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### American travelers in Palestine : origins of Holy Land discourse in nineteenth-century America

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AMERICAN TRAVELERS IN PALESTINE:  
ORIGINS OF HOLY LAND DISCOURSE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY  
AMERICA

UNDERGRADUATE HONORS THESIS IN HISTORY

BY

MATTHEW R. SCUTARI

SUPERVISED BY

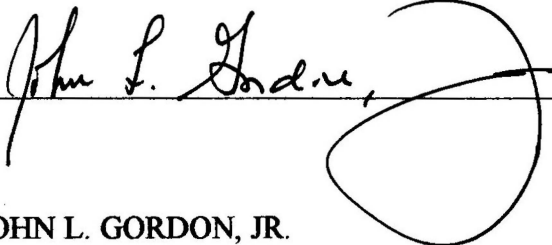
DR. JOHN L. GORDON, JR.

SPRING 2006

## **Abstract**

Throughout the nineteenth century, American writers, journalists, explorers, and pilgrims traveled to the region then known as Palestine, publishing travel narratives upon their return to the U.S. Such narratives were wildly popular during this period, and the accounts of these travelers quickly made their way into the nation's collective consciousness. From personal libraries to Sunday school classrooms, their depictions of the Holy Land, which reflected a uniquely American biblical tradition, ultimately painted a picture of Palestine that closely conformed to popular preconceptions of what the Holy Land ought to be, stubbornly resisting contradiction and reinforcing stereotypes already held by many Americans. My thesis examines the effect of these travel narratives on the development of a unique discourse on the Holy Land within American society, and explores the intersection of faith and experience in a part of the world where the two are quite difficult - if not impossible - to separate. Ultimately, this paper attempts to establish a link between the established Holy Land discourse and ultimate American popular support for the Zionist movement in its early stages.

**THIS THESIS PROJECT MEETS IN MAGNITUDE AND QUALITY THE  
DEPARTMENT'S STANDARDS FOR HONORS IN HISTORY.**



A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "John L. Gordon, Jr.", is written over a horizontal line. The signature is followed by a large, stylized flourish that loops back to the right and then down.

**JOHN L. GORDON, JR.  
COORDINATOR, HISTORY HONORS PROGRAM**

*"Travel and experience mar the grandest pictures and rob us of the most cherished traditions of our boyhood."*

- Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad*

## **Introduction**

Throughout history, humans have had the curious tendency to relate descriptions of the unfamiliar by way of establishing a point of view grounded in the familiar. What we know, in other words, often becomes a framework for our attempts to understand that which lies outside our own frame of reference. When confronted with some strange or exotic description or image, we cannot help but allow our preconceptions to intervene in the process of understanding such information. Strangeness, after all, is a relative concept, a judgment imposed upon "otherness" by an actor from the vantage point of his or her own reality of experience.<sup>1</sup>

While this process can be approached through numerous modes of transmission, it is the written word that has for centuries been the primary vehicle

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<sup>1</sup> Some would likely argue that there exists no such thing as pure "reality of experience," that all of human experience is rooted in an unavoidable process of representation. As a point of clarification, I will argue that what one might call "immediate experience," or those first-hand experiences of an actor are, if not palatable as "pure reality," at least as close to any such conception as possible (so long as such experiences lie within that actor's frame of reference). As an actor becomes further detached from both the experience itself and from the realm of the familiar, however, such understanding becomes to an increasing degree supplemented by the process of representation necessary to conceptually process that which is unfamiliar. Thus, the further removed an individual happens to be from that which is under scrutiny, the more distorted his or her understanding is likely to be.

for disseminating foreign concepts and realities throughout societies and throughout the world. For the vast majority of human history, most of mankind has lacked the means with which to ever travel any great distance from the places in which they were born, much less to locales so exotic that their comprehension would require any sort of vast mental leap. Those who did travel the world have typically been few and far between; and their writings have been, for most people, a singular window through which to view the realities of distant places, peoples, and their cultures. However natural in terms of the reproduction of “real” knowledge, this seems to be somewhat problematic for the transmission of what we might refer to as “true” human experience. Edward Said may have put it best, arguing that

all cultures impose corrections upon raw reality, changing it from free-floating objects into units of knowledge.... It is perfectly natural for the human mind to resist the assault on it of untreated strangeness; therefore, cultures have always been inclined to impose complete transformations on other cultures, receiving those other cultures not as they are but as, for the benefit of the receiver, they ought to be.<sup>2</sup>

Knowledge, then, has typically been disseminated via second-hand sources throughout the majority of human history, and those sources have been both produced and received by individuals and groups possessing particular interpretive frameworks. It is through this framework that reality becomes knowledge, and knowledge, over time, becomes discourse.

According to Said, Orientalism is at its most basic level the distribution of geopolitical and cultural knowledge into a wide array of texts, ultimately creating a discourse that perpetuates certain notions of the power-relationship between the

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<sup>2</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 67.

“Orient” and the “Occident” throughout history. For our purposes, however, the theory’s crucial element is Said’s assertion that “texts exist in contexts, that there is such a thing as intertextuality.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, no author’s work exists in a vacuum; texts build upon and speak to one another, ultimately facilitating the translation of knowledge into discourse.

In this paper, I propose to examine this phenomenon with regards to accounts written by Americans traveling in Palestine during the second half of the nineteenth century. Almost invariably, these accounts drew on biblical stories and images in order to explain the author’s experiences in the Holy Land. Concurrently, they also drew heavily on the works of previous travelers to the region. In other words, travelers adopted a familiar context in order to understand things foreign, unfamiliar, and strange. Rooted in the American Protestant tradition, such accounts either ignored or reinterpreted that which failed to conform to current notions of what Palestine *ought* to be; and, not surprisingly, such notions were quite often rooted in the text of the Holy Bible. These exercises in what historian Lawrence Davidson astutely refers to as “selective perception,”<sup>4</sup> reinforced by the resurgence of biblical literalism within American Protestant theology of the period, contributed in no small way to the development of a particular Holy Land discourse within American society, an evolved form of which survives even today. Finally, I will apply the general arguments surrounding this discourse to a brief examination of the Zionist movement in an

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<sup>3</sup> Said, 13.

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Davidson, “Historical Ignorance and Popular Perception: The Case of U.S. Perceptions of Palestine, 1917,” *Middle East Policy* 3, No. 2 (1994), 125.

effort to explain, at least in part, American popular support for the realization of its goals.

### **Biblical Literalism and the Princeton Theological Seminary**

One of the key ingredients leading to both the use of the Bible as a guidebook to the Holy Land and the pre-established framework through which travelers formed their picture of the region was the rebirth of biblical literalism within Christian theology, a reaction to the crosscurrent of a more liberal Protestant theology taking hold during the nineteenth century. This belief in the infallibility of the authors of the biblical texts and their position as divinely inspired messengers of God's word contributed to the development of a faith-based discourse which, though outside the theological mainstream in its most pronounced form, seems to have had a definite effect on American religious thought during the period. Constructed around the Bible and identifiable in the numerous works of travel produced in the period, the evolution of this discourse ultimately led to an expansion of the missionary enterprise as Palestine began to occupy a more central place in American Christian thought. According to historian Fuad Sha'ban,

During the latter part of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, Americans were introduced to the Orient commercially, diplomatically, and militarily, and in that process they rediscovered the Holy Land. During the same period the United States was experiencing a special religious fervor, as seen first in the Great Awakening and subsequent revivalist movements. With this surge of religious interest came the two related phenomena of the missionary enterprise and millennial tendency. Both of these latter movements were instrumental in exciting



interest in the Holy Land and in creating a sense of urgency for a rebuilding of Jerusalem.<sup>5</sup>

It is both interesting and pertinent that Sha'ban refers to the result of this introduction as a "rediscovery" of the Holy Land, for it seems to imply the expansion of a preexisting discourse on the Holy Land through an increase in American interaction with the region. Subsequent theological shifts taking place during the period, as well as the increased circulation of both religious and secular accounts of travel to Palestine, now bound the American to the Holy Land both personally and religiously. Having already been introduced to the Orient "commercially, diplomatically, and militarily," the missionary enterprise was to become an important aspect of the American Holy Land discourse.

Millenarian eschatology – particularly its insistence on the Bible's inerrancy – seems to have had equally interesting effects on the development of Holy Land travel literature during the period, and thus also played a large though indirect role in shaping the emerging discourse on Palestine within American society.<sup>6</sup> Probably the most well-known institutional proponent of this theological undercurrent within American Christianity was the Princeton Theological Seminary, founded in 1811 by Archibald Alexander, an evangelical preacher who developed a deeply rationalistic curriculum for his students. Though none of the seminary's faculty were willing to admit that they were actively promoting an identifiable theology, Ernest Sandeen argues that the

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<sup>5</sup> Fuad Sha'ban, *Islam an Arabs in Early American Thought: The Roots of American Orientalism* (Durham, North Carolina: Acorn Press, 1991), 149-150.

<sup>6</sup> Millenarianism will be addressed more specifically in relation to the Zionist movement later in this paper.

seminary actually produced a distinctive school of thought which he refers to as the Princeton Theology.<sup>7</sup>

While a comprehensive review would be outside the scope of this project, the Theology's position as relevant to biblical literalism can be briefly summarized in three points. First, the school's theologians believed that the divine inspiration of the Bible extends to the text itself. Second, the theology holds that the "Scriptures taught their own inerrancy."<sup>8</sup> And finally, the Princeton theologians held that this inerrancy was not necessarily self-evident in the Bible in its present form, but only in the "original autographs," or the original manuscripts as they came directly from their divinely inspired authors.

This final point became increasingly significant for the school as emergent biblical criticism began to turn up more inconsistencies within the biblical texts than could be easily dismissed; many biblical literalists thus argued that such errors were the product of mistakes of copyists and translators over the centuries.<sup>9</sup> It seems to have been no accident, then, that this stance was actively promoted from the seminary's very beginnings. In his inaugural address Archibald Alexander, the original architect of the Princeton Theology, argued that:

Every person who has had experience, will acknowledge, that even in reading the plainest texts, there is a satisfaction and advantage to be derived from the original, which cannot easily be explained. It becomes therefore a duty incumbent on all who are candidates for the sacred office, or invested with it, to endeavor to become acquainted with the *original Scriptures*.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ernest. R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 114-115.

