

**Title:** "I been there before": biblical typology and 'Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.'  
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Critics have noted often Mark Twain's incorporation of biblical allusions into the text of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Echoes of the Book of Exodus, in particular, have received a good deal of attention. Billy G. Collins, in what is the most extensive treatment of the Exodus motif to date, observes that in *Huck* "Twain ... created a modern Moses whose journey from a barrel to the territory closely resembled that of the biblical Moses from the ark of bulrushes to the wilderness" (87).(1) That Huck also corresponds to Christ has been noted less often. Randy K. Cross has argued that chapter 33 of Twain's text is a parody of the Resurrection, with Huck playing Christ to Tom's doubting Thomas. Also, the end of chapter 18, where Huck climbs into a tree to watch the bloody upshot of the Shepherdson/Grangerford feud, recalls Christ's being "nailed to the tree" or the Crucifixion. "I wished I was out of that tree," Huck remarks sadly, "but I dasn't come down" (153).

The question arises: how can Huck be at once both Moses and Christ? Is Twain simply playing fast and loose with the Bible, employing whatever character correspondence serves his artistic purpose at the moment? I want to argue here that Twain is instead drawing upon the example of biblical typology, an interpretive procedure that was very common among early- and mid-Victorian Bible readers and sermonizers. This procedure is defined by George P. Landow: "Typology (or typological symbolism) is a Christian form of biblical interpretation that proceeds in the assumption that God placed anticipations of Christ in the laws, events, and people of the Old Testament" (ix). By the law of typology, old and new, past and present become one in a moment dense with meaning. The most salient Old Testament "type" of Christ is of course the patriarch Moses. Landow cites Cardinal Newman on this relationship: "The history of Moses is valuable to Christians, not only as giving us a pattern of fidelity towards God, of great firmness, of great meekness, but also as affording us a type or figure of our Savior Christ" (23). What is unique and appealing about typological interpretation is that it retains difference while asserting identity: Moses is Moses, but he is also Christ. One can readily see, therefore, how Twain, wanting to endow his hero with historical and mythical resonance, might draw upon the example of biblical typology to structure what he sometimes referred to as "*Huck Finn's autobiography*."(2)

The argument that *Huckleberry Finn* may constitute an example of what Landow terms "typological realism" finds support in Alan Gribben's reconstruction of Mark Twain's library. Gribben lists among Twain's books Hannah More's "*Moses in the Bulrushes, A Sacred Drama*," which "four-part, twenty-five-page version of the biblical story from the Book of Exodus was well-known in the early nineteenth century" (1, 484). Turning to More's text, one encounters near its conclusion a passage which sets out, in a highly didactic manner, the Moses-Christ typological connection. The speaker is Moses's sister, the prophetess Miriam:

... Hear further wonders: Moses, tho' great, is but the type of ONE Far greater; ONE predestined to redeem Not Israel only, but the human race; ONE who in aftertime shall rescue men, Not from the body's slav'ry, the brief bondage Of life and time; but who shall burst the chains Which keep the soul enthral'd, the chains of sin; Shall free the captive from the galling yoke Of Satan; rescue from eternal death, And finally restore, Man's ruin'd race. (106)

That Twain may have had More's drama in mind while writing *Huckleberry Finn* is suggested by his first chapter, where Huck is suffering at the well-meaning hands of the Widow Douglas: "After supper she got out her book and learned me about Moses and the Bulrushers; and I was in a sweat to find out all about him; but by and by she let

it out that Moses had been dead a considerable long time; so then I didn't care no more about him; because I don't take no stock in dead people" (2). Huck's "Moses and the Bulrushers" echoes, with some comic distortion, More's title.(3) Twain, then, may well have been thinking of Miriam's prophecy when he made Huck at once a Moses and a Christ - for, once again, according to typological logic, Moses and Christ are one in the same. Christ, like Huck, has "been there before."

There may be more to Huck's distortion of More's title, however, than mere "funnin." When Huck observes that Moses had been dead "a considerable long time" and asserts that he "don't take no stock in dead people," he is implicitly rejecting the recognition of the present reality of the type necessary for the interpