

GRACE IN THE ARTS: MARK TWAIN: A BITTER BATTLE WITH GOD

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I. INTRODUCTION

“If the 19th-century American dream has any single literary laureate, it is Samuel Clemens, known...by his pen name, Mark Twain,” announced the *Family Encyclopedia of American History*.¹ With that assessment literary critic Edward Wagenknecht concurred when he penned: “Mark Twain is...incomparably the dominating personality in American literature, the mightiest figure in our American mythology...”² James M. Cox observed that in *The Green Hills of Africa* Ernest Hemingway asserted that “*Huckleberry Finn* was both the first and best book in American literature” so that “Mark Twain began to be viewed as the writer’s writer.”³ Likewise, William Faulkner told Japanese students that “Mark Twain was really the father of American literature...”⁴

Probably no one said it better than Twain’s long-time friend and contemporary critic William Dean Howells. At Twain’s funeral Howells acknowledged that he’d known America’s sages, poets, critics and humorists, “...but Clemens was sole, incomparable, the Lincoln of our literature.”⁵

Most likely few general readers, Christian or otherwise, are aware that the “Lincoln of our literature” was not merely mischievous but also

¹ *Family Encyclopedia of American History* (Pleasantville, NY: The Readers Digest Association, Inc., 1975), 232.

² Edward Wagenknecht, *Cavalcade of the American Novel* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1952), 114.

³ *Encyclopedia of American Biography*, eds. John A. Garraty and Jerome L. Sternstein (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1974), 201.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Milton Meltzer, *Mark Twain Himself* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1960), 289.

malevolent. America's foremost humorist was one of God's most stringent critics. As time went on, his venom and vitriol grew against the biblical God. Especially in some of his later works (which were only published posthumously—by his decision) did his anti-God acerbity arrive at its acme.

II. A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Mark Twain, born in 1835, was raised in Hannibal, Missouri. He “once claimed that at the age of two weeks [old] he knew the Bible well enough to protest being named Samuel after a boy whom the Lord ‘had to call...a couple of times before he would come!’”⁶ (Twain is referring to 1 Sam 3:1-10.) While the statement reeks of typical Twain exaggeration, it does put its finger on an important issue—namely, that the Bible was ineradicably ingrained in Twain's system at an early age. Of his two parents, Mark's mother was the one who gravitated more toward Christianity. The Twain children read the Bible, had access to Sunday school literature, and attended Sunday school. Nevertheless, her periodic pipe-smoking, dancing, and other non-traditional habits marked Jane Clemens as something of a non-conformist among Presbyterians. She also examined odd forms of religion.

Mark's dad was a self-styled free thinker. Indeed, Edward Wagenknecht avers that “Mark's father and uncle were unbelievers, and neither Orion [Mark's brother, whose name is pronounced OH-ree-uhn] nor Pamela [his sister] grew up as a model of orthodoxy.”⁷ “When he was dying [and Mark was twelve], John Marshall Clemens [Mark's father] was asked by a clergyman whether he believed in Christ and in the saving blood of Christ; he answered, ‘I do.’”⁸ Without more biographical data and a transcript of the full conversation, it would be hard to assess the genuineness of such an acknowledgement by a lifelong free thinker.

The Clemens children started out attending the Methodist Sunday school, but after a few years Jane Clemens switched them to the Presbyterian Sunday school. Wagenknecht noted that “there was one Methodist Sunday School teacher—‘Richmond, the stone mason’—whom he loved

⁶ Allison Ensor, *Mark Twain and the Bible* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1969), 1.

⁷ Edward Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain: The Man and His Work* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1935), 174.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

for his kindness.”⁹ Chapter 4 in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* gives the reader some inkling of what Sunday school must have been like for the boy Samuel Clemens.

Most commentators refer to Twain’s Sunday school indoctrination which proved unshakable for him till his dying day. John Gerber asserted: “The Calvinistic doctrines of depravity and predestination created an intellectual context from which he never...escaped. Yet Samuel Clemens was never a believer in the orthodox sense...”¹⁰ Nevertheless, Twain reiterated that his was a “trained Presbyterian conscience.”¹¹

In the summer when his father died, a measles epidemic was killing a child almost daily in Hannibal. Mark’s paralyzing fear of death was overcome when he climbed into bed with a friend who had the measles, and he nearly died. After two weeks, however, he reached a turning point and began recuperating.

By the time he was a teenager, Mark Twain had read the Bible through completely. When he was sixteen years old, his first article appeared in print. For four years during his early twenties (1857–61), he became first an apprentice, and eventually a steamboat pilot on the Mississippi River (enshrined in his book *Life on the Mississippi*). Then in 1861–1862 he headed west by stagecoach (narrated in *Roughing It*), ending up as a newspaper reporter in Virginia City, Nevada (1862–1864) and San Francisco (1864–1865). By 1861 he had joined the Freemasons, and “Masonic beliefs...were at this period distinctly deistic...”¹² In 1866 Twain spent four months in what is now called Hawaii (then designated the Sandwich Islands).

In 1870 Samuel Clemens married Olivia Langdon. Wagenknecht observed that “when Mrs. Clemens, as a girl, was a helpless invalid, it had been a faith healer, a Dr. Newton, who had restored her to activity.”¹³ Although Livy’s (or Olivia’s) family were church-goers, evidently their religion was of the liberal Protestant variety. Wagenknecht commented concerning Thomas K. Beecher (brother of Henry Ward Beecher), the Langdons’ pastor: “if there have not been many truer Christians than Thomas K. Beecher, there has certainly never been a more unconventional one in ecclesiastical life,” for he was “liberal...in his

⁹ Ibid., 176.

¹⁰ John C. Gerber, *Mark Twain* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988), 3-4.

¹¹ Ibid., 3.

¹² Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 177.

¹³ Ibid., 184.

interpretations of religion.”¹⁴ Biographer Milton Rugoff stated: “It is impossible to classify Thomas Beecher because he was guided not by doctrine” and “had left behind his father’s Calvinism.”¹⁵

At the time when Twain “was engaged to Olivia Langdon, [he] came closest to making a real connection with organized Christianity,” although “he looked back on his early life as distinctly non-Christian in his character.”¹⁶ Furthermore in the effervescence of his engagement Clemens wrote to his fiancée:

...Livy, we’ll model our home after [your] old home, and make the Spirit of Love lord over all the realm... Turn towards the Cross and be comforted—I turn with you—What would you [have] more? The peace of God shall rest upon us and all will be well.¹⁷

During that romantic period Twain was reading the Bible nightly and praying, as well as corresponding with his sweetheart over sermons he’d been reading.¹⁸ When the couple was first married, they read the Bible together, and he would say grace at mealtime.

That atmosphere didn’t last extensively, however, for soon he was announcing to Livy: “I don’t believe the Bible. It contradicts my reason.”¹⁹ As the famous author was to say through the mouth of Tom Sawyer, “I...have got religigion and wish to be quit of it and lead an honest life again.”²⁰ Irrespective of this temporary fervid religiosity Mark Twain exhibited shortly before and after his marriage, Allison Ensor concluded: “I believe that the evidence shows Twain’s orthodoxy reached its zenith late in 1868 and early in 1869 and was already declining before his marriage.”²¹ If the last six words in the preceding sentence are true, Twain either put on a gallant last hurrah or tried a good deal of romantic self-convincing.