<sup>8</sup> Sandeen, 125.

<sup>9</sup> Sandeen, 227.

As one reads on into Alexander's inaugural address, there also seems to be evidence of the role played by the revival of biblical literalism in the formation of a particular discourse on the Holy Land within American society. Alexander continued:

But in all writings, especially such as contain historical facts, there are frequent allusions to the existing customs of the country, and to the prevailing opinions of the people, where the book was written.... Many passages [of the scriptures] would be quite unintelligible, without some acquaintance with Jewish antiquities.... And as scriptural history frequently refers to the condition, character, and transactions of contemporaneous nations, it is of importance to be well acquainted with their history.... There is however a more important reason why the Biblical student should be well versed in history... because *there* he must look for the accomplishment of many important prophesies.<sup>11</sup>

Here one can observe the addition of proper historical knowledge as a prerequisite for the correct interpretation and understanding of scripture, expanding this literalist discourse to encompass *secular* history. Such sentiments are quite understandable steps towards better establishing context for scriptural passages, but the Reverend would go one step further:

Even modern travels have been turned, by some learned men, to a very important account, in explaining the scriptures. For oriental customs and modes of living, have not been subject to the same capricious changes, which have prevailed in the western nations. And therefore, in observing carefully what oriental customs are, at this day, a very probable opinion may be formed, of what they were two thousand years ago.... Indeed to speak the truth, *there is*

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<sup>10</sup> Archibald Alexander, *The sermon delivered at the inauguration of the Rev. Archibald Alexander, as professor of didactic and polemic theology, in the Theological Seminary of the Presbyterian Church, in the United States of America to which are added, the professor's inaugural address, and the charge to the professor and students* (New York: Whitting and Watson, 1812), 82.

<sup>11</sup> Alexander, 82-83.

*scarcely any science or branch of knowledge which may not be made subservient to theology* [emphasis mine].<sup>12</sup>

Alexander, whether he knew it or not, seems to have been describing the formation and encouraging the perpetuation of the very discourse I have set out to examine in this paper. Travel diaries and other forms of secular scholarship, because of a perception of Palestine as being somehow frozen in time, have apparently entered the realm of theological relevance.

But there also seems to exist a clear contradiction in this argument: for if proper understanding of scripture requires familiarity with original manuscripts (apparently in order to reduce deviations from the original intentions of their writers over time and across cultures), then to supplement such studies with travel diaries and other branches of knowledge would appear to combine the “objective” study of scriptural texts with subjective historical and cultural interpretations. Indeed, if any branch of knowledge may be made subservient to theology, then the number of intertextual relationships that can be created and utilized to reinforce an established system of belief may be limitless, rendering the scope of the discourse surrounding that system virtually infinite.

### **Holy Land Travel Literature in America**

The preconceptions of the Holy Land being harbored in the imaginations of American travelers and pilgrims during this period, as well as the manner in which they wrote about their experiences there, seem to have blossomed out of an intertextual discourse quite similar to the one discussed by Edward Said. Mark

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<sup>12</sup> Alexander, 84.

Twain himself seems to have suggested its existence, pointing out of his fellow travelers in *The Innocents Abroad*:

Our pilgrims have brought *their* verdicts with them.... I can almost tell, in set phrase, what they will say when they see Tabor, Nazareth, Jericho, and Jerusalem – *because I have the books they will “smouch” their ideas from.* These authors write pictures and frame rhapsodies, and lesser men follow and see with the author’s eyes instead of their own, and speak with his tongue.<sup>13</sup>

While Twain’s criticism highlights the significance of intertextuality to the genre of travel literature, and hints at the extent to which a discourse had already afflicted his contemporaries with a sort of “selective perception,” we should also note that Twain himself admits to owning many of these books. In fact, Twain relied quite heavily on other works throughout his entire career as a writer, using these “pre-texts” to shape his satirical and realistic literary styles.<sup>14</sup> Thus, despite his intended use of these works to parody previous scholarship on the Holy Land, we might infer that Twain too has incorporated many of these works into his interpretive framework, even if only subconsciously.

And the sheer amount of such works is astounding. What historian Hilton Obenzinger calls American Holy Land literature, or those published works containing first-hand accounts of travels in Ottoman Palestine, is a body of work consisting of hundreds of books, as well as newspaper and magazine articles, mostly published between the beginning of the eighteenth century and the 1880s. Obenzinger argues that, taken together, this archive demonstrates an “insistent

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<sup>13</sup> Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 1869), 512.

<sup>14</sup> *Innocents Abroad; or, The New Pilgrim’s Progress (1869)*, “Selected Pre-Texts,” (Charlottesville, VA: UVA.) [Online] available from <http://etext.virginia.edu/railton/innocent/iasrcshp.html>; accessed February 24, 2006; Internet.

American religious and cultural involvement” with Palestine, even a “deep cultural preoccupation” with the region.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, an electronic search of the Library of Congress collection yields over three hundred Holy Land travel narratives published between 1800 and 1899, many published in multiple editions, and in numbers generally increasing with each passing decade. Whether out of vanity or charity, a great many of these “pilgrims” seem to have been more than willing to share their experiences with the world.

While it is difficult to make generalized statements regarding the true motives behind the Holy Land pilgrimage, it is relevant to make a distinction between traditional pilgrims and those travelers whom Doron Bar and Kobi Cohen-Hattab categorize as “modern tourist pilgrims.” Initially, the majority of travelers to the Holy Land fell into the former category, making their way to Palestine for exclusively religious purposes. They were generally Catholic or Orthodox Christians from all classes of society (their trips were often state or church funded), who planned their expeditions around religious holidays and typically spent much of the duration of their stay participating in rituals and ceremonies at various holy sites. Modern tourist pilgrims, however, were often more secularly motivated. These travelers were generally wealthy Protestants who made their way to Palestine as part of a pleasure cruise to the Mediterranean region; the Holy Land was not necessarily the specific object of their voyage. By

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<sup>15</sup> Hilton Obenzinger, *American Palestine: Melville, Twain, and the Holy Land Mania* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 3-4. In these same pages, the author also notes that what he calls Holy Land literature actually “intersects several genres, including consular documents, illustrations, panoramas, photographs, and other non-literary representations.... religious text...., travel books, exploration narrative, archaeological and topographical treatises (particularly those seeking ‘evidences’ of Biblical prophecies), and even historical romance and poetry.”

the latter part of the nineteenth century, it was this latter type of pilgrim had come to dominate travel to the region.<sup>16</sup> Still, even the modern tourist pilgrim would have arrived in the Holy Land with his or her own religious convictions; in fact, records reveal that many Protestants traveled to Palestine hoping to find a validation of scripture, reconfirming their religious convictions through a new proximity to the origins of their faith.<sup>17</sup>

Accordingly, it is important to note that interest in the Holy Land was not restricted to members of the scholarly and religious communities who managed to make their way to the region, as general interest in the region had long been fueled by an American religiosity centered on the Holy Bible. In the first of a long series of letters published in the widely-read *Harper's Weekly*, a foreign correspondent in the Holy Land states his purpose in writing as to relate “the localities of those events that are familiar to every Christian child, and... the existing evidences, and terrible evidences too, of the fulfillment of God’s prophecies....”<sup>18</sup> Such familiarity with scripture was widespread even among the barely literate masses, which absorbed biblical tales of the Holy Land via religious services and Sunday school lectures. In fact, travel literature as a genre was immensely popular during the nineteenth century, especially in its latter half. According to Cathleen Christison, “travel books were the most popular genre at

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<sup>16</sup> Doron Bar and Kobi Cohen-Hattab, “A New Kind of Pilgrimage: The Modern Tourist Pilgrim of Nineteenth-Century and Early Twentieth-Century Palestine, *Middle Eastern Studies* 39, No. 2 (April 2003), 1-5.

<sup>17</sup> Bar and Cohen-Hattab, 1-5. Though the traditional pilgrim warrants a certain degree of attention, it is the modern tourist pilgrim that will be the primary focus of this study, as their preconceptions more closely mirror those of the average American of the period.

<sup>18</sup> “Travel Notes in the Bible Lands,” *Harper's Weekly*, June 13, 1857, p. 376.

that time in the United States.... They did not sell fast, like novels by well known authors, but they sold longer and more steadily and in the end sold best.

Americans also avidly read myriad periodicals that published travel articles, and travelers were well received on the lecture circuit.”<sup>19</sup> One such traveler by the name of Bayard Taylor, who is reported to have given his lectures dressed in traditional Arab clothing, earned \$5000 during the average lecture season.<sup>20</sup>

Nineteenth-century American preoccupation with Holy Land travel literature and Holy Land travel in general can be demonstrated by way of a few notable examples of the genre’s popularity.<sup>21</sup> John Lloyd Stephens’ *Incidents of Travel in Egypt, Arabia Petraea, and the Holy Land*, first published in 1837, was among the first of the soon-to-be widely popular secular Holy Land travel diaries, selling over 20,000 copies in its first two years of publication to a U.S. population of only 20 million.<sup>22</sup> William M. Thomson’s *The Land and the Book*, published in 1859, “became a fixture in countless Sunday school libraries and one of the most popular books ever written by a missionary.”<sup>23</sup> Multiple editions were printed of this massive three-volume work, which ultimately sold nearly 200,000 copies, arguably more than any American book other than *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*

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<sup>19</sup> Cathleen Christison, *Perceptions of Palestine: Their Influence on U.S. Middle East Policy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 17.

<sup>20</sup> Sha’ban, 119.

<sup>21</sup> I have selected only a few of the most popular works in this genre to be the focus of my research, both out of considerations of scope and because it is those works that were the most widely circulated during this period that are most relevant to this study, as they would have had the most profound impact on popular American attitudes toward the region.

<sup>22</sup> Christison, 17.

<sup>23</sup> Obenzinger, 4.



had sold to that point.<sup>24</sup> It is both interesting and pertinent to note that Thomson had been a student at the Princeton Theological Seminary from 1824 until 1831.

He then left the

United States for Syria in 1832, and would remain in the Middle East until 1876.<sup>25</sup>

Before publishing his own travel book on the region, the Rev. Dr. T. DeWitt Talmage preached a sermon regarding his pilgrimage to the Holy Land in September of 1890, and the mob-like New York City crowd in attendance would seem to have provided literal evidence to support Obenzinger's characterization of a kind of "Holy Land mania" in the United States at that time. As reported by the *New York Times*,

The thousands of persons who lined Fourteenth Street last night from Third Avenue well-nigh to sixth were those who had been turned away from the doors of the Academy of Music, where the Rev. Dr. T. DeWitt Talmage was announced to speak. Early in the evening the rush began, and half an hour before the doctor arrived... all the seats in the spacious academy were filled. 'All the seats' means that the first, second, and third gallery, clear to the very roof, were packed like so many leaves in a book – close together. A score of policemen were called to the spot to keep the crowds back, several ladies were severely hurt in the jam.... The best man got in, and, judging by certain expressions, the devil took possession of the hindmost.<sup>26</sup>

Obenzinger explains his use of the term "mania" as indicative of the manner in which certain radical forms of expression could create cultural patterns that promoted replication throughout mainstream society.<sup>27</sup> To describe growing

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<sup>24</sup> Christison, 17. Records of book sales from this period are rather fragmentary, but estimates seem to indicate this to be true.

<sup>25</sup> *Who Was Who in America: Historical Volume 1607-1896* (Chicago: Marquis Who's Who, Incorporated, 1963), 529.

<sup>26</sup> "Dr. Talmage's Talk," *New York Times*, September 29, 1890, p. 4.

interest in the Holy Land as a “mania” of this sort not only helps to explain the seemingly excessive American preoccupation with the region, but also how a marginal theological movement like millenarianism could, given the proper context, achieve an influence far broader than could be predicted by reference to its actual appeal.

Probably the best-known travel account from the period is Mark Twain’s *The Innocents Abroad*, which launched his career as a writer, satirist, and American cultural icon with its publication in 1869.<sup>28</sup> What began as a series of letters sent to and published by a San Francisco newspaper between August 2, 1867 and January 8, 1868 (Twain had been hired by the *Daily Alta California* – which also funded his trip – as a foreign correspondent)<sup>29</sup> would become the author’s best selling work during his lifetime, with nearly 67,000 copies sold in its first year of publication in 1869.<sup>30</sup> The book went through 17 editions between 1869 and 1897, two of which, curiously enough, omitted its first half (the chapters relating the European leg of Twain’s “pleasure cruise”), and thus contained only those chapters concerning Egypt and the Holy Land. One might assume, then, that it is in this region of the world – not in the familiar scenes of Europe – that

<sup>27</sup> Obenzinger, xii.

<sup>28</sup> Obenzinger, x.

<sup>29</sup> *Innocents Abroad; or, The New Pilgrim’s Progress (1869)*, “Reporting the Holy Land Excursion,” (Charlottesville, VA: UVA.) [Online] available from [http://etext.virginia.edu/railton/innocent/alta\\_home.html](http://etext.virginia.edu/railton/innocent/alta_home.html); accessed February 24, 2006; Internet.

<sup>30</sup> Christison, 17. Interestingly, *The Innocents Abroad* was one of the first books to be successfully marketed and circulated through subscription sales, by which publishing agents traveled door-to-door with a bound prospectus (a partial, preliminary version of the work to be sold) and made a sales pitch. This aggressive marketing technique likely played a large role in the book’s success, enabling Twain to sell copies of his work to people who would not normally visit book stores. For more information on subscription sales, visit <http://etext.virginia.edu/railton/marketin/soldxsub.html>.

Twain's readership had becoming particularly interested by the end of the nineteenth century. According to Obenzinger,

*Innocents Abroad* would become the unofficial tour guide for Americans traveling to the Holy Land; they employed the book, as did General Grant on his world tour, 'right along' with the Bible, assuring the popularity [of] its author... [and] thereby launching the career of 'Mark Twain,' a trademark that would become far more celebrated than the Sam Clemens of its creation.<sup>31</sup>

General Grant's comment concerning his use of both Twain's travel book and the Bible on his tour of the Holy Land provides an indication of Said's intertextual discourse at work: experiences in Palestine were being interpreted not only through the immediacy of experience, but also through the past experiences of others and through the framework of biblical history. In the very book Grant carried with him to the Holy Land, Twain had criticized his contemporaries for "smouching" their ideas from the works of other, earlier travelers, who had undoubtedly referenced some even earlier work – as well as the Bible – in their own. These texts were speaking to one another, with each subsequent traveler's work drawing on the collective works of all those previous, constantly obscuring some part of reality with that which was already thought to be known. Which, of course, brings us back to the words of Reverend Archibald Alexander: for at the center of this emerging discourse, rendering all other branches of knowledge subservient to theology, we find the Holy Bible.

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<sup>31</sup> Obenzinger, x.

## The Land and the Book

Five months after that first sermon regarding his pilgrimage to the Holy Land, Reverend Talmage once again addressed a New York City congregation on the subject. “The condition of this Bible,” said Talmage, “almost needs an apology. It is almost dropping to pieces. I carried it in the saddle bags all through Palestine and Syria, and read from it on the spot descriptions of the scenes through which I was passing.”<sup>32</sup> William McClure Thomson too, in the introduction to his lengthy travel narrative and study of biblical geography appropriately titled *The Land and the Book*, writes that

The Land and the Book constitute the all-perfect text of the Word of God, and can best be studied together. To read the one by the light of the other has been the privilege of the author for more than forty years, and the governing purpose in publishing is to furnish additional facilities for this delightful study to those who have not been thus favored.<sup>33</sup>

The problem for many, including Thomson, seemed to be that of separating the “text” of the Holy Land from the text of the Bible to any significant degree. Not that this was ever Thomson’s objective: on the contrary, the very title of his work suggests an implicit understanding that the two were inextricably linked, and is a direct reflection of the guiding principles of his theological education at the Princeton Seminary. For, as articulated by its founder and noted earlier, travel narratives were to be used in tandem with the Bible to aid in a fuller, more accurate comprehension of scripture. Indeed, as Obenzinger observes, for many travelers “the Bible was more than a guidebook; it became the Holy Land itself –

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<sup>32</sup> “Talmage Preaches Again,” *New York Times*, February 10, 1890, p. 8.

<sup>33</sup> W. M. Thomson, *The Land and the Book* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1880), 3-4.

and the scenery of the living Palestine was continually adjusted to the textualized necessities of biblical narrative: the traveler always stepped onto its pages.”<sup>34</sup>

Read together, however, the two texts seem to have become mutually-reinforcing to a point that rendered the formation of any new knowledge regarding the region a virtual impossibility. One’s faith in scripture, as well as the desire to avoid discord between expectation and experience, attributed certain qualities to the land that stubbornly refused contradiction, a trend that can be observed in almost every American account of travel to this region of the world.

Even the secularly motivated Twain reports that he was instructed prior to his excursion to bring along “a few guide-books, a Bible, and some standard works of travel,”<sup>35</sup> and apparently followed the advice. As Obenzinger eloquently observes, these travelers were engaged in “‘reading sacred geography’ with the Bible either in their hands or firmly planted in their heads.”<sup>36</sup> The result over time was the perpetuation, validation, and expansion of a preexisting faith-based discourse on the Holy Land within American society, as all experiences found to be inconsistent with one’s expectations were discounted on the basis of a pre-existing network of knowledge.

It has become something of a cliché to note that the Holy Bible has been the best-selling book since the advent of the printed word; considering the extent to which Christianity has spread throughout the world, the statement seems almost self-evident. Still, it is important to consider what this has meant for the

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<sup>34</sup> Obenzinger, 41.

<sup>35</sup> Twain, 24.

<sup>36</sup> Obenzinger, xvii-xviii.

development of literacy after the Protestant Reformation, especially as English Puritans began to migrate to North America. Central to Puritanism is the belief that in order to truly receive the Word of God, each individual must be able to personally read the Holy Bible. Thus, Puritans were among the most literate groups in English society during the seventeenth century, and continued to place a high value on reading and writing once settled in the New World. Indeed, in Puritan New England, the primary purpose of maintaining a literate society was religious in nature.<sup>37</sup>

In the years immediately following the American Revolution, the processes and technologies used to produce books were essentially the same as those used three hundred years earlier. By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, great advances in printing technologies and marketing techniques, particularly the advent of the modern publisher, had altered the book trade to a significant degree. Improved transportation systems, particularly the development and expansion of railroads, helped facilitate much wider distribution of printed materials throughout the country.<sup>38</sup> Literacy rates skyrocketed, as did the availability of books in public schools and libraries, and the dawn of the advertising agency played a major role in the further expansion of an already burgeoning American print culture.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Scott E. Casper, Joanne D. Chaison, and Jeffrey D. Groves, eds., *Perspectives on American Book History: Artifacts and Commentary* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 17.

<sup>38</sup> Scholars known as “book historians” have devoted significant scholarship to the study of just how changes in publishing and readership, as well as literacy rates, were affected by such technological innovations in printing and transportation. See Cathy N. Davidson’s *Reading in America: Literature and Social History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

For many if not most nineteenth-century Americans, despite the growing popularity of the travel narrative, the Holy Bible existed as the one work that served as a widely disseminated, ceaselessly discussed, and to a great degree undisputed source for information on the Holy Land. The travel writings produced by Americans regarding Palestine in the nineteenth century thus reflected what was in many ways a uniquely American biblical tradition, with the Bible acting as the root source in what was to become a pervasive discourse regarding the Holy Land within American society.

The formation of this American biblical tradition began with the earliest settlers arriving in the New World. According to Dr. Fuad Sha'ban,

The immigrants settling in the New World, like the Protestants of Europe, believed in a providential plan. But what gave the concept added poignancy is that the immigrants, as well as their descendants, firmly believed that they held a special position in this plan. They were, as it were, hand picked, chosen by God for the fulfillment of His will. Thus it is that the Pilgrims and the subsequent generations of Americans were constantly applying to their situation the religious analogy of “chosen people.”<sup>40</sup>

More specifically, “the similarity which they saw between their conditions and those of the Israelites... actually became an extended metaphor in which biblical geography blended with real-life experiences and included the story of the flight from Egypt, crossing the desert and sea, and facing a vast inhospitable wilderness.”<sup>41</sup> Indeed, an 1867 article in the *New York Times* demonstrates the perpetuation of such modes of thought well into the nineteenth century. Entitled

<sup>39</sup> Casper et. al., 109.

<sup>40</sup> Sha'ban, 3.

<sup>41</sup> Sha'ban, 9.

“The Pacific Coast: The American Palestine, or Correspondence Between the Pacific Coast and Syria,” the article opens with the following passage:

I have often been struck, in traveling through California and Nevada, with the old Biblical descriptions of nature and scenery, as applicable here; so that the wonderful language and imagery of the Hebrew prophets and poets find a continual exegesis and commentary in one’s journey. The modern accounts, too, of Syria and Palestine correspond surprisingly with one’s observations here.<sup>42</sup>

The author then goes on to describe, at considerable length, the various similarities in both conditions and events between the American Pacific Coast and Palestine, citing biblical passages throughout. The religious dimensions of Manifest Destiny thus seem to have had repercussions beyond the geographical expansion of the United States: the conceptual link established between the American frontier and the perceived Christian “frontier” in the Holy Land helped fuel the missionary drive that would attempt to reclaim Palestine for Western Christianity. According to Dr. Fuad Sha’ban,

The fabric of American culture in the nineteenth century was permeated by Evangelical Christianity, and this aspect of nineteenth century America gave rise to the missionary spirit which essayed to reach ‘lost souls’ throughout the world.... and the Holy Land, especially Jerusalem, assumed a central position in American missionary efforts.<sup>43</sup>

As I will soon demonstrate, the proselytizing in which such Christian missionaries engaged was not only linked to a sort of conceptual appropriation of the Holy Land for the Western Christian world, but also helped to facilitate the conceptual adjustments found to be necessary by American travelers in the region. As we will

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<sup>42</sup> C. L. B., “The Pacific Coast: The American Palestine, or Correspondence Between the Pacific Coast and Syria,” *New York Times*, December 26, 1867, p. 3.

<sup>43</sup> Sha’ban, 89-90.



discuss later, the energy behind this drive for a sort of conceptual appropriation of the Holy Land seems to have eventually manifested itself in the form of Western support for the Zionist movement in the late nineteenth century.

### **Expectation and Experience: The Theory of Cognitive Dissonance**

A slight detour into the realm of social psychology may help to illustrate the underlying causes of the difficulties faced by American travelers in their attempts to reconcile expectation with experience. In particular, the theory of cognitive dissonance, first articulated by Leon Festinger in the 1950s, provides an interesting perspective from which to examine our travelers. According to this much expounded-upon theory, cognitions are the things people know or believe about themselves, their behavior, and their environment. Dissonance occurs when two cognitions are found to be inconsistent with one another, typically as a result of the acquisition of new information. According to Festinger, once dissonance occurs, the natural human tendency is to attempt to reduce or resolve that dissonance through one or more of three methods: avoidance, social support, or explanatory schemes.<sup>44</sup>

Avoidance is the most obvious method of dissonance-resolution for the individual. Should reality contradict one's beliefs in any significant manner, however, one may find it impossible to avoid "dissonance producing confrontations,"<sup>45</sup> be they involuntary (as with crises or accidents) or, in the case of many travelers to the Holy Land, simply unanticipated. It is for these

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<sup>44</sup> Robert P. Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 86-98.

<sup>45</sup> Carroll, 93-94.

occasions in which dissonance is encountered either involuntarily or without warning that social support networks become crucial methods of resolution. Support gained through membership in a group made up of people sharing similar beliefs may serve to reduce the effects of dissonance by reinforcing the validity of previously-held beliefs. This is of particular importance in the realm of organized religion, as such beliefs are not only validated by the existence of the group but often by the conversion of new members as well, which serves to augment the force behind those convictions.<sup>46</sup> Christianity in particular, which in addition to its proselytizing tendencies has a long history of tradition to reinforce its system of beliefs, is a prime example of this method of dissonance resolution, and one that is directly applicable to this study.

For individuals as well as groups, explanatory schemes are the most common method of dissonance-resolution, providing alternative explanations for newly introduced cognitive elements that contradict current notions of reality.

According to Robert P. Carroll,

there is an endless supply of possible reinterpretations and rationalizations available for neutralizing dissonance.... the dissonance avoidance function of belief systems [is such that] they provide a place for everything in the world and have explanations of all phenomena, events and experiences so that it is very difficult for different or newer cognitive elements to penetrate such systems.<sup>47</sup>

Travelers to the Holy Land, arriving with preexisting group affiliations of both the religious and cultural sort, and intending to detail their experiences in books, often utilized both the social support and explanatory scheme methods of dissonance

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<sup>46</sup> Carroll, 94-95.

<sup>47</sup> Carroll, 96-97.

resolution. Their individually-held beliefs, reinforced by membership in particular groups sharing those beliefs, prompted the formulation of various explanations and rationalizations to the end of resolving the dissonance they encountered in their travels.

William M. Thomson's writing contains several examples of such dissonance resolution. From the very beginning of *The Land and the Book*, for example, we observe its author actively confronting and resolving the gap between expectation and experience. Upon arriving in Jaffa, Thomson surveys the land before him:

My first view of this Land of Promise has been gloomy and discouraging to the last degree. A long low reach of featureless coast, dimly visible through the spray from angry waves, was all that could be seen at early dawn, as we approached.... I can readily believe, however, that in a calm, clear day Jaffa and its immediate surroundings would present a very pretty and smiling prospect.... *So I shall make haste to dismiss my first impressions, and with other eyes look upon these scenes as fancy drew and colored them in my early boyhood;* and even if every prospect does not please, I am resolved to be content with things as I find them, and make the best of them [emphasis mine].<sup>48</sup>

Like many travelers, Thomson arrived in Palestine with an idealized notion of the land, a picture carried in his mind since childhood as a result of the region's association with scripture. But the contradiction is quickly resolved; Thomson easily dismisses the perceived discordance as merely a product of the weather or, at worst, an unfortunate condition to be adapted to, likely through the further employment of various explanatory schemes.

The theory of cognitive dissonance also has special applications to beliefs dealing with biblical prophesy. In fact, there is an entire book devoted to the

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<sup>48</sup> Thomson, 6.

subject. Robert P. Carroll, in *When Prophecy Failed*, addresses the predictive elements of the prophetic traditions and the responses the failed expectations they triggered. Although a comprehensive study of the multitude of prophetic traditions is beyond the scope of this paper (indeed, it was beyond the scope of Carroll's book), it will be useful to address in general how biblical prophecy fits into the framework of dissonance resolution. According to Carroll, there exist two general types of predictions, one based on clear terms (thus clearly aligning the prediction and the conditions requisite for fulfillment) and the other in which the terms for fulfillment or failure are not inherent to the prediction itself. Since most biblical prophecy, as a result of the conditional or symbolic language in which it is stated, falls into the latter category, opportunities abound in which to employ various explanatory schemes to deal with the possibility of failure.<sup>49</sup>

John Lloyd Stephens, though not a missionary like Thomson, makes repeated reference to biblical stories prophecies, both with specific quotations and in passing, throughout *Incidents of Travel*. "I would that the skeptic could stand as I did among the ruins of this city among the rocks," writes Stephens of the ruins of the ancient city of Edom, "and there open the sacred book and read the words of the inspired penman, written when this desolate place was one of the greatest cities in the world."<sup>50</sup> And later, after passing through the supposedly cursed land of Idumea unharmed, Stephens writes:

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<sup>49</sup> Carroll, 112-114.

<sup>50</sup> John Lloyd Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Egypt, Arabia Petraea, and the Holy Land, Vol. II* (New York: James C. Darby, 1837), 58.

And, though I did pass through and was not cut off, God forbid I should count the prophesy a lie: no; even though I had been a confirmed skeptic, I had seen enough, in wandering with the Bible in my hand in that unpeopled desert, to tear up the very foundations of unbelief and scatter its fragments to the winds.<sup>51</sup>

Though experience seems to have demonstrated that the prophesy barring passage through Idumea had indeed failed, Stephens's faith refuses to be shaken. Here is an example of the power of faith in the context of dissonance resolution: the author's membership in a particular religious group, one possessing certain collective notions of scriptural accuracy, likely acted as a key motivation towards his comfortable dismissal of the dissonant cognitive elements at hand. It did not matter that the prophesy went unfulfilled, only that it existed, and that there also existed a large support network to validate its authenticity. To claim the prophesy a failure would have likely seemed to the author's potential audience unimaginably scandalous, if not outright blasphemous. After all, one man claiming to possess first-hand evidence of biblical prophesy's failure would have likely been no match for scores of outraged believers reading from back home in the United States.

