Condition of Palestine” with the statement, “The desolate condition of the country has been over-estimated.” Whether or not Conder had Twain in mind when he wrote his report for the *Quarterly Statement* of the Palestine Exploration Fund, Twain most certainly played an outsized influence in forming what Conder saw as an overly-grim assessment of the environmental condition of the Holy Land.

*The Innocents Abroad* was Twain’s bestselling book during his lifetime and though the book has been surpassed in popularity by Twain’s works of fiction, *The Innocents Abroad* continues to exert influence on twenty-first century understandings of the condition of the environment of the Holy Land during the mid-nineteenth century. International policy makers, environmental scientists, and members of the general public cite *The Innocents Abroad* as evidence of the barrenness, ruin, and emptiness of the Holy Land in the nineteenth century.

Given the historical and contemporary influence of *The Innocents Abroad* in discussions of nineteenth-century Holy Land ecology and agriculture, this essay first examines the history of Twain’s surprisingly persistent authority. The essay argues that Twain’s influence is due not only to Twain’s fame and quotability, but also to readers’ tendency to falsely oppose Twain, the secular, realist observer of the Holy Land, to his religious, romantic contemporaries. The essay then evaluates the validity of Twain’s descriptions of the environment of the Holy Land by comparing them with the findings of the Palestine Exploration Fund's 1871-1878 Survey of Western Palestine and with nineteenth-century sketches and watercolors of the region. These overlooked documents and artifacts reveal that the environmental condition of the Holy Land was much more varied than Twain suggests; the Holy Land was both fertile and barren, biodiverse and deforested, settled and depopulated.

I conclude the essay by showing how the narratives of nineteenth-century desolation, and its corollary the narrative of “making the desert bloom”, contribute to twenty-first century environmental problems in Israel and the Occupied Territories. I suggest that a more careful reckoning with the environmental history of the Holy Land might contribute to more sustainable agriculture and development even as it contributes to a more just and lasting peace.

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