Edward Wagenknecht espoused the view that when Mark Twain abandoned all penchant for Bible-reading and hat-tipping in the direction

¹⁴ Ibid., 179.

¹⁵ Milton Rugoff, *The Beechers* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1981), 565.

¹⁶ Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 175.

¹⁷ Ibid., 178.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ensor, *Mark Twain and the Bible*, 39.

²⁰ Ibid., 40.

²¹ Ibid., 112.

of Christianity, his wife did also. She informed him that if he were going to hell, she wanted to go with him! Later when he urged her: “Livy, if it comforts you to lean on the Christian faith, do [so],” she retorted, “I can’t Youth [using her pet name for him]. I haven’t any.”²²

Oddly, in light of his throwaway “faith,” Twain became friends about that time (for the next forty-five years) with the Congregational minister from Hartford, Connecticut, who had co-performed their wedding. Reverend Joseph Twichell had attended Yale University, Union Theological Seminary, and spent 2 years at Andover Theological Seminary. As a Civil War chaplain, Twichell had already become broader in his thinking due to his association with his fellow chaplain, the Roman Catholic Father Joseph B. O’Hagan (later to become president of Holy Cross College in Massachusetts). When Twichell had to conduct the funeral of a non-Christian, he inquired aloud during the service what was “the distinctive feature of the religion of Christ?” He answered his own question by asking, “Is it not the simple appeal to love one another?”²³ No wonder the commenting biographer can therefore assert: “Evangelical Christianity was beyond the range of [Twichell’s] personal experience.”²⁴

Toward the end of the Civil War, Twichell was forced to come to some doctrinal decisions about the controversial local Congregational pastor, Horace Bushnell. The *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* calls Bushnell “the father of American theological liberalism.”²⁵ Bushnell’s theology “disagreed with three basic Calvinistic propositions, the first of which concerned the means by which an individual became a true Christian” in that “total depravity, unconditional election, and prevenient and irresistible grace” presumed that each individual “must experience some kind of miraculous conversion.”²⁶ This was the position he chafed against in his book *Christian Nurture*. Bushnell held that if a child grew up in a loving Christian home, he or she “would grow up never feeling that he had been other than a Christian.”²⁷

²² Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 178.

²³ Leah A. Strong, *Joseph Hopkins Twichell: Mark Twain’s Friend and Pastor* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1966), 36.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁵ Mark A. Noll, “Bushnell, Horace,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 181.

²⁶ Strong, *Joseph Hopkins Twichell*, 55.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

In Bushnell's book *God in Christ* he communicated that "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost were *not* three distinct consciousnesses...Instead, they were 'instrumentally three'..."²⁸ For these theological positions (and others) the *Princeton Review* (and other Bible scholars) called for Bushnell to be tried for heresy. All of this theological upheaval was transpiring when Twichell came to be a Congregational pastor in Hartford, Connecticut. Upon study, Twichell "adopted Bushnell's theology almost in its entirety."²⁹

Mark Twain's new publisher of *Innocents Abroad* lived right across the street from the church which Twichell pastored. In a social gathering Twain called the Congregational church the "Church of the Holy Speculators" (due to its wealthy members), only to be told that Twichell was standing right behind him at that very moment. As time passed, the Twichells and the Twains became fast friends. Mark Twain was to consider Rev. Joseph Twichell and the literary William Dean Howells his two best and longest friends.

On their 1878 trip abroad together in Europe, Twain was to tell Twichell: "I have been almost a believer, but it immediately drifts away from me again. I don't believe a word of your Bible was inspired by God any more than any other book."³⁰ Twain's first biographer, Albert Bigelow Paine, was to claim that by 1878 Twain and Twichell "ended all discussion of the personal aspects of religion..."³¹

In the ten-year period between 1876 and 1885 Mark Twain penned *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), *The Prince and the Pauper* (1882), *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885).

Twain's life was also pocked by tragedy. He watched his brother Henry die from a steamboat explosion and wasn't sure that Henry's death might have been capped off by an overdose of morphine that he may have administered. He also felt responsible for the death of his first child (a little boy) since Mark had taken him out of doors and overexposed him in bad weather. By 1894 his lack of financial wisdom had brought him to the door of bankruptcy. In 1896 his daughter Susy died from meningitis. In 1904 his wife died after a siege of twenty-two months, and in 1909 his daughter Jean died on the day before Christmas.

²⁸ Ibid., 56.

²⁹ Ibid., 58.

³⁰ Ibid., 92.

³¹ Ibid., 105-106.

Only his daughter Clara was to outlive the famed author. Twain was, of course, responsible for his wife's abandonment of any substantial version of Christianity. Eventually he "began to have terrifying dreams in which...he and his family are lost in the dark on board a ship with no pilot and no rudder."³² What nightmares for a former riverboat pilot to have!

Mark Twain was to receive honorary doctorates (between 1901 and 1907) from Yale University, the University of Missouri, and Oxford University.

By 1906 Twain had published privately and anonymously a piece that his wife had despised and which he called his "Bible"—*What Is Man?* Among his last and most bitter anti-God writings are *The Mysterious Stranger* (featuring a Satan character) and *Letters from the Earth*. Before dying, Mark Twain reportedly said to his daughter, "Good-by, dear, if we meet."³³ How different a tone is entailed in Twain's dying "if we meet" from 1 Thess 4:14 and 17 (*we believe that we who are alive will be caught up with Christians who've died to meet the Lord together*).

III. A SHORT SURVEY OF HIS BOOKS

The Innocents Abroad (1869) is Twain's write-up of his trip overseas aboard an excursion ship (the Quaker City) bound (among other destinations) for the Holy Land. *The Innocents Abroad* is subtitled *The New Pilgrim's Progress*. It was really this book that rocketed Twain to fame as a national humorist. He felt that a sizable percentage of the passengers had a kind of prissy pseudo-piety. He called Palestine "the grand feature of the expedition."³⁴ However, any supposed innocence of expectations he had cherished about the Holy Land was diminished or demolished by the greed and gaudiness that hovered about the so-called "holy places."

A second travel book (*Roughing It*) materialized from his pen three years later. It traced his out-west trip and adventures there. John Gerber asserted: "Apart from *Huckleberry Finn*, *Roughing It* is Mark Twain's best compendium of well-crafted comic styles and devices."³⁵ Incidentally, for preachers the hilarious conversational interchange between a

³² Gerber, *Mark Twain*, 150.

³³ Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 8.

³⁴ Meltzer, *Mark Twain Himself*, 100.

³⁵ Gerber, *Mark Twain*, 48.

fresh-from-the-east reverend and a slang-spraying, rugged Scotsman (transcripted in chapter 47) makes an excellent introduction for a sermon on the provocative problem of cross-cultural communication.

Concerning *Tom Sawyer* (1876) and its companion volume *Huckleberry Finn* Edward Wagenknecht observed regarding their youth-flavored orientation: "There is nothing in them that he did not understand better than any other under who ever lived."³⁶ Tom's Sunday school and church experience are undoubtedly reflective of Twain's own early memories.