In fact, most writers of American Holy Land literature themselves remained in Palestine for only a brief time (William M. Thomson, who made the region his home for almost forty-four years, was the notable exception). It was, therefore, not until they returned home to the U.S. that they began to produce the books they would publish purporting to document their experiences, as well as the perceived realities of the region. According to Obenzinger,

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<sup>51</sup> Stephens, 110-111.

the reports on economic conditions, local culture, and even geography by American Holy Land writers are often less than accurate or complete. Americans viewed Palestinian reality through American eyes, through the ‘window’ of the New World experience of the rawest, most extreme, most violent settler-colonial expansion in the world, as well as through the lens of the Bible, crusader myths, and *Arabian Nights*. What these writers ‘saw’ often spoke to the formation of American cultural structures and had little to do with what was actually the Palestine before their eyes.<sup>52</sup>

If Obenzinger is correct, then there is indeed a clear problem with Reverend Alexander’s philosophy of theological study. To provide scripture with context through modern works of travel – or any other branch of knowledge – is to apply subjective cultural structures to a supposedly objective scholarly exercise. But perhaps it is impossible for an individual to interpret *any* text without resorting to his or her unique personal and cultural biases and preconceptions. Unavoidably, any American reading of the Bible (or any other work, for that matter) essentially results in the reading of his or her national, cultural, and religious identity into the text.

The “American cultural structures” of which Obenzinger writes thus had a great deal to do with a uniquely American biblical tradition, which in effect acted as a basis for a developing discourse on Palestine within American Christian society. This discourse posited the Holy Land firmly within the Judeo-Christian tradition, and ultimately had a profound effect on American popular perception regarding Palestine and its inhabitants. According to Obenzinger, “American child rearing and Protestant-based education infused biblicalism into all aspects of daily life, resulting in an intimate, personalized knowledge of an imagined Holy

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<sup>52</sup> Obenzinger, xvii-xviii.

Land.”<sup>53</sup> Palestine in the American traveler’s imagination, therefore, existed as an amalgamation of the effects of Bible-centered Protestant upbringing, the Orientalist tendency to posit all things Eastern as the diametrical opposite of all things “good” of Western origin, and the sum of all previously encountered texts concerning the Holy Land, whether encountered directly through perusal or indirectly through their dissemination via various other social channels.

### **The Problem of Forming a Picture**

Historian Timothy Mitchell observes in his book *Colonising Egypt* that “among European writers who traveled to the Middle East in the middle and latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, one very frequently finds the experience of its strangeness expressed in terms of the problem of forming a picture.”<sup>54</sup> The sense of order and consistency inherent in the examination of a picture, a picture one created through the ordering of previous experience around reality (or, perhaps more accurately for our purposes, the ordering of reality around previous experience), seemed to have been crucial to the Western traveler’s ability to make sense of his or her experiences in Palestine. And, indeed, one discovers a similar tendency among American travelers upon encountering the Holy Land for the first time.

John Lloyd Stephens, for example, in his 1837 travel book *Incidents of Travel*, voices his disappointment with the realities of Palestine in pictorial terms, writing “One by one I had seen the many illusions of my waking dreams fade

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<sup>53</sup> Obenzinger, 42.

<sup>54</sup> Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 22.

away; the gorgeous pictures of Oriental scenes melt into nothing.”<sup>55</sup> In *The Innocents Abroad*, Twain too demonstrates this picture-forming dilemma as he reflects on his companions: “These men had been taught from infancy to revere, almost worship, the holy places whereupon their happy eyes were resting now. For many and many a year this very picture had visited their thoughts by day and floated through their dreams by night.”<sup>56</sup> Later, this preoccupation with pictures becomes even more apparent:

We descended to the Plain again, and halted a moment at a well – of Abraham’s time no doubt.... It was walled three feet above ground with squared and heavy blocks of stone, after the manner of Bible pictures.... Picturesque Arabs sat upon the ground, in groups, and solemnly smoked their long-stemmed chibouks.... Here was a grand Oriental picture I had worshipped a thousand times in soft, rich steel engravings! But in the engravings there was no desolation; no dirt; no rags; no fleas; no ugly features; no sore eyes; no feasting flies; no besotted ignorance in the countenances; no raw places in the donkeys’ backs; no disagreeable jabbering in unknown tongues; no stench of camels; no suggestion that a couple of tons of powder placed under the party and touched off would heighten the effect and give to the scene a genuine interest and charm which it would always be pleasant to recall, even though a man lived a thousand years. Oriental scenes look best in steel engravings.<sup>57</sup>

Upon close examination of these passages, a few things become evident. First, the matter of forming a picture does not seem so much a *problem* for the American as Mitchell would describe it, but more an intense desire for the resolution of dissonant cognitive elements. As indicated in the first of the above selections from Twain, there seems a constant need to reconcile scripture with reality. As

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<sup>55</sup> Stephens, 123-124.

<sup>56</sup> Twain, 496.

<sup>57</sup> Twain., 543-544.



indicated in the latter passage, however, there seems a desire to distance oneself from that same reality precisely *because* it does not square with the traveler's idealized preconceptions of the Holy Land. The desired picture, however, is not simply that of a vaguely recalled steel engraving or biblical description, but was often attached to an incredibly significant element of one's religious faith, an association that rendered successful dissonance resolution that much more crucial for the Christian traveler.

According to Mitchell, the Westerner seems to be programmed to understand the world around him through a process of representation, one that often obscures the reality of experience behind expectations of order and consistency. The strong ties of such expectations to religious faith acted as significant ideological constraints on the incorporation of new knowledge; more often than not, the reconciliation of dissonant cognitive elements involved explanatory schemes to resolve a traveler's particular faith-associated dissonance. Despite the often light, satirical tone of his travel book, perhaps Twain says it best:

I am sure, from the tenor of books I have read, that many who have visited [the Holy Land] in years gone by, were Presbyterians, and came seeking evidences in support of their particular creed; they found a Presbyterian Palestine, and had already made up their minds to find no other, though they possibly did not know it, blinded by their zeal.... Others were Catholics, Methodists, Episcopalians.... Honest as these men's intentions may have been, they were full of partialities and prejudices, and entered this country with the verdicts already prepared and they could no more write dispassionately and impartially about it than they could about their own wives and children.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Twain, 511.

Such presuppositions built upon religious faith carried with them much more weight than those resulting from secular biases, rendering the resolution of dissonance that much easier: when presented with the option of either explaining away a new, discordant cognitive element or accepting the possible invalidity of one's religious faith, it is likely that the choice was rarely a difficult one to make. William M. Thomson provides a clear demonstration of an explanatory scheme at work, a dissonance resolved for the reader. In his discussion of the Old Testament story of Jonah, who is swallowed by a whale, Thomson dismisses the contention that, because there are no whales in the Mediterranean Sea, the story cannot be true:

In a word, the whole affair was miraculous, and, as such, is taken out of the category of difficulties. If a whale had never before been in the Mediterranean, God could bring one to the exact spot needed.... He could also furnish the necessary capacity to accomplish the end intended. It is idle, and worse, cowardly, to withhold our faith in a Bible miracle until we can find or invent some way in which the thing might have happened without any great miracle after all.<sup>59</sup>

Belief in an all powerful God, then, appears to manifest itself here as the ultimate explanatory scheme. In the realm of religious belief, the existence of a supreme being through which even the miraculous is believed to be possible provides an incredibly powerful mechanism for the resolution of virtually any type of discord between expectation and experience.

Of course, the American traveler also found it necessary to resolve contradictions of the more secular sort: Americans arrived in the Holy Land expecting an *American* Holy Land. As a result of the discourse we have

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<sup>59</sup> Thomson, 12-13.

discussed, Americans often confused representations with reality. As Timothy Mitchell argues,

since the Middle East had not been organized representationally, [Westerners] found the task of representing it almost impossible and the results disappointing... the Orient more and more became a place that one ‘already knew by heart’ on arrival... something one only ever rediscovered. To be grasped representationally, as a picture of something, it was inevitably to be grasped as a reoccurrence of a picture one had seen before, as a map one already carried in one’s head, as the reiteration of an earlier description.... To describe the Orient, which refused to provide a point of view and to present itself, became more and more a process of re-describing these representations.<sup>60</sup>

Pilgrims to the Holy Land not only had a very specific pre-conceived picture in their heads, but ultimately *placed themselves within that picture*, thus attempting to pre-fashion their experiences around their presuppositions, many of which often proved to be inaccurate. As Obenzinger argues, travelers in Palestine “could read/write themselves within a material aura of a transcendent past that the American entered as an actor on a divine stage set who, simply by his presence, brought the drama back to life;”<sup>61</sup> and the Holy Bible became the script.

What is interesting is not that the Bible was utilized in these travels – the fact that it was referenced is almost self-evident – but rather *how* it was used: instead of using the reality of experience to verify the Bible, travelers essentially *used the Bible to verify the reality of experience*. The Bible was thus not only a guidebook to the Holy Land, but also had a profound effect on the very *character* of the land, or more specifically on how its character was represented by travelers and translated into the American popular imagination throughout the nineteenth

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<sup>60</sup> Mitchell, 29-30.

<sup>61</sup> Obenzinger, 40.

century. As a result, the study of Holy Land travel literature provides a unique intersection of Western attitudes. On the one hand, we see the type of polarizing Orientalist thought that can be observed elsewhere in Western scholarship on the Middle East. But we can also detect the Westerner's expression of a sort of familiarity with *this particular part* of the Middle East, one derived from a perceived Western Christian connection to the land. According to Obenzinger,

while persistent preoccupations with the Bible and Biblical geography stood at the ideological core of American colonial expansion, actual travel to Palestine allowed Americans to contemplate biblical narratives at their source in order to reimagine – and even to reenact – religio-national myths, allowing them, ultimately, to displace the biblical Holy Land with the American New Jerusalem.<sup>62</sup>

That these authors were, in fact, recording first-hand experiences in the Holy Land attributed to their works an authority that would have otherwise been impossible to achieve. With each reaffirmation of the “true” character of Palestine, the picture of the land embedded in the American collective imagination became clearer, increasing the scope of the conceptual appropriation taking place.

