“Reimagining Pilgrimage: Shifting Our Reading of Twain and Others for Today”

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History is both progressive and regressive. A dominant U.S. view of this region (“Biblical World,” “Holy Land,” etc.) claims an identity sourced in invented national myth, brought to unwieldy reality. How did an imagined geography that important writers ridiculed in the 19th century return with vengeance, ignoring more recent discoveries and insights? Polarized identities are serious obstacles to deeper understanding, thus the need to shift systemic interpretations and awaken public perceptions of what earlier thinkers knew through observation or partial knowledge—for future’s sake.

Twain and other writers are often misquoted or misused to sustain dominant anti-“Arab” and Zionist agendas (e.g., Netanhayu gives Obama copy of Twain). Thus well-intentioned scholars (Nur Masalha, Raja Shehadeh, even Edward Said), reacting to such Zionist/mainstream exploitation, misunderstand or omit these writers’ real contributions. When Mark Twain in Innocents Abroad (1867) speaks of both the U.S. and Palestine as “home” he is commenting on disillusions ironies in the “Promised Land” model employed to construct a national story by “pilgrim” fathers. Innocents satirizes the sacred geographers whose biblical obsessions formed Zionist “prehistory.” Twain makes fun of everyone, his compatriots included. He demolishes all sentimentalized associations which frame modern “pilgrimage” and site identification (thus land claims). For him, Greece was as “barren” as Palestine. Herman Melville too, in his undervalued Clarel (1876), deflates sacred topography, producing an anti-pilgrimage. While he says “Arabs” are the only cultivators of soil in Palestine, he is sympathetic to nomadic life, and his aesthetic of barrenness goes far ahead his time.

This presentation examines texts by seminal writers (also others like Blake, Nietzsche) to reaffirm regional understandings that are corroborated by recent archaeological, epigraphic and historical discoveries—understandings that decolonize minds and counter old misperceptions, patriotism logics, and justifying strategies perpetuated to instrumentalize current designs.