The Prince and the Pauper (1882) also adapts itself excellently to preacherly purposes in speaking about the incarnation of our Lord. The pauper Tom Canty is a lookalike for the young regent, Prince Edward. When a mixup ensues after the two boys have changed clothes with each other, the prince learns at great length what it's like to live as a pauper, and the pauper experiences all the perks of living as a prince. In a way *The Prince and the Pauper* is a gigantic storybook commentary on Phil 2:5-11. Our Prince entered into the mammoth exchange of heaven's palace for our planet's pauperhood, experiencing the rigors of the lowest of the low. By contrast, Christians are elevated to the regal realms spelled out in Rom 8:17. Thus, Twain has provided preachers with a ready-made parable in this tale of exchanged identities.

Life on the Mississippi (1883) charts Twain's experience as a steamboater, this time navigating north-and-south on the famous river instead of stagecoach-and-sagebrush adventures going west (as in *Roughing It*).

His 1885 *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* may be Twain's most memorable book. It is "one of the most popular and respected works of fiction ever written. Abroad it has appeared in roughly 700 editions and has been translated into over fifty languages."³⁷ Several chapters in *Huckleberry Finn* (chs 34-39) would supply any preacher with a masterful illustration of what legalism is. Tom Sawyer proves to be a first-class legalist. He has the perfect opportunity to set the runaway slave (Jim) free. However, Tom flabbergasts Huck Finn by concocting all manner of rules and regulations which (according to Tom's romanticized fictional novel-reading, such as of *The Man in the Iron Mask*) must be carried out (by the book, so to speak). Thus, Tom is forever inventing ways to make freeing Jim harder (such as sawing off the table leg to which Jim is chained when he might simply lift up the table and in an instant Jim

³⁶ Wagenknecht, *Cavalcade of the American Novel*, 118.

³⁷ Gerber, *Mark Twain*, 95.

would be fully liberated!). In comedic fashion (for the reader) Tom prefers legalism to liberty, keeping Huck (the free spirit) exasperated. It is not comic, but tragic, when churches opt for a regeneration-via-regulations (which is really no regeneration at all) instead of the sheer simplicity of supernatural salvation.

In *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) Twain treats us to yet another case of exchanged identity. By means of time-travel, Hank Morgan returns to King Arthur's England. In the story we have another case of royalty-stooping-to-poverty. However, King Arthur has the manners of royalty inbred in him so that his posing as a beggar becomes a highly difficult stunt to pull off. What a contrast with the One who was in very nature God yet absorbed fully the very nature of a slave (Phil 2:6-7).

Puddn'head Wilson (1894) is Twain's third treatment of the theme of transferred identity (as in *The Prince and the Pauper* and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*). In this third book the exchange is far deeper, not an exchange of royalty, but of race. John Gerber wrote: "For the first time in his fiction Mark Twain confronts the slaveholding South head on."³⁸ It was also in the year of 1894 that the famous author himself had to stoop because his publishing house went bankrupt.

Wagenknecht observed: "Though in 1904 [Twain] agreed with William Lyon Phelps that *Huckleberry Finn* was his masterpiece, he is officially on record as regarding *Joan of Arc* [1896] as worth all his other books together."³⁹ In terms of appraisal, Twain considered Joan of Arc (the person) so high as to be practically off the scale. Only Christ was (at that time) afforded a higher position. Twain had a penchant for thinking in superlatives, and it is probably not coincidence that in the same year his favorite daughter Susy died.

Mark Twain authored other books in addition to the nine volumes just surveyed. *What Is Man?* was published anonymously four years prior to Twain's death. While its title is drawn from Ps 8:4, the book's content is anything but biblical. It was the book manuscript that had most appalled his wife with its "nihilism."⁴⁰

Baetzhold and McCullough observed concerning Twain's *Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven*: "Among the works published during Mark

³⁸ Ibid., 130.

³⁹ Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 60.

⁴⁰ Wagenknecht, *Cavalcade of the American Novel*, 120.

Twain's lifetime, it holds the record for the longest period between gestation and publication—almost forty years.”⁴¹

The Mysterious Stranger, starring a Satan-figure, only appeared posthumously. It was also a mouthpiece for Twain's antibiblical embitterment, in which he concluded that life is really only a dream.

Twain's *Letters from the Earth* would have been so disturbing to the general reading public of the early 1900s that it was not published in its true text until 1962. Baetzhold and McCullough summarized its thrust by writing:

The dramatic opening sequence presents a scathing creation myth, portraying God as an absent-minded scientist, Satan as a skeptic, and humanity as a botched experiment. And the work as a whole remains as Mark Twain's final word on God, the Bible, the world, human nature, and the...religious beliefs of the human race.⁴²

Therefore, Twain deemed it prudent financially and popularitywise to keep a lid on much of his most anti-Christian writing during his own lifetime.

IV. TWAIN'S THEOLOGY

Dickens, Hardy, Hugo, Melville, Twain—all had imbibed a great deal from the matrix of an orthodox Christian perspective in their younger years. Therefore, the analyst must always distinguish between such writers' verbalizing of orthodox theology through the mouths of their characters and the author's true thinking on theological subjects. Although a Tom Sawyer or Huck Finn may take umbrage at Sunday school memorization, their shenanigans hardly qualify as blatantly anti-Christian vitriol.

A. OVERALL ORIENTATION

Mark Twain seemed to chafe at the Calvinistic version of Christianity he had imbibed at the outset, yet he could never shake it off totally. His famous line was: “mine was a trained Presbyterian conscience.”⁴³

⁴¹ Howard G. Baetzhold and Joseph B. McCullough, *The Bible According to Mark Twain* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1995), 129.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 213.

⁴³ Stanley Brodwin in *Critical Essays on Mark Twain*, ed. Louis J. Budd (Boston: G. K. Hall and Co., 1983), 179.

Wagenknecht states matter of factly that “Mark Twain was not, in the theological sense...a Christian...”⁴⁴ John Gerber concurs: “Sam Clemens was never a believer in an orthodox sense...His religious ambivalences started early.”⁴⁵

While Mark Twain claimed to “detest...theology,” yet “he remained a kind of crackerbarrel folk theologian throughout his career” according to Stanley Brodwin.⁴⁶ Despite this penchant, Twain read Twichell’s volume of Jonathan Edwards, though in the aftermath he claimed to go around wallowing “on a three days’ tear [like] a drunken lunatic.”⁴⁷

By common consensus Mark Twain is branded a philosophical determinist. He viewed humans as “prisoner[s] of determinism,” for (he wrote) “every event, however slight, was embryonic in the first instant of life.”⁴⁸ Therefore, Gerber acknowledges: “He did believe in the doctrine of mechanical determinism...”⁴⁹ Another take on his “gospel” of determinism was to see it as “a vast, materialistic pantheism” where “man is himself a microbe, and his globe a blood corpuscle drifting with its shining brethren of the Milky Way down a vein of the...Maker of all things, whose body...is what men name the Universe.”⁵⁰

In *Letters from the Earth* Twain penned: “The human being is a machine. An automatic machine. It is composed of thousands of...mechanisms...over which the man himself has no authority...no control.”⁵¹ That statement reduces his determinism to a nutshell.