Palestine was, after all, perceived to be an important aspect of American settler identity, and the dissonance resolution in which travelers engaged was crucial to the achievement of any such appropriation. As Obenzinger argues,

the perception of the Holy Land's failure, which often led to the disturbing sense of disjuncture and disappointment, could also lead to material projects to correct and restore the land, although in most cases travelers appropriated and Americanized the land through the imagination by means of rhetorical adjustments. Between the expectation and the realization, between the ancient

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<sup>62</sup> Obenzinger, 5.

text and the contemporary, there always seems to stand the impossible gulf...<sup>63</sup>

Because that which was inscrutable could not be adapted to fit the desired context of an American Palestine, the successful Western appropriation of the Holy Land required that any such explanation-defying dissonance be avoided at all costs. As a result, that which could not be explained was often deemed irrelevant to a proper understanding of the region or, worse still, detrimental to its current condition. The unexplainable *itself*, then, could become an explanatory scheme for resolving dissonance encountered as a result of the traveler's idealized expectations.

### **Liberal Exclusionism and Conceptual Appropriation**

The following elaboration on Western attempts at a sort of conceptual acquisition of the Holy Land might be aided by a brief discussion of Uday S. Mehta's theory of liberal exclusionism. In short, Mehta argues that liberalism's theoretical framework, as based on its Lockean formulation, contains a kind of "loophole," one that essentially denies the benefits of the theory's claimed universality to societies not meeting certain standards, and ultimately provides a justification for imperialism. Self-government based on the consent of the governed implies the ability to consent, which is, according to Locke, entirely dependent on one's ability to reason. Children and the insane, for example, cannot consent, for they lack the sufficient capacity for rational thought. Turning this idea on its head, however, we can see that one purporting to observe from a

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<sup>63</sup> Obenzinger, 57.

relative position of superiority typically assumes responsibility for verifying the presence of reason – or the lack thereof. In Mehta's own words,

The significance of designating something as inscrutable can be illustrated by the distinction between something that resists comprehension and something that is inscrutable. The former description permits of a future change in which the object may, finally, become comprehensible. It also places the onus on the comprehending subject and not on the studied object.... In contrast, inscrutability designates an unfathomable limit to the object of inquiry without implicating either the process of inquiry or the inquirer. It is quite literally a description in which the object is made to appear... on its own reckoning as something that defies description and, hence, reception. Furthermore, inscrutability clearly places a limit on political possibilities by closing off the prospect that the object satisfies the (however minimal) conditions requisite for political inclusion.<sup>64</sup>

As I will soon demonstrate to have been the case, travelers to the Holy Land often seemed to find the land and its inhabitants to be utterly inscrutable in nature. Not only did the land seem to be an unchanging relic of the past, its inhabitants a detriment to progress and utterly incapable of establishing a Western standard of proper self-government, but the American travelers seemed to routinely attempt to reformulate that which they were observing in order to reconcile the reality of experience with their preconceptions.

One interesting manifestation of such preconceptions was the nineteenth-century European phenomenon of the world exhibition. These exhibitions were elaborate models of exotic locales which claimed to represent the external reality of the Orient. If, after visiting one of these exhibitions, the European then had occasion to experience the Orient first-hand, however, he or she often found its comprehension quite problematic. According to Timothy Mitchell,

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<sup>64</sup> Uday S. Mehta, "Liberal Strategies of Exclusion," in *Tensions of Empire*, ed. Fredrick Cooper and Laura Stoler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 64.

the Orient refused to present itself like an exhibit, and so appeared simply orderless and without meaning. The colonizing process was to introduce the kind of order now found lacking – the effect of structure that was to provide not only a new disciplinary power but also the novel ontology of representation.<sup>65</sup>

The Holy Land discourse seems to have functioned for the American traveler in much the same way as the exhibition functioned for the European. Americans arrived in Palestine expecting to encounter the same neat, ordered reality of their imaginations. What they discovered lacked the order and consistency of the established representational schemes found in travel diaries and Sunday school lectures; the model was inconsistent with reality. Thus, the use of explanatory schemes to resolve such dissonance was an important method for the American traveler in his or her efforts to make sense of that which resisted comprehension, and whatever could not be explained was, in a manifestation of dissonance avoidance, discounted out of necessity as inscrutable.

The actions of Western Christian missionaries and travelers in the region during the nineteenth century provide another interesting example of this distinction between that which resists comprehension and that which is deemed to be inscrutable. According to Lawrence Davidson, American Protestant missionaries had largely abandoned their attempts to convert the region's Muslim population by the 1830s, focusing the bulk of their efforts instead on its Christian and Jewish inhabitants.<sup>66</sup> As Davidson argues,

The indigenous Muslim population... was of necessity simultaneously demonized and deemphasized. Non-Muslim groups, such as Armenians, Arab Christians, and Jews, all seen as

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<sup>65</sup> Mitchell, xv.

<sup>66</sup> Davidson, 127.

people of Biblical origins, received more attention, which reinforced the perception that they were the only groups in the region meriting serious consideration.... This process, in turn, fed into a widespread conviction that the Holy Land was really an extension of the West's biblical religious patrimony that had been usurped by an alien power.... The result was a religiously prescribed picture of the Holy Land that in effect emptied it of its Islamic history and, when it addressed the Arab Muslim population at all, viewed them as an unfortunate impediment to be dismissed for the sake of redemption and progress.<sup>67</sup>

Eastern Christians and Jews, then, merely resisted comprehension. They possessed the potential for progress, primarily as a result of their shared biblical heritage with the Western Christian, and thus became the main focus of evangelical projects in the region. Muslims, on the other hand, seem to have been deemed inscrutable: because their religion was not viewed as part of a Judeo-Christian heritage, their presence in a land that was perceived as inextricably linked to that heritage was, out of necessity, something to be ignored.

In some ways, this argument stands in contradiction to one articulated by Bar and Cohen-Hattab, which proposes that while pilgrims understood their journey to the Holy Land to be one from periphery to center (as Palestine is regarded in scripture as the literal and figurative center of the world), modern-tourist pilgrims regarded their journey as one from center (the "civilized" Western world) to periphery.<sup>68</sup> While this may be true from a purely religious perspective, it seems that even those traveling in the Holy Land for purely religious reasons were aware of a certain discord between their Western perception of what Palestine *ought* to be and their actual experiences in the region. For the modern

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<sup>67</sup> Davidson, 127-128.

<sup>68</sup> Bar and Cohen-Hattab, 3.



tourist pilgrims, most of whom were posited in fairly elite socio-economic backgrounds and were keenly aware of the developmental state of Western society, there was almost surely a sense that Palestine must be some sort of cultural and political backwater. For missionaries and traditional pilgrims, though in a sense they *were* traveling to the spiritual center of their world, their attempts to convert its population – to essentially alter its nature – seem to demonstrate that, on some level, they did indeed perceive the Holy Land to be peripheral. The region and its inhabitants stood at the periphery of the traditional pilgrim's expectations, and were thus justifiably subject to his efforts to promote conformity to a preconceived ideal.

On the other hand, most Americans did perceive there to exist a special relationship between the Holy Land and America, between Old Testament stories and the American story of colonization and expansion. The American biblical tradition interpreted the Holy Land as part of a Western Judeo-Christian heritage, and the travel diaries that were being published during this period simultaneously reflected and reinforced these assumptions. According to Obenzinger, these travel diaries made up

a subgenre or field of American Holy Land literature based on direct travel to Palestine, a literature in which representations, controversies, and anxieties involving the certainties of religious and national identities contend upon a heightened field of mythic meanings, with all Holy Land books seeking in one way or another to appropriate Palestine for the American imagination.<sup>69</sup>

The appropriation of which Obenzinger writes often involved the use of explanatory schemes to resolve the dissonance experienced when Holy Land

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<sup>69</sup> Obenzinger, x.

realities failed to conform to expectations. Travel narratives written on the region thus depended on the author's ability to resolve the dissonance caused by such inconsistencies in order to render the appropriation of the Holy Land conceptually feasible. The author's task became to fashion a picture of the Holy Land that could be more easily understood by American readers than the reality initially confronted by the writer. The observer was thereby engaging in the translation of reality into knowledge, and in doing so, altering the very nature of the land to fit into his audience's frame of reference. Dissonance resolution was thereby rendered completely unnecessary for the reader; any dissonance had already been resolved by the writer's chosen explanatory scheme.

One of these explanatory schemes dealt with historical perspective. Traveling as they were from a young nation with a comparatively short history, American travelers exhibited an almost universal tendency to characterize Palestine and its people as timeless and unchanging. As Twain writes in *The Innocents Abroad*, "The famous pool looked exactly like it did in Solomon's time, no doubt, and the same dusky, Oriental women, came down in their old Oriental way, and carried off jars of water on their heads, just as they did three thousand years ago, and just as they will do fifty thousand years hence if any of them are left on earth."<sup>70</sup> Three decades earlier, Stephens expressed similar sentiments in his *Incidents of Travel*, stating that

the life of the Bedouin, his appearance and habits, are precisely the same as the patriarchs of old. Abraham himself, the first of the patriarchs, was a Bedouin, and four thousand years have not made the slightest alteration in the character and habits of this extraordinary people. Read of the patriarchs in the Bible, and it is

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<sup>70</sup> Twain, 583.

the best description you can have of pastoral life in the East at the present day.<sup>71</sup>

The long history of the region and its people, coupled with the ideological constraints of a biblical history inseparable from religious faith, seem to have made such observations that much easier to make. In addition, general cultural stereotypes of Oriental peoples as primitive, and of the region as a political and cultural backwater, likely helped to stimulate such notions of the Holy Land as a sort of unchanging historical monument. Bible in hand, American travelers took for granted the presuppositions planted in their minds by religious faith – and to a large extent even their general cultural experience – and created before them a Holy Land in which they could not only validate their faith in the Bible, but in which they could imagine its events unfolding before their eyes.

On the other hand, when it so happened that the reality of experience so defied expectations as to render their reconciliation impossible, the traveler often seemed to distance himself from the reality before him through an exercise of the imagination. As Stephens wrote of the port city of Jaffa, “There is nothing of interest in the modern city of Jaffa. Its history is connected with the past. The traveler must stand on the shore, and fill the little harbor with the ships of Tarshish, or imagine Noah entering the ark with his family . . .”<sup>72</sup> Twain often reverted to a similar kind of imaginary Palestine, remarking that “We do not think, in the holy places; we think in bed, afterwards, when the glare, and the noise, and the confusion are gone, and in fancy we revisit alone, the solemn

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<sup>71</sup> Stephens, 12.

