Edward Abbey writes, “There is no shortage of water in the desert but exactly the right amount, a perfect ration of water to rock, of water to sand…” (159). Many tourists agree. The arid, undeveloped American West so loved by Abbey in the late 1960s continues to be sought by droves of tourists who annually flock to national parks in the Southwest to hike and camp in the desert.

Whereas the wild desert is celebrated by American nature writers such as Abbey and Terry Tempest Williams, the desert landscapes of the Middle East fascinate tourists for different reasons. While the popular tourist destinations in the American desert frequently boast Native American artifacts or ruins, it is the vast and wild landscape itself that is the main attraction for many visitors. By contrast, popular tourist sites in Jordan, Syria, and the Holy Land are so steeped in human history that the physical condition of the desert itself is of secondary importance to tourists fascinated by the ancient ruins and storied cities.

However, this essay does not posit a simple dualism in which tourists in the American desert enjoy wilderness and tourists to the deserts of the Middle East enjoy history. Instead, this essay examines the meanings projected upon Middle Eastern deserts by foreigners who visit them, and asks how those meanings affect the land’s physical condition. In addition to examining contemporary and historical desert tourism material such as interpretive signs, brochures, and tour advertisements, this essay will take an ecocritical approach to Mark Twain’s *Innocents Abroad* and other works of American Holy Land travel literature.