B. THE BIBLE

Louis Budd noted factually: “Significantly, there are more biblical references in [Twain’s] collected works than references to any other literary work or figure.”⁵² Illustrative of this reality is that when Olivia had accepted his proposal, Twain wrote Rev. Twichell: “Sound the loud timbrel!...for I have fought the good fight and lo! I have won!”⁵³ (How

⁴⁴ Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 195.

⁴⁵ Gerber, *Mark Twain*, 4.

⁴⁶ Brodwin in *Critical Essays on Mark Twain*, 176.

⁴⁷ Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 200.

⁴⁸ James Hefley, “The Greatness, and the Sadness, of Mark Twain,” *Moody Monthly* (December 1985): 84.

⁴⁹ Gerber, *Mark Twain*, 150.

⁵⁰ Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 191.

⁵¹ Baetzhold and McCullough, *The Bible According to Mark Twain*, 238.

⁵² Budd, *Critical Essays on Mark Twain*, 3.

⁵³ Allison Ensor, *Mark Twain and the Bible*, 37.

many authors today could conflate Ps 150:4-5 and 2 Tim 4:7?) Edgar Lee Masters said: “At last he threw out the Bible, but it seemed to be attached to a rubber ball and was likely to bounce back into his lap at any time.”⁵⁴

Mark Twain developed within the cocoon of a Bible-believing time and place. He remarked “that he was ‘compelled’ to read the Bible ‘un-expurgated’ before he was ‘15 years old’...”⁵⁵ Allison Ensor observed: “He had lived in a community where many people revered the Bible as the Word of God, as virtually a letter direct from the hand of the Almighty.”⁵⁶

By contrast with that homebase “as early as 1870 he looked upon the Bible as ‘a mass of fables and traditions, mere mythology’ ([Albert Bigelow Paine’s] *Biography*, 411).”⁵⁷ To his first biographer (Paine) he said about the Gospels and Christ: “It is all a myth. There have been Saviors in every age of the world. It is all just a fairy tale like the idea of Santa Claus” (*Biography*, 1482).⁵⁸

On Twain’s 1878 overseas trip he stated:

...I have been almost a believer, but it immediately drifts away from me again. I don’t believe a word of your Bible was inspired by God any more than any other book. I believe it is entirely the work of man from beginning to end—atonement and all.⁵⁹

This is a statement formulated over thirty years prior to Twain’s death. Thus, “in the creed printed in [Thomas] Paine’s last volume [in Twain’s own library], Mark Twain takes up the position that the Bible was written wholly by man...not the outcome of special revelations.”⁶⁰

Twain’s view of the Bible was not merely Bultmannian for he wrote during the years before he died that the Bible contained “upwards of a thousand lies.”⁶¹ In fact, he went further to say that the Bible, particularly the OT, “is perhaps the most damnatory biography that exists in print anywhere. It makes Nero an angel of light...by contrast.”⁶²

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵⁵ Budd, *Critical Essays on Mark Twain*, 187.

⁵⁶ Ensor, *Mark Twain and the Bible*, 2.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁵⁹ Strong, *Joseph Hopkins Twichell*, 92.

⁶⁰ Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 194.

⁶¹ Ensor, *Mark Twain and the Bible*, 73.

⁶² Baetzhold and McCullough, *The Bible According to Mark Twain*, 319.

Twain wrote extensively about Eden, Adam, Eve, Methuselah, Noah, Shem, etc. Genesis was Twain's favorite biblical quarry. Naturally the Noah account is a favorite source of his for taking potshots (for example, drinking water issues and why dinosaurs were missing from Noah's cargo list while nuisance insects, cholera germs, etc., were aboard). All his hilarity was to arrive at the deduction: "we knew that Noah's flood never happened, and couldn't have happened [June 23, 1906]."⁶³

Mark Twain reread the Joseph narrative of Genesis in light of the contemporary Rockefeller (who was "filthy rich" and taught a young men's Bible study). So Twain said that Joseph "skinned [the Egyptians] of every last penny they had...then bought the whole nation's bodies and liberties on a 'fair market' valuation for...the chains of slaves."⁶⁴ Since Twain had jettisoned the Bible as *the* Bible, he spoke of *What Is Man?* as his "Bible."

C. GOD

For about the latter half of his life Mark Twain kept up a sort of guerilla warfare against the God of the Bible (as he perceived Him to be). Certainly as a child he must have had a very somber dosage of the fear of God drilled into him, for there were electrical storms and local epidemics that filled him with a virtual terror of death.

Essentially he concluded that if the biblical God were the all-controlling God of Calvinism, then He should take the full brunt of responsibility for sin. Twain wrote that God should "recognize in Himself the Author and Inventor of Sin and...place the whole responsibility where it should rightly belong: upon Himself, the only Sinner."⁶⁵

Christians showcase God's love, grace, and mercy, but Twain had really nothing good to say about the Bible's God. He asserted: "We brazenly call God the source of mercy, while we are aware...that there is not an authentic instance in history of His ever having exercised that virtue."⁶⁶ (Note his thoroughly sweeping statement—"not an authentic instance...ever.")

The portrait that Twain painted of God was anything but pretty. He viewed this God as "...jealous, trivial, ignorant, revengeful..."

⁶³ Ibid., 322.

⁶⁴ Ensor, *Mark Twain and the Bible*, 80.

⁶⁵ Budd, *Critical Essays on Mark Twain*, 180.

⁶⁶ Baetzhold and McCullough, *The Bible According to Mark Twain*, 320.

irascible...fickle..."⁶⁷ He asked: "Do we know that He is just, charitable, kindly, gentle, merciful, compassionate? No. There is no evidence that He is any of these things."⁶⁸ In short, this God is a cruel fiend and an immoral monster. "He is destitute of morals—at least of the human pattern," said Twain.⁶⁹

In *The Mysterious Stranger*, published after Twain died, he adopted the stance of solipsism, writing, "There is no God, no universe, no human race, no earthly life, no heaven, no hell. It is all a dream, a grotesque and foolish dream. Nothing exists but you."⁷⁰

Under the rubric of "God" there are several subtopics worth considering—namely, Calvinism, Darwinism, and prayer. First, almost every Twain commentator alludes to Twain's upbringing under the pall of Presbyterian Calvinism. In *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Tom's pastor had droned on about "fire and brimstone and thinned the predestined elect down to a company so small as to be hardly worth the saving."⁷¹ The writer Owen Wister (who authored *The Virginian*) spoke of Twain's boyhood "boiling with curiosity...all in collision inside him with the Calvinistic dread of hell."⁷² Of course, it is highly ironical that Twain, who would wield a rapier against Calvinism, would settle for his own brand of determinism.

Twain came to his popularity during the heyday of the Darwinian upsurge. In 1879 he was to meet Charles Darwin, and Darwin also was to read Twain's books. Twain wrote to his fiancée (January 8, 1870):

I have been reading some new arguments to prove that the world is very old and that the six days of creation were six immensely long periods...This writer mentions that there are stars within reach of our telescopes whose light requires 50,000 years to...come to our earth [so that the universe existed perhaps] a million years ago.⁷³

⁶⁷ Budd, *Critical Essays on Mark Twain*, 180.