<sup>72</sup> Stephens, 191.

monuments of the past, and summon the phantom pageants of an age that has passed away.”<sup>73</sup> Twain also quite notably closes his final chapter on the Holy Land by remarking that “Palestine is no more of this work-day world. It is sacred to poetry and tradition – it is a dream-land.”<sup>74</sup>

The traveler’s problem seemed to have been that he or she was unprepared for this new proximity to a land that had previously existed only in books and stories. As Twain reflects in one instance,

I could sit off several thousand miles and imagine the angel appearing, with shadowy wings and lustrous countenance, and note the glory that streamed downward upon the Virgin’s head while the message from the Throne of God fell upon her ears – anyone can do that, from beyond the ocean, but few can do it here. I saw the little recess from which the angel stepped, but could not fill its void. The angels that I know are creatures of unstable fancy – they will not fit in niches of substantial stone. Imagination labors best in distant fields. I doubt if any man can stand in the Grotto of the Annunciation and people with the phantom images of his mind its too tangible walls of stone.”<sup>75</sup>

The reality of experience was often sobering, even shocking; but the traveler’s faith in the Bible seemed to prevent it from ever becoming devastating. The conceptual adjustments necessary to reconcile new, dissonant cognitive elements with one’s faith seemed to rarely compel any serious dissent; some type of explanation was always available to dismiss what could not be explained by reference to one’s expectations.

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<sup>73</sup> Twain, 603.

<sup>74</sup> Twain, 608.

<sup>75</sup> Twain, 527.

### **Conceptual Appropriation Fulfilled: Explaining Christian Support for the Zionist Movement**

But where do we go from here? Up to this point, we have explored some arguably engaging issues in a highly theoretical sense, but the thrust of this study seems to beg some sort of substantive application. To this end, I will spend the remainder of this paper analyzing the previous elaborations in the context of the Zionist movement, or, more specifically, the movement's ability to successfully garner Western Christian support for its stated goals. According to Edward Said,

It was the world that made the success of Zionism possible, and it was Zionism's sense of the world as supporter and audience that played a considerable practical role in the struggle for Palestine. Most Jews, then as now, were not in Palestine but in "the world." All appeals on behalf of Zionism were international appeals perforce. The site of the Zionist struggle was only partially in Palestine; most of the time until 1948, and even after, the struggle had to be waged, fueled and supported in the great capitals of the West.<sup>76</sup>

Aside from the obvious political motivations behind the establishment of a democratic state in the Middle East, and the later humanitarian ambitions of creating a safe-haven for the Jewish people in the aftermath of the Holocaust, it seems that the American discourse on the Holy Land may have had a significant effect on popular attitudes toward the establishment of a Jewish state during this period.

The connection between Christian Fundamentalism and the Jewish people seems to have played a definite role in fostering at least theological acceptance of the idea of a Jewish state in Palestine. This phenomenon seems to have been grounded in religious as well as cultural attitudes in nineteenth-century American

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<sup>76</sup> Edward Said, "The Idea of Palestine in the West," *MERIP Reports* No. 70 (September 1978), 4.

society. As discussed earlier, with the resurgence of the doctrine of biblical inerrancy necessarily came increased attention to the literal interpretation of biblical prophesy. The millenarian movement, for example, which began in Britain and became influential among many evangelicals in the U.S. after 1845,<sup>77</sup> was largely responsible for introducing the concept of pre-millennialism into American Protestant thought. Most mainstream Protestants during the nineteenth century advocated a post-millennialist theology, which generally maintained that human cultural progress would eventually bring about the millennium, a thousand-year period of peace during which God would shower his blessings upon the world. *After* this millennium, Christ would return to rule the earth. But according to pre-millennialist doctrine, which is based on the literal interpretation of biblical prophesy (particularly correlations between the Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation), the Jewish people would be reinstated in Palestine, bringing about the aforementioned millennium *before* the second coming of Christ would take place.<sup>78</sup>

This theological stance is indeed quite interesting in light of growing Western interest in the Holy Land throughout the nineteenth century, and the Zionist movement seemed to benefit from this increased attention to Christian biblical prophesy. In the latter decades of the nineteenth century, what David Rausch calls the “proto-Fundamentalist” movement began to emerge from the ranks of millenarians, fueled by an improved organizational structure that

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<sup>77</sup> David A. Rausch, *Zionism Within Early American Fundamentalism 1878-1918: A Convergence of Two Traditions* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1979), 57.

<sup>78</sup> Rausch, 56.

developed during the Prophecy Conference movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>79</sup> Proto-Fundamentalism came as a reaction to the growing field of Higher Criticism and an increasing acceptance of the scientific theory of evolution. In accordance with the millenarian interpretation of biblical prophecy, the Proto-Fundamentalist advocated that the Jewish people would not only return to Palestine, but that they in fact possessed an inherent right to the land.<sup>80</sup> As a result, Rausch argues that

While Fundamentalists vary from person to person, their support for the Jewish people usually goes beyond a support for Israel. There is a reverence for the Jewish people of any nation that evokes the love and regard of Fundamentalists. Even among those who do not hold the Jewish people on a ‘pedestal,’ it is much easier to convince them of their positive duty toward God’s Chosen People, because the Fundamentalist will take the Bible’s word on it.<sup>81</sup>

The politically and culturally constructed objectives of Zionism happened to coincide with an important doctrinal objective of Fundamentalism, and as the Fundamentalist movement continued to grow in size and influence, the Zionist movement would find that it had gained an important ally. The Fundamentalist’s support for Zionism seems to have lent itself to a significant expansion of the movement’s perceived legitimacy within American culture, creating conceptual associations through which the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine could be understood and accepted as a “Western” project. While such validation would

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<sup>79</sup> The Prophecy Conference movement developed out of the Bible Conference movement of the nineteenth century, and consisted of meetings and forums designed to “reaffirm and proclaim the doctrine of Christ’s second coming through special speakers, discussion, and publicity.” (See Rausch, 79.)

<sup>80</sup> Rausch, 26.

<sup>81</sup> Rausch, 26.

not ultimately manifest itself in the form of outright political support from either western Europe or the United States until the First World War<sup>82</sup> (the Balfour Declaration being the prime example), the emerging pro-Zionist theological undercurrents in American society seem to have helped to pave the way for popular acceptance of subsequent political support.

With this intensification of millennial beliefs within American Christianity during the nineteenth century came a more pronounced awareness of the special place occupied by the Jewish people in literalist Christian doctrine, as their ingathering in the Holy Land was interpreted to be a prerequisite for the second coming of Christ. In addition, the period also produced an unprecedented surge of apocalyptic predictions, many of the perceived signs of which were observed in international political events, particularly in the Muslim World. The mid-nineteenth century also saw the emergence of theological Dispensationalism, which is explained by historian Hertzal Fishman as a theology “which viewed God as administering periods of history in accordance with specific revelations... concerned with a spiritual fellowship of individual Christians who appreciated Scripture more literally than did the ‘modernists’ who viewed it symbolically, spiritually, or critically.”<sup>83</sup> In its American form, Dispensationalism went against the traditional Christian doctrine refusing the viable existence of the Jewish people.<sup>84</sup> Taken together, these developments increased the urgency for prophetic

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<sup>82</sup> William L. Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 236-237.

<sup>83</sup> Hertzal Fishman, *American Protestantism and a Jewish State* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1973), 18-19.

<sup>84</sup> Fishman, 19.



fulfillment, an important element of which was said to be an ingathering of the Jewish people in Palestine.<sup>85</sup>

A literal interpretation of scripture demonstrates a special, even divinely mandated connection between the Jewish people and the Holy Land and, in this sense, the Western claim to Palestine can be seen as firmly posited within a sort of Judeo-Christian heritage. While exploring the city of Hebron, for example, Stephens writes that

The great mosque, the walls of which, the Jews say, are built with the ruins of the temple of Soloman, according to the belief of the Mussulmans *and the better authority of the Jews*, cover the site of the cave of Machpelah.... The doors are guarded with jealous care by the bigoted Mussulmans; and when, with my Jewish companion, I stopped for a moment to look up at the long marble staircase leading to the tomb of Abraham, a Turk came out from the bazars [sic], and, with furious gesticulations, gathered a crowd around us; and a Jew and a Christian were driven with contempt from the sepulchre [sic] of the patriarch whom they both revered.<sup>86</sup>

Not only does Stephens seem to view Jewish tradition as more reliable than that of the Muslims, but one also gets the sense that Stephens is expressing a sincere sense of solidarity with his Jewish guide. The image of a Jew and a Christian being turned away from a holy site by mob of angry Muslims seems to draw a conceptual line in the sand, suggesting the existence of a Judeo-Christian religious tradition quite separate from that of Islam.

As a result, the region's Muslim and Arab population scarcely entered into consideration; indeed, in what Lawrence Davidson refers to as a process of

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<sup>85</sup> Sha'ban, 150-155.

<sup>86</sup> Stephens, 126.

“perceptual depopulation,”<sup>87</sup> it was largely discounted altogether. As explained by Kathleen Christison in an article published in the *Journal of Palestinian Studies*,

The assumption that the *real* Palestine was not Muslim or Arab but Christian and/or Jewish constituted a symbolic dispossession of the Palestinians and gained hold of the Western imagination well before the first Zionist settlers ever conceived of migrating to Palestine in the 1880s.<sup>88</sup>

Of course, most of the region’s Christian and Jewish inhabitants *were*, in fact, of Arab descent. But as a result of the region’s deep connection with Judeo-Christian tradition (remember, the land and the Book were often conceptually indistinguishable), this matter of secular identity became largely irrelevant. Communication may have been something of an issue: upon his companion’s repeated failure to identify the price of an item while making a transaction at a Gaza marketplace, even when counting on his fingers, a foreign correspondent for *Harper’s Weekly* concludes that “an Arab can not interpret by signs intelligible to any other nationality.”<sup>89</sup> Such cultural rifts involving conventions seemingly universal to the Westerner must have not only created a significant amount of cognitive dissonance, but likely frustrated many an effort to convert the region’s inhabitants to some more “enlightened” form of worship.

