

"I Come from the Throne": "The War-Prayer," *The Bible*, and Anti-imperialism

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The history of Mark Twain's "The War-Prayer," in terms of its composition, publication, and critical and popular responses to it, is of special interest in Twain studies. While some matters regarding the story remain open to speculation, others are established in Twain criticism. For example, it is well known Twain himself had strong feelings for his creation. It was in reference to "The War-Prayer" that Twain claimed in this story he "had told the whole truth" and "only dead men can tell the truth."

It is also certain that Twain wrote this "truth" when he was grinding on his late-life anti-imperialistic axe. As Louis Budd noted in *Mark Twain: Social Philosopher*, in the early years of the new century, among other issues, Twain wrote letters condemning Roosevelt's armament policies, blaming governments for much of human suffering (180-81). Twain mused about "The Great Yellow Peril," and the Boer War and "dashed off essays" denouncing America's power politics." In Budd's view, "A polished result of such musings was 'The War Prayer'" (181).

During this period, Twain also repeatedly denounced the institution of kingship. Twain's attitude toward hereditary royalty had been made manifest in *A Connecticut Yankee* (1889), and he was even harsher in "King Leopold's Soliloquy" (Foner 385). As Justin Kaplan noted in *Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain*, one of Twain's turn-of-the-century concerns was his belief that "America's democracy was heading toward 'monarchy' (or dictatorship)," and he wrote "King Leopold's Soliloquy," "the most effective and most widely circulated piece of American propaganda in the cause of Congo reform" (366). This indictment of Belgium's monarch was, according to E. Hudson Long, "so blistering that it was not thought suitable for magazine publication but was issued as a pamphlet . . . most scathing of all, however, was 'The War Prayer' which Twain did not publish in his lifetime" (240).

According to both Philip Foner and Justin Kaplan, one concern about "King Leopold" likely directly affected the publication of "The War-Prayer," composed in 1904-05 (Foner 385). Twain worried that "King Leopold's Soliloquy" would affect his literary reputation and declined to publish any further pamphlets, writing "I am a lightning bug not a bee" (Kaplan 366). Likewise, it has been claimed Twain had great misgivings about publishing "The War-Prayer," and his daughter Jean vetoed publication because she felt the story

would be considered sacrilegious (366).

However, as explained by Jim Zwick, Twain's own suppression of the story occurred only after rejection by his usual magazine publisher. Mark Twain wrote "The War-Prayer" during the Philippine-American War. It was submitted for publication, but on March 22, 1905, *Harper's Bazaar* rejected it as "not quite suited to a woman's magazine" (Zwick, "Mark Twain"). Eight days later, Twain wrote to his friend Dan Beard, to whom he had read the story, "I don't think the prayer will be published in my time. None but the dead are permitted to tell the truth." His editor was "responsible to his Company," Twain wrote, "and should not permit laughs which could injure its business." Then, in his private notebook, Twain expanded his thoughts about the rejection of the story into a series of maxims about freedom of speech (Zwick, "Anti"). Finally, in 1912, Twain's literary executor, Albert Bigelow Paine, published long excerpts from the story in *Mark Twain: A Biography* before publishing the story in full for the first time in 1923 in *Europe and Elsewhere*.

While the historical contexts affecting Twain's thinking while composing "The War-Prayer" are now well established, determining any literary influences on the framework of the story relies on critical speculation. For example, in the summer 1975 issue of *The Mark Twain Journal*, William Andrews wrote in his "The Source of 'The War Prayer'" that Twain's anti-war story was inspired by an anecdote Twain had heard about a "ne'er-do-well" named Henry Clay Dean, an anecdote recounted in Chapter 57 of *Life on the Mississippi* (8-9). Andrews wrote "In 1861 when the war feeling was running high in Keokuk," Dean made a name for himself by making a last-minute speech to a meeting in the Keokuk Athenaeum. He appeared "like a scarecrow" and an "escaped archangel" (8). Andrews noted that Dean's speech was apparently well received, but "the reader is not told the subject of Dean's remark. The important thing in the speech is not what Dean says or why he says it. What matters is the result" (8).