⁶⁸ Baetzhold and McCullough, *The Bible According to Mark Twain*, 323.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Gerber, *Mark Twain*, 156.

⁷¹ Mark Twain, *The Unabridged Mark Twain*, ed. Lawrence Teacher (Philadelphia: Running Press, 1976), I:460.

⁷² Owen Wister in *Readings on Mark Twain*, ed. Bruno Leane (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 1996), 118.

⁷³ Baetzhold and McCullough, *The Bible According to Mark Twain*, xv.

In *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* he asserted:

All that is original in us...can be covered up...by the point of a cambric needle, all the rest being atoms...inherited from a procession of ancestors that stretches back a billion years to the Adam-clan or grasshopper or monkey from whom our race has been so...unprofitably developed.⁷⁴

In contrast with many Darwinians, however, Twain saw the animal-to-human trajectory as a moral *descent* rather than an *ascent*. In one spot Twain offered the opinion that man was probably “not made intentionally at all, but worked himself up from the primeval slime through some unhappy accident, much to the surprise and grief of the Creator.”⁷⁵

In *Huckleberry Finn* as the trio of characters raft on the Mississippi River, Jim and Huck discuss the stars. “Jim he allowed they was made, but I allowed they happened.”⁷⁶

Huck Finn also dispensed with the subject of prayer to God on a purely pragmatic basis. Miss Watson tried to teach Huck to pray, “but nothing came of it. She told me to pray every day, and whatever I asked for I would get. But it warn't so. I tried it.”⁷⁷ God didn't prove to be a dispensary for Huck's desired fishhooks.

The adult Twain asked, “When we pray...does He listen? Does He answer? There is not a single authentic instance of it in human history.”⁷⁸ Elijah (in Jas 5:17-18) and the apostles (in Acts 4:31) would dispute Twain's claim concerning “not a single authentic instance” of positively answered prayer.

Naturally Twain's view of God and evolution determines his perspective on humanity.

D. HUMANITY

Critic Edward Wagenknecht served up the opinion that “no man ever poured fiercer scorn upon his own kind” than did Mark Twain.⁷⁹ Twain declared that man “begins as dirt and departs as stench.”⁸⁰

⁷⁴ Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 224.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁷⁶ Twain, *The Unabridged Mark Twain*, I:831.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, I:755.

⁷⁸ Baetzhold and McCullough, *The Bible According to Mark Twain*, 324.

⁷⁹ Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 117.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

In his philosophic determinism (dare we say, secular hyperCalvinism?) Twain announced: “Man is a machine, and not responsible for his actions.”⁸¹ As such, humans have no free will according to Twain.

Through the mouthpiece of his fictional character in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* Twain pontificated: “Training is all there is to a person. We speak of nature; it is folly; There is no such thing as [human] nature. What we call by that misleading name is merely heredity and training.”⁸² Few major American writers have been more pessimistic than Twain was about the human race.

E. SIN

Twain said on the subject of sin: “It was decreed that all of Adam’s descendants...should be punished for the [moral] baby’s trespass against a law of his nursery fulminated against him before he was out of his diapers.”⁸³ In *Letters from the Earth* he stated that God “elected to punish [Adam’s] children, all through the ages to the end of time, for a trifling offense committed by others before they were born.”⁸⁴ Consequently, the liberal Congregational pastor Joseph Twichell reprimanded Twain for being “too orthodox on the Doctrine of Total Human Depravity [in 1901].”⁸⁵

The following statement from Twain’s invalid wife shows the extent to which his views on this subject affected those closest to him when she pleaded with him: “Why always dwell on the evil until those who live beside you are crushed to the earth and you seem almost like a monomaniac?”⁸⁶ Twain was personalizing when he penned: “The real life that you live is a life of inferior sin.”⁸⁷ In another place he wrote: “All our acts—reasoned and unreasoned—are selfish.”⁸⁸

Yet, despite his statements about the sweepingness of sin, Twain could say (paradoxically) of his brother (Orion) who died in his seventies: “He was good, all good...; there was nothing bad in him.”⁸⁹ By contrast, when his brother Henry was about to die from the steamboat

⁸¹ Baetzhold and McCullough, *The Bible According to Mark Twain*, 327.

⁸² Twain, *The Unabridged Mark Twain*, I:1035.

⁸³ Baetzhold and McCullough, *The Bible According to Mark Twain*, 320.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁸⁵ *Critical Essays on Mark Twain*, 181.

⁸⁶ Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 161.

⁸⁷ *Critical Essays on Mark Twain*, 179.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁸⁹ Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 204.

explosion, Mark could write (in 1858): “Hardened, hopeless,...lost and ruined sinner as I am—I...have humbled myself...and prayed as never man prayed before that the great God might let this cup pass from me [and] spare my brother.”⁹⁰ No doubt this non-answered prayer colored his view on prayer (touched on earlier).

Oddly, the view on death that Twain espoused was a strange one. He wrote, “I think the dead are the only human beings who are really well off...”⁹¹ Elsewhere he called death “the most precious of all gifts.”⁹²

F. SATAN

Most literary critics hold that Satan in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is a more potent and grander character than Milton’s God. Even so, Mark Twain showed an obsession with Satan, producing at least six pieces related to Satan from 1897 to 1905. In his autobiography entry of 1897-98, Twain admitted: “I have always felt friendly toward Satan. Of course, that is ancestral; it must be in the blood for I could not have originated it.”⁹³

Twain alluded to an early fascination when he acknowledged in *What Is Man?*: “When I was a [childhood] Sunday school scholar, something more than sixty years ago, I became interested in Satan, and wanted to find out all I could about him.”⁹⁴ Satan is really the hero of *The Mysterious Stranger*.

G. CHRIST

In an 1871 essay Mark Twain was still affirming: “All that is great and good in our particular civilization came straight from the hand of Jesus Christ.”⁹⁵ By 1878 Twain could say: “neither [William Dean] Howells nor I believe in...the divinity of the Savior.”⁹⁶ Even at that time he was still (though denying Christ’s deity) stating that Jesus ought not be referred to “lightly, profanely, or otherwise than with the profoundest

⁹⁰ Ensor, *Mark Twain and the Bible*, 6.

⁹¹ Baetzhold and McCullough, *The Bible According to Mark Twain*, 321.

⁹² Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 204.

⁹³ Ensor, *Mark Twain and the Bible*, 54-55.

⁹⁴ Mark Twain, *What Is Man? and Other Essays* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1972), 307.

⁹⁵ Ensor, *Mark Twain and the Bible*, 88-89.

⁹⁶ Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 191.

reverence.”⁹⁷ In 1906 Twain wrote: “Christ does not prove that He is God.”⁹⁸

“Bernard DeVoto has noted, ‘throughout Mark Twain’s writing he confuses the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception with that of the Virgin Birth of Christ...’”⁹⁹ In Twain’s “Reflections on Religion” he suggested that the virgin birth account was “invented by Mary to conceal from Joseph her indiscretions. To top it all off, he declared that ‘you couldn’t purify a tomcat by the Immaculate Conception process’ [by which he meant the virgin birth].”¹⁰⁰

Allison Ensor reasoned deductively:

Twain never denied [the resurrection of Christ] specifically, [but] when Twain told [Albert Bigelow] Paine that the whole story of Christ is a fairy tale of the Santa Claus variety, he was by implication including the Resurrection.¹⁰¹

As time went on, Twain concluded that Jesus (or the God of the New Testament) was “a thousand billion times crueller than ever he was in the Old Testament.”¹⁰² That was because (as he asserted in *Letters from the Earth*) “the palm for malignity must be granted to Jesus, the inventor of hell.”¹⁰³ Anyone who questions whether Twain could be so malignant needs to read *The Mysterious Stranger* and *Letters from the Earth*. It would be difficult to find a more rabid attack against the God of the Bible than in Twain’s perception.