As we have seen, however, missionaries persisted in their attempts to convert Palestine’s Jewish and Christian populations, while gradually abandoning

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<sup>87</sup> Davidson, 125.

<sup>88</sup> Kathleen Christison, “U.S. Policy and the Palestinians: Bound by a Frame of Reference,” *Journal of Palestinian Studies* 26, No. 4 (Summer 1997), 48.

<sup>89</sup> “Travel Notes in the Bible Lands,” *Harper’s Weekly*, June 13, 1857, p. 377.

their efforts towards Muslims in the region. The former, then, seem to have merely resisted comprehension, and thus the Westerner was able to resolve the cognitive dissonance created by the presence of Arab Christians and Jews through social support (conversion) or through various explanatory schemes. The inscrutable Muslim, on the other hand, who was extraordinarily difficult to convert, and whose presence in the Judeo-Christian Holy Land could not be explained as anything other than an unfortunate anomaly, was out of necessity either ignored or demonized.

*Baltimore Times* correspondent H. Allen Tupper, Jr., in an article reprinted in the *New York Times* in 1896, provides an interesting example. Concerning a town in Syria, Tupper writes that

Of the 12,000 people who live in the unique old town about 600 are Jews.... The Moslems, *who compose the rest of the population, are noted for their rank fanaticism and superstition*, which fact makes it dangerous for Christians to visit the place unguarded [emphasis added].<sup>90</sup>

Though comprising the vast majority of the population, the town's Muslims are seen, on account of their "rank fanaticism and superstition," to be utterly discordant with their surroundings; they simply refused to fit coherently into the context of a Judeo-Christian Holy Land. Muslims were "represented, uniquely among Oriental peoples, as aliens in their own land."<sup>91</sup> To create a Jewish state in this region, however, was in effect to reclaim the land for the West, to re-posit the Holy Land within a consonant Western conception of what it ought to be. As

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<sup>90</sup> H Allen Tupper, Jr., "The Land of the Bedouin: An American Traveler Tells of His Experiences," *New York Times*, June 15, 1896, p. 5.

<sup>91</sup> Christison, "U.S. Policy and the Palestinians," 48.

Said explains, “The Zionists occupied a place that made it possible to *interpret* Palestine and its realities to the West, in terms that the West could understand and accept.”<sup>92</sup>

Evidence of a “perceptual depopulation” can be found in many accounts of the region from the period in the form of a general dismissal of the Muslim’s claim to the land: not only were Muslims characterized as incapable of proper self-government (evidence supporting Mehta’s theory of liberal exclusionism), but their very *presence* was often found to be offensive to the Christian traveler. Davidson even suggests the existence of “a widespread conviction that the Holy Land was really an extension of the West’s biblical religious patrimony that had been usurped by an alien power.”<sup>93</sup>

There is certainly no lack of historical evidence to support Davidson’s claim. Once inside the walls of Jerusalem, for example, Twain laments that “Rags, wretchedness, poverty and dirt, those signs and symbols that indicate the presence of Moslem rule more surely than the crescent-flag itself, abound.”<sup>94</sup>

And later,

I cannot say any thing about the stone column that projects over Jehoshaphat from the Temple wall like a cannon, except that the Moslems believe Mahomet will sit astride of it when he comes to judge the world. It is a pity he could not judge it from some roost of his own in Mecca, without trespassing on *our* holy ground. Close by is the Golden Gate.... The Moslems watch [it] with a jealous eye, and an anxious one, for they have an honored tradition that when it falls, Islamism will fall, and with it the Ottoman

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<sup>92</sup> Said, 5.

<sup>93</sup> Davidson, 128.

<sup>94</sup> Twain, 559.

Empire. It did not grieve me any to notice that the old gate was getting a little shaky.<sup>95</sup>

Twain's condescending tone is indicative of the general sentiments of many American travelers, implying that Muslims did not belong in the Holy Land *at all*, let alone in the position of political authority. Stephens expresses similar sentiments as he approaches Bethlehem, writing that "the mosque and the minaret proclaim the birthplace of Christ under the dominion of a people who reject and despise him."<sup>96</sup> As Obenzinger argues,

Although Westerners "bent on 'discovering,' hence reclaiming, the Holy Land from what they believed was a stagnant and declining Ottoman Empire" described the land and architecture "in excruciating detail," they "turned a blind eye to the native inhabitants who, at best, were portrayed as nostalgic icons of Biblical times or, at worst, as obstacles to modernization." With development seen as top-down – mainly through the intervention of European political and economic influence – the native inhabitants are regarded merely as passive impediments to one or another version of progress.<sup>97</sup>

Indeed, as American involvement in the First World War began to loom over the nation, the Ottoman Empire would become the specific target of much of this hostility towards the presence of Islam in Palestine. Newspaper records from the period demonstrate the frequent use of what Davidson terms "crusader analogies" to describe Western military operations in the region, harkening back to earlier attempts by the Christian West to reclaim the Holy Land from Muslim rule.<sup>98</sup>

"Because the land was Palestine," argues Edward Said in an article for the Middle

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<sup>95</sup> Twain, 584.

<sup>96</sup> Stephens, 136.

<sup>97</sup> Obenzinger, xiv.

<sup>98</sup> Davidson, 129.

East Research and information project, “it was controlled in the Western mind not by its present realities and inhabitants, but by its portentous past and the potential of its future. Palestine was seen as the place to be possessed *anew* and reconstituted.”<sup>99</sup>

The First World War would ultimately bring about the fall of the Ottoman Empire, and with it the first great opportunity toward reclaiming Palestine for the West. The prospect of establishing a Jewish state in the region, however, seems to have possessed a certain appeal to Americans for quite some time. “Books of travel in the Holy Land,” opens one *New York Times* book review from the period, “are always among the most read, and, especially of late, the removal of the Jews to Palestine having been proposed, works of this character present a great deal of interest.”<sup>100</sup> And in another book review, “We give also the writer’s views as to the probable future of the Holy Land, about which much interest exists in Christian lands, particularly in view of the large hopes which have been excited of a return of the Jews to Palestine.”<sup>101</sup> While such hopes would not be realized for several decades, the seeds had been planted for the project’s acceptance by the West, the conceptual links established to enable the Zionist movement to garner the Western support necessary for the attainment of its goals. By the issuance of the Balfour Declaration in 1917, Jews and Christians in the West seem to have been united not only by what they perceived to be a shared religious heritage, but also by common geopolitical goals in the Middle East.

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<sup>99</sup> Edward Said, “The Idea of Palestine in the West,” 4.

<sup>100</sup> “Travels in Palestine,” *New York Times*, April 29, 1883, p. 5.

<sup>101</sup> “Palestine and its Teachings,” *New York Times*, May 7, 1888, p. 2.

## Conclusion

While the primary sources examined in this study represent only a fraction of the available material on the subject, we have made significant strides towards presenting a clearer picture of the cultural and psychological origins of an American Holy Land discourse in the nineteenth century. It is never enough to merely claim that the recording of history and the examination of other cultures are subjective endeavors; this much should be obvious. As we have seen, any interpretation of reality is necessarily distorted by the nature of a particular observer's identity, be it defined in terms cultural, religious, civilizational, or otherwise. Travel literature in particular, because of the close proximity between the observed and the observer from which its documentation arises, provides an unparalleled window through which to examine the formation of cultural discourse. On this matter, Edward Said deserves to be quoted at length:

when a human being confronts at close quarters something relatively unknown and threatening and previously distant.... one has recourse not only to what in one's previous experience the novelty resembles but also to what one has read about it. Travel books or guidebooks are about as "natural" a kind of text, as logical in their composition and in their use, , as any book one can think of, precisely because of this human tendency to fall back on a text when the uncertainties of travel in strange parts seem to threaten one's equanimity. Many travelers find themselves saying of an experience in a new country that it wasn't what they expected, meaning that it wasn't what a book said it would be.... *The idea... is that people, places and experiences can always be described by a book, so much so that the book (or text) acquires a greater authority, and use, even than the actuality it describes* [emphasis mine].<sup>102</sup>

Of course, most nineteenth-century Americans would never see the Holy Land first-hand, and the travel narratives they so eagerly read would never aid them in

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<sup>102</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 93.

navigating any landscape other than the Palestine of their dreams. But that is precisely the point: for when personal experience is beyond the realm of possibility, we are left only with the pictures in our heads, images created through our participation in discursive networks that perpetuate culturally prescribed notions of the world.

However, as we have seen, even those who *did* manage to travel to the Holy Land remained bound by their preconceptions. A particular group's collective imagination seems to assign to objects of inquiry certain representational notions of reality, notions that are rarely dispelled even through interaction and experience. Indeed, when experience is confronted by faith, faith often seems to win; the human tendency toward the painless resolution of dissonance is often far too strong to permit new, inconsistent cognitive elements to replace preexisting beliefs.

This being said, it is crucial to proper historical inquiry that we engage in a constant reexamination of that which we think we know. We need to ask ourselves *why* and *how* such knowledge has been introduced into our consciousness, and to what extent political or ideological frameworks have translated that which is knowable (to whatever extent it *is*, in fact, knowable) into mere representation. We can travel to the Holy Land, describe the landscape, the architecture, the people and their customs. But we have got to recognize that, by virtue of our existence as individuals, arriving with countless preconceptions derived from various group memberships and social identifications, our claims to any sort of universal objectivity will almost surely be false. That the issues with



which we deal exist within such discursive structures is an unavoidable reality, an inevitable consequence of living within a particular society. But we must acknowledge their existence, and deal with the notions they perpetuate, if we are to ensure that the pace of human progress does not suffer by virtue of our ignorance.

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