

Mark Twain's unwittingly prophetic vision for the State of Israel

(The following introductory paragraphs are lifted from the writings of Tuly Weisz in the Jerusalem Post, September 26, 2017)

A natural skeptic, Twain was not taken by the splendor of the Holy Land. He wrote irreverently about the country's legendary sites. At his peak, Mark Twain was probably the most popular American celebrity of his time. What few realize is that it was an unlikely trip to the Holy Land that established his fame as an author. A century and a half ago, Twain traveled on an excursion with his American church group to Europe and the Middle East. The material he gathered, first published in a San Francisco newspaper, formed the basis of the humorous book that made him hugely popular: **The Innocents Abroad**. A natural skeptic, Twain was not taken by the splendor of the Holy Land. He wrote irreverently about the country's legendary sites. The Sea of Galilee was, "a solemn, sailless, tintless lake, as unpoetical as any bath-tub on earth." The Church of the Nativity was "tricked out in the usual tasteless style observable in all the holy places of Palestine."

Throughout *Innocents Abroad*, Twain explicitly states that the area was desolate and devoid of inhabitants. His group entered Palestine from the north, passing through such sites as the Sea of Galilee, the Banias, Nazareth, Jenin and Nablus. Riding on horseback through the Jezreel Valley, Twain observed, "There is not a solitary village throughout its whole extent – not for 30 miles in either direction. There are two or three small clusters of Bedouin tents, but not a single permanent habitation. One may ride 10 miles, hereabouts, and not see 10 human beings." He continues, "Of all the lands there are for dismal scenery, I think Palestine must be the prince... Can the curse of the Deity beautify a land? "Palestine sits in sackcloth and ashes. Over it broods the spell of a curse that has withered its fields and fettered its energies." Twain was not alone in his poor impression of the land of milk and honey. Historians and travelers alike made similarly dreary observations over the centuries. Six hundred years before Twain's visit, another famous visitor with a nom de plume was struck by Jerusalem's desolation. Rabbi Moses ben Nachman, known as Nachmanides (1194-1270), fled Christian Spain for the Land of Israel. After a long and perilous journey, Nachmanides arrived at the Port of Acre before traveling to Jerusalem in 1267, where he couldn't even find nine other Jews to pray with. He wrote to his son, "Many are Israel's forsaken places, and great is the desecration. The more sacred the place, the greater the devastation it has suffered. Jerusalem is the most desolate place of all." Nevertheless, the sage, whose Torah commentary is still studied, had an altogether surprising interpretation of the desolation he encountered. He saw it as a blessing in disguise. Commenting on a verse in Leviticus that describes the curses that will befall the land of Israel, Nachmanides wrote that the devastation "constitutes a good tiding, proclaiming that during all our exiles, our land will not accept our enemies... Since the time that we left it, [the land] has not accepted any nation or people, and they all try to settle it... This is a great proof and assurance to us." The 13th-century scholar wrote that Israel will remain desolate until the Jewish People assume control. But when the people of Israel finally return to the land of Israel, the region will once again flourish thanks to Divine providence.

As the most famous eyewitness to the 19th-century desolation of Palestine, Twain was an unwitting collaborator of Nachmanides. *Innocents Abroad* brought global attention to the sorry state of Palestine and proved that Palestine was a land without a people for a people without a land just 15 years before the First Aliya and subsequent waves of Jewish immigration. Half a century after Twain's visit, the Balfour Declaration was issued in 1917. Fifty years later the Six Day War was won. And today, in 2017 – 50 years after that – Israel continues to flourish, moving in leaps and bounds away from Twain's "sackcloth and ashes." ¹

In Deuteronomy 29:22,23 is found: ²² **Your children who follow you in later generations and foreigners who come from distant lands will see the calamities that have fallen on the land and the diseases with which the LORD has afflicted it.** ²³ **The whole land will be a burning waste of salt and sulfur—nothing planted, nothing sprouting, no vegetation growing on it. It will be like the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboyim, which the LORD overthrew in fierce anger. (NIV)**

Historians are divided regarding Mark Twain's personal stance on biblical belief, acceptance or non-acceptance. Some see his caustic remarks targeting the behavior of "christians" more so than directed toward God or the bible. Nevertheless, his disparaging remarks about the land of Israel that he encountered and the inferred failure of God thereat creates a humorous dichotomy to his inadvertant role as a foreigner coming there from a distant land to both see and to broadly proclaim the calamities that had befallen the land in his published Innocents Abroad², just as biblically predicted. When Samuel Clemens awakens at the judgement, will he see the humor in it? We hope so.