John Seelye was not exaggerating when he declared that “Jesus Christ for Mark Twain was more expletive than redeemer, and who had a middle initial H—for Hellfire, not Humanity. For Mark Twain...was more of Satan’s party than of the Savior’s...”¹⁰⁴

H. SALVATION

In a totally non-soteric or non-religious context (relating to the Quaker City tourists’ arrival at Odessa) the passengers (Mark Twain

⁹⁷ Ensor, *Mark Twain and the Bible*, 88-89.

⁹⁸ Baetzhold and McCullough, *The Bible According to Mark Twain*, 327.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 379.

¹⁰⁰ Ensor, *Mark Twain and the Bible*, 76.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁰³ *Critical Essays on Mark Twain*, 184.

¹⁰⁴ John Seelye, *Mark Twain in the Movies* (New York: The Viking Press, 1977), 31.

traveled with) asked the consul (in *Innocents Abroad*) “what we must do to be saved” (as far as etiquette in the Russian court was concerned).¹⁰⁵ Obviously Mark Twain was acquainted with the language of Acts 16:30 and the world’s most vital question: “What must [we] do to be saved?” Presumably if Mark Twain was familiar with Acts 16:30, he could also have quoted Acts 16:31. Did he comprehend the NT’s formulation of salvation?

On one occasion Huck Finn found himself situated squarely amid a rural, gun-toting feud, but after church the gun-toters discussed the sermon “about faith, and good works and free grace, and preforeordination, and I don’t know what all.”¹⁰⁶ The heart of the question becomes: did Huck Finn’s inventor really understand “free grace” or actually not “know what all?”

In one of Twain’s famous cases of transferred identity, Huck Finn pretended to be Tom Sawyer (among Tom’s relatives). He described his sensation of joy “like being born again...”¹⁰⁷ In Twain’s *Captain Stormfield’s Visit to Heaven* a “barkeeper got converted at a Moody and Sankey meeting,” was shortly killed, and so turned up in heaven.¹⁰⁸ These two cases illustrate Twain’s awareness concerning the subject of regeneration or conversion.

There are a number of places in Twain’s fiction where—in the parlance of the time—people “get religion” by means of an emotional experience at a revival or some other meeting. For example, Tom Sawyer makes up a pretend-letter where he writes: “I am one of the gang [of cutthroats], but have got religgion and wish to quit [the gang] and lead a honest life again...”¹⁰⁹ In *Pudd’nhead Wilson* Roxy (the woman who was one-sixteenth black) “had been saved in the nick of time by a revival in the colored Methodist Church...at which time and place she ‘got religion.’”¹¹⁰ Obviously this terminology (“got religion”) was then much in vogue.

Also in *Pudd’nhead Wilson* Judge Driscoll anticipates a duel in which he may be killed that very night. Out loud he speaks, will in hand, of his nephew Tom, saying, “I see that his reformation is going to be

¹⁰⁵ Twain, *The Unabridged Mark Twain*, II:225.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, II:825.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, II:907.

¹⁰⁸ Baetzhold and McCullough, *The Bible According to Mark Twain*, 165.

¹⁰⁹ Twain, *The Unabridged Mark Twain*, I:939.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, II:27.

permanent.” Tom overhears this soliloquy, and so he says to himself, “I’ll gamble no more, I’ll drink no more...”¹¹¹

In Twain’s narrated *Roughing It* Ollendorf, Ballou, and Twain get trapped in a snowstorm. They expect to die. In an emotion-laden scene Ollendorf verbalizes his forgiveness of Ballou. All three are crying. Ollendorf throws away his bottle of whisky, only wishing he’d lived long enough “to make a thorough reform of his character...by devoting himself to helping the poor, nursing the sick, and pleading with people to guard themselves against the evils of intemperance...” Ballou then throws away his pack of cards (though “he said he never gambled”). Then Mark Twain “threw away [his] pipe.”¹¹² However, at dawn the three companions discover that they have been only fifteen steps from a stagecoach station! Twain then discovers, “Alas, my regeneration was not complete—I wanted to smoke!”¹¹³ As he sneaks out and lights his pipe, he finds Ollendorf drinking his whisky and Ballou playing solitaire. Thus, for Twain, “regeneration” was very much interwoven with “getting religion” and giving up drinking, smoking, gambling, etc.

The preceding paradigm seems to echo Mark Twain’s own premarital and early marital expectations. He had temporarily given up smoking and had gotten involved in reading the Bible. This was his “Christian” phase. However, that phase was hardly long-lasting.

In the *Autobiography of Eve* Eve finds Adam’s words written in sand: “I am sorry. I repent. Forgive!”¹¹⁴ When Twain made his transatlantic trip, Mary Mason Fairbanks acted as his spiritual “mother,” and he assumed “the role of the reformed bad boy, a repentant prodigal...”¹¹⁵ Allison Ensor said in reference to Mrs. Fairbanks: “he was making a genuine effort—trying too hard probably—to reform and become a Christian.”¹¹⁶ Is that what Mark Twain really thought “regeneration” was—repentance (in the clean-up-your-act sense) and reform?

In *Tom Sawyer* Aunt Sally says, “I’m thankful to the good God...[who is] longsuffering and merciful [to] them that believe on Him and keep His word...”¹¹⁷ Is Aunt Sally enunciating a formula for

¹¹¹ Ibid., II:84-85.

¹¹² Ibid., II:677-78.

¹¹³ Ibid., II:679.

¹¹⁴ Baetzhald and McCullough, *The Bible According to Mark Twain*, 51.

¹¹⁵ Allison Ensor, *Mark Twain and the Bible*, 34.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 36.

¹¹⁷ Twain, *The Unabridged Mark Twain*, I:517.

salvation which involves keeping God's Word? In *Letters from the Earth* Satan says that "salaried teachers" tell earthlings that "there is a hell of everlasting fire, and that [one] will go to it if he doesn't keep the Commandments."¹¹⁸ Is this item ("to keep the Commandments") yet another additive to the formula for salvation?

In his eventual philosophy of determinism Mark Twain declared "the basis or moral skeleton of the man was inborn disposition—a thing which is as permanent as rock, and never undergoes any actual or genuine change between cradle and grave."¹¹⁹ Such a viewpoint obviously allows no room for any positional or experiential conversion.

Mark Twain was assuredly aware of the Protestant-Catholic controversy over the faith-and-works issue. In *Pudd'nhead Wilson* Mark Twain probably came as close as anywhere to addressing the salvation issue directly. Roxy tells about an out-of-state preacher who comes to her church:

He said dey ain't nobody kin save his own self—can't do it by faith, can't do it by works, can't do it no way at all. Free grace is de on'y way, en dat don't come from nobody but jis' de Lord; en he kin give it to anybody he please, saint or sinner—he don't kyer. He do j'is as he's a mineter. He slect out anybody dat suit him, en put one in his place, en make de first one happy forever en leave t'other one to burn wid Satan.¹²⁰

One wonders if this scrambled-up version of Calvinism was Twain's recasting of the version of Christianity he'd received as a child. Biblically informed Christians agree with the novel's preacher that there is no such thing as self-salvation, that the Lord is its sole originator, and that it is by "free grace" as the only way. However, what does the preacher mean when he says "can't do it by faith?" Does he mean what J. I. Packer meant when he wrote that the notion that

believers are justified...on account of faith, Paul never says...Were faith the ground of justification, faith would be in effect a meritorious work...Paul regards faith, not as itself our

¹¹⁸ Baetzhold and McCullough, *The Bible According to Mark Twain*, 222.

¹¹⁹ Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 226.

¹²⁰ Twain, *The Unabridged Mark Twain*, II:31-32.

justifying righteousness, but rather as the outstretched empty hand which receives righteousness by receiving Christ?¹²¹

Faith then is properly conceived of as the non-meritorious condition of justification, but not as the objective basis for the Christian's salvation. But Twain's preacher seems to be suggesting some kind of predestinarian salvation where *faith has no role whatsoever*.

Louis Budd owned that "the Lutheran and Calvinistic emphasis on 'Faith Alone' (*sola fides*) [and predestination]...were the theological principles [Mark Twain] must have been exposed to during his youth."¹²² The same author proposed: "What [Twain]...came to reject—if he ever believed it—was the Protestant reliance on the Grace of God."¹²³

Twain commented considerably upon Roman Catholicism, Mormonism (in chapters 12-16 of *Roughing It*), and Christian Science (in his 1907 book on *Christian Science*). He once said that "Catholics believe they can 'buy salvation with Masses.'"¹²⁴ Certainly *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* would not make for pleasant reading for any ardent Roman Catholic. Yet when his daughter Jean temporarily lived in a Catholic convent, he wrote that he would not "be the least bit sorry" if she became a Catholic, and that Catholicism "is doubtless the most peace-giving and restful of all the religions."¹²⁵

Since Twain claims Roman Catholicism as "the most peace-giving and restful of all religions," this is an excellent fulcrum point from which to test its doctrine of personal assurance of salvation. And who better to test that claim on than upon Twain's heroine, Joan of Arc, whom he pedastalized in the way most Catholics would revere Mary?

In answering the court's interrogation Joan remarks: "Without the grace of God I could do nothing." Beaupere then asks her, "Are you in a state of grace?" She replies: "If I be not in a state of grace, I pray God place me in it; if I be in it, I pray God keep me so." Prior to her answer, the narrator remarks upon her dilemma that "the Scriptures had said one cannot know this thing."¹²⁶ Neither are the "ifs" of the virtuous Joan

¹²¹ J. I. Packer, "Faith and Justification," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 596.

¹²² Louis J. Budd, *Critical Essays on Mark Twain*, 185.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ Edward Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 197.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ Samuel L. Clemens, *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1896), III:148-49.

assuring nor does the narrator's claim about Scripture assure an inquirer, for it flies in the face of 1 John 5:10-13 (among other NT promises of assurance).

When it comes to assurances, Joan is asked how she knows certain future things. She replies, "I know it by revelation. And I know it as surely as I know that you sit here before me."¹²⁷ These solid assurances she claims to have received from St. Marguerite and St. Catherine in special revelations. Later Joan says, "I know that I shall be saved." Her inquisitor inquires: "Do you think that after that [special or private] revelation you could be able to commit mortal sin?" To this query she replies: "As to that I do not know. My hope for salvation is in holding fast to my oath to keep my body and soul pure."¹²⁸ Many evangelical Protestants have a problem with the biblicalness of her reply here. She does not say, "My hope for salvation is in Christ's death for me, His forgiveness, grace, etc.," but "My hope for salvation is in holding fast" to personal purity. The ardent evangelical Protestant desires one to affirm (with Edward Mote):

"My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus blood and righteousness..."¹²⁹

Christ's person and work are the only adequate undergirding for genuine salvation and assurance.

I. ESCHATOLOGY

One would expect Mark Twain to parrot the terminology of the thought-world in which he grew up. For example, in a case of extreme sarcasm in 1873 Twain exclaimed: "How do we know but that [William Foster, a brutal murderer] is the Second Advent?"¹³⁰ In an unpublished pro-Boer article in the late 1890s Twain wrote of fearing "degradations ...which would...steep [the globe] in a sort of Middle-Age...slavery which would last till Christ comes again."¹³¹ Obviously, in light of

¹²⁷ Ibid., III:164.

¹²⁸ Ibid., III:192.

¹²⁹ *Choice Hymns of the Faith* (Fort Dodge, IA: Gospel Perpetuating Fund, 1952), 121.

¹³⁰ Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 119.

¹³¹ Ibid., 236.

everything Twain believed about Christ, he was not using such an expression about the Lord's return in any kind of seriously factual manner.

In *Roughing It* Mark Twain referred to an admiral of the *Ajax* who roared out a greeting "in a way that was calculated to wake the dead and precipitate the final resurrection..."¹³² The preceding expressions are a patently figurative borrowing. In *Huckleberry Finn* Aunt Sally informs Huck about a Baptist who was in a steamboat explosion "and died in the hope of a glorious resurrection."¹³³ In *Letters from the Earth* Twain speaks figuratively about an older male's sexual ability which is "laid to rest in the hope of a blessed resurrection which is never to come."¹³⁴

Chapter 5 of *Tom Sawyer* refers to another eschatological phenomenon. The Presbyterian minister in his sermon "made a grand and moving picture of the assembling together of the world's hosts at the millennium when the lion and the lamb should lie down together..."¹³⁵ Here Twain paraphrases Isa 11:6 and conflates it with Rev 20:1-6.

Wagenknecht corrals Twain's position on a future afterlife as follows: "'As to a hereafter,' he told Paine [his biographer, who came to stay with him in 1906], towards the end of his life, 'we have not the slightest evidence that there is any...I have never seen what to me seemed an atom of proof that there is a future life.'"¹³⁶ Clearly Twain had ruled Jesus' testimony about any hereafter out of any court of evidence. Nevertheless, at the end of the preceding assertion, Twain added: "And yet—I am strongly inclined to [its] acceptance."¹³⁷

Of course, wishful thinking about an afterlife affects even the most hard-boiled. When his daughter Susy died, Twain told his wife: "It has been the belief of the wise...of many countries for three thousand years; let us accept their verdict...I will try never to doubt it again."¹³⁸ Similarly, when his daughter Jean died, Twain said to his housekeeper, Katy Leary, "She's in heaven with her mother."¹³⁹

¹³² Twain, *The Unabridged Mark Twain*, II:805.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, I:905.

¹³⁴ Baetzhold and McCullough, *The Bible According to Mark Twain*, 248.

¹³⁵ Twain, *The Unabridged Mark Twain*, I:460.

¹³⁶ Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 195.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 196.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

Allison Ensor noted:

Twain observes that there are only two really new things in the Bible—heaven and hell [(*Letters from the Earth*), 14]. He seems not to be aware that writers such as Homer and Plato had depicted places of punishment and reward [after death] long before the New Testament was written.¹⁴⁰

Concerning the NT's (specifically, Jesus') view of hell, Twain penned: "Nothing in all history...remotely approaches in atrocity the invention of Hell" (*Letters from the Earth*, 335).¹⁴¹ Also in *Letters from the Earth* he chafed that "billions of human beings [who]...lived and died without ever having heard of Him or the terms at all...are to be...burned throughout all eternity."¹⁴²

Twain was never completely homogenous in the expression of his opinions, for he also wrote: "It is not likely that there will be a Heaven hereafter. It is exceedingly likely that there will be a Hell—and it is nearly dead certain that nobody is going to escape it."¹⁴³ In his term "nobody" in the preceding sentence Twain is typically his superlatively sweeping self. Even Matt 7:13 and 14 does not exempt everybody (in its notation of "few").

Edward Wagenknecht observed that "Mark Twain once confessed that, though intellectually he did not believe in hell, emotionally he was still often afraid that he was going there. 'Why, Youth,' [Livy] exclaimed, 'who, then, can be saved?'"¹⁴⁴ Thus, Twain was never completely able to exorcise his youthful fear of hell.

Mark Twain had grown up hearing the preachers he knew justifying slavery from the Bible. Hence, when the relatively uneducated Huck Finn finally decides not to reveal what he knows about Jim the slave and so to reduce him again to slavery, Huck goes against the consensus of the Bible-believing people he knows when he declares: "All right, then, I'll go to hell."¹⁴⁵ Through Huck's voice, Twain believed he was acting in a more morally enlightened way than many who claimed to have the Bible on their side. Of course, virtually all Bible-believing Christians today

¹⁴⁰ Ensor, *Mark Twain and the Bible*, 82.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ Baetzhold and McCullough, *The Bible According to Mark Twain*, 329.

¹⁴⁴ Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 158.

¹⁴⁵ Wagenknecht, *Cavalcade of the American Novel*, 124.

would abominate slavery, but Mark Twain lived through the Civil War era. It is immeasurably sad when people feel forced into a false dilemma, such as either to be pro-slavery or anti-Bible. Nevertheless, Twain's gravitation away from and antagonism toward the Bible and its God were decided in a considerably larger basis than a one-issue choice.

V. CONCLUSION

Practically every Twain commentator alludes to Twain's birth and death as the coincidental timing of the arrival of Halley's Comet on both occasions. Mark himself wrote: "The Almighty has said, no doubt, 'Now here go those two unaccountable frauds; they came in together, they must go out together.'"¹⁴⁶ Both were brilliant, and each was considered an unorthodox phenomenon.

Paralleling Thomas Hardy, Mark Twain grew up within a cocoon of orthodox Christianity (though it may have been somewhat warped in its transmission), married a church-goer, became embittered, and launched attacks on the biblical God. Twain did not accept the Bible as God's unique revelation or believe that it was divinely inspired. Consequently he understood the God of the Bible to be malevolent rather than merciful. Indeed, he slanted his reading toward those biblical accounts that could be interpreted as leaning in the direction of a malicious deity.

The Calvinistic God that Twain cut his theological teeth on as a youngster was evidently One who "thinned" out the elect (as he put it) to a highly rarified few and who sovereignly selected these few and left the majority to roast eternally without any chance.

Furthermore, the same author who met Darwin and furnished him with amusing nighttime reading acknowledged in his *Autobiography*: "Man was descended from...animals..."¹⁴⁷ By this comment, Twain not only endorsed biological evolution, but also he subscribed to a sort of moral and mechanical devolution. At heart he became a biological determinist, reviving a secular brand of the theological Calvinism he had earlier rejected. Humans were for him machines without free will.

Since one can't alter a preprogrammed machine, for Mark Twain there was no viable reality to be signified by a conversion. From day one of birth, people are what they are and that's it.

¹⁴⁶ Meltzer, *Mark Twain Himself*, 288.

¹⁴⁷ Mark Twain, *The Autobiography of Mark Twain*, ed. by Charles Neider (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), 336.

Did Twain really grasp what the NT teaches about how to be saved? In his *Autobiography* he filtered through his mother's logic (concerning Satan) a statement about salvation...He asked: "What saves the rest [meaning all sinners, besides "the supremest" sinner, who is Satan]?" Then he asked, "Their own efforts alone? No—or none might ever be saved."¹⁴⁸ In this statement, at least, self-effort is ruled out as a means of salvation.

If the above paragraph were all we had to work with, we might conclude that Twain intellectually grasped God's method of salvation. However there are numerous other (more experiential) autobiographical data that point in a different direction—talk about repenting and re-repenting, reforming, "getting religion," etc. Sunday school, Twain declared (through the thought balloon of Tom Sawyer), was "a place that Tom hated with his whole heart..."¹⁴⁹ It's a telling statement from his early era.

Perhaps a paradigmatic and revealing excerpt comes from his childhood. He stated that tragedies "ought to bring me to repentance." Every night he got rescaered about his unrepentance, but broad daylight always banished his fears of God's judgment. "Those were nights of despair...After each tragedy I...repented...only in my *own* interest." He continues to describe his earnest, reiterated repentances (at night). Yet he admitted: "In all my boyhood life I am not sure that I ever tried to lead a better life in the daytime—or wanted to."¹⁵⁰

Although Mark Twain apparently could verbalize the Protestant doctrine of the new birth through grace alone by faith alone in Christ, he seemed to mix it up frequently with the baggage of a reformed life, being good, cutting out certain social vices, being repentant enough to operate on a consistent plane, etc. The majority of his later commentators and biographers believe that he was never a real Christian.

Twain resorted to a Satan-character more than once in order to articulate his views. *The Mysterious Stranger* and *Letters from the Earth* are among his latest and posthumous publications.

While Twain waffled on the subjects of heaven and hell (since he hoped he'd see his deceased loved ones again), his overriding view in later life was: there is no heaven or hell. In fact, hell is the invention of

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 28.

¹⁴⁹ Twain, *The Unabridged Mark Twain*, I:453.

¹⁵⁰ Twain, *The Autobiography of Mark Twain*, 45-46.

Jesus, who is not God. Someone who would come up with an idea so fiendish could hardly be thought of as merciful or as divine.

For someone who regarded the Bible as containing such detestable material, Mark Twain kept on interacting with that “damnatory” book. “I have always preached,” he proclaimed.¹⁵¹ However, his preaching was corrosive. For Mark, God’s and Satan’s roles were almost reversed. The biblical God is the One who is hellish, and Satan is the one who takes that viewpoint to task.

When the Twains visited Europe together (in all spending nine years abroad), they were invited to dinner by the German Emperor. In responding to such fame, Twain’s daughter Jean quipped, “Papa, the way things are going, pretty soon there won’t be anybody left for you to get acquainted with but God.”¹⁵² Evidently he never really did. How tragic!

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 298.

¹⁵² Meltzer, *Mark Twain Himself*, 214.