Perhaps so. The "Angel of Him Most High" in Twain's story does deliver the "War-Prayer" to an audience in the grip of war fever, but what the speaker says and how he says it is equally as important as the result. Taking another view of the role of "God's Servant," Paul Baender concluded in 1966 that Twain used one early character (MacFarlane) to make his "pessimism" more palatable to the public by putting in a third-person voice, diluting the negativity of first-person invective as in *The Mysterious Stranger*, "The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg," "Corn-Pone Opinions," and "The War-Prayer," all stories using an "outsider" to express Twain's personal opinions (192).

But, beyond the story's central figure, little critical attention has addressed other elements of the parable. Still, as this author opined in 1989, the themes of the story, its

structure, its tone, its diction and its tragic outcome may have their origins in two other acknowledged influences on Mark Twain—*The Bible* and the writings of Thomas Paine, in particular his pamphlet "Common Sense" when Paine directly quotes lengthy passages from the eighth chapter of First Samuel from the Old Testament (Britton 139). Not coincidentally, the topics of the Biblical quotations and Paine's use of them were much the same as Twain's "King Leopold's Soliloquy." In the Biblical chapter, the prophet Samuel tries to convince the Israelites, clamoring for a king, that what they pray for is not likely to bring the desired results. Paine used this passage as a metaphor for his main message—that kings were still undesirable.

As Paine pointed out, in First Samuel, the Israelites ask for a line of kings to rule them after Samuel's death. He tells them, "This shall be the manner of the king that shall rule over you. He will take your sons and appoint them for himself for his chariots to be his horsemen, and some shall run before his chariot" (Paine 11). This king would make "captains over thousands", and, 'captains over fifties', and put the men to work to till his ground, reap his harvest, "and prepare his instruments of war. The women would be taken to serve the court, feed the king and, in an editorial aside from Paine, this demonstrated "the expense and oppression of the king" (12). The king would appropriate all lands, fields, vineyards and homes and then distribute them to his "favorites." One-tenth of all products would be taken and given to the courtesans. "And You shall cry out in that day because of the king ye have chosen. AND THE LORD SHALL NOT HEAR YOU IN THAT DAY" (12). This line of reasoning fails to convince the Israelites. "We shall have a king," is the answer: Saul becomes the first king of Israel.

There are a number of similarities in the language and the setting of First Samuel and "The War-Prayer." Like the prophet Samuel, the mysterious stranger has "a commission from God." Like Samuel, the messenger tells the expectant people that "God has heard your prayer," and wishes to answer by revealing the actual outcome if the prayer's desire is granted. If the Israelites are granted a king, their freedom will be lost, their possessions will be taxed, and their sons will be drafted into the king's service, particularly in the army. If the confident Christians of Mark Twain's story also get what they pray for, both armies will find death, destruction, injuring of innocents, and the tears of loved ones:

"O Lord, our God, help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells; help us to cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead; help us to drown the thunder of the guns with the shrieks of their wounded, writhing in pain; help us to lay waste their humble homes with a hurricane of fire; help us to wring the hearts of their unoffending widows with unavailing grief; help us to turn them out roofless with their

little children to wander unfriended the wastes of their desolated land in rags and hunger and thirst, sport of the sun-flames of summer and the icy winds of winter, broken in spirit, worn with travail, imploring Thee for the refuge of the grave and denied it . . . Lord, blast their hopes, blight their lives, protract their bitter pilgrimage, make heavy their steps, water their way with their tears, stain the white snow with the blood of their wounded feet!” (Twain 198)

In both Samuel and Twain’s story, the speaker argues by listing a series of undesirable and unexpected predictions that show the negative side of granted prayers. And, in both cases, the plea is rejected. “It was believed, afterward, that the man was a lunatic, because there was no sense in what he said.” The tone of each is the same; a serious sermon with Biblical diction is employed. So the rhetorical devices in the Bible, Paine’s “Common Sense” and “The War-Prayer” are too similar not to conclude an influence on Twain’s story from either his reading of Paine or *The Bible*.

More speculation regarding “The War-Prayer” has been suggested regarding its minimal place in the Twain canon. Jim Zwick believes the story, along with the bulk of Twain’s late-life anti-imperialist writings, are ignored due to America’s repression of its own history. In his view, “Mark Twain’s anti-imperialist writings are relatively unknown today because of the nation’s inability to deal with that part of its past . . . The denial of empire is so pervasive that it often seems overwhelming, but it has been contested throughout the century.” According to Zwick, later annexations, military occupations, and numerous other foreign interventions keep the issue of imperialism alive. Within that debate, Zwick contends “Mark Twain’s iconic stature in American culture gives his anti-imperialist writings particular importance, and it is clear that all sides understand the significance of attaching his name to a political position. Further, “By examining his writings and how they were censored during and after World War I, debated during the Cold War, and revived from the 1960s onward, we can get a glimpse of how the history of imperialism was suppressed and how Americans became ‘miseducated’ about their country’s historic role in the world” (Zwick “Anti-Imperialism”).

But beyond this aspect of the story, “The War-Prayer” has been used in other political discussions, primarily when anti-war feelings are important in public discourse. The first published mention of the story was in a December 7, 1914 article in *The New York Times* briefly describing a reading of excerpts from it by Dr. Henry Neuman in St. Louis, leader of the Ethical Culture Society, a liberal religious/philosophical movement founded by Felix Adler (“A War Prayer”). While little is known about this event, there was much discussion during this period about America’s involvement in World War I, particularly as

many felt the endeavor was largely a means for arms manufacturers to line their pockets. Circulation of the story reached its height when a small paperback, with line drawings by longtime war correspondent and illustrator, John Groth, was published by Harper & Row in 1968. Appearing during the zenith of public protests against the Vietnam War, Groth's illustrations depicted the horror, pain and suffering that Twain described, making the book a '60s version of the pamphlets issued by both Thomas Paine and Twain.

In later decades, the science-fiction television series *Babylon 5* aired one episode entitled "The War Prayer" based on Twain's story. On April 22, 1995, the world premiere performance of "The War Prayer Oratorio" (music by Herbert Haufrech, Libretto by Mark Twain) took place at the Ulster Choral Society in Kingston, NY. In 2004, during the build-up toward the second Iraq War, singer Willie Nelson re-released his rendition (using five other performers) of "The War Prayer" first produced in 1991 during the first Gulf War. Both editions were distributed for free by Peace Inc. of San Francisco. The online version included parts of an anti-war vocal narrative called "Jimmy's Road." According to Terry Oggel, "Jimmy's Road" framed and contextualized the reading of Twain's verbal narrative "by telling the story of Jimmy, a boy who grows up only to be sent to war, where he learns to kill and then is killed himself" (Oggel).

But some media dramatizations of the story had more educational and less propagandistic purposes. In 1979, PBS broadcast the partial biography, *Mark Twain: Beneath The Laughter*, in which Richard Moll played the messenger from the Throne. The segment is interlaced with scenes of Twain (Dan O'Herlihy) in bed reading the story aloud to daughter Jean, who is visibly shaken by it. In 1981, PBS included the story as an epilogue to its dramatization of *A Private History of a Campaign That Failed*, a tale set during the Civil War in which a young Sam Clemens claimed to have seen an innocent man gunned down by would-be soldiers fearing Union scouts.

Clearly, "The War-Prayer" is part of the Twain canon deserving renewed explorations both during discussions of any "war fever" and on its own as evidence of Twain's stylistic skills. The importance of reader reactions to it will continue as long as war remains part of the human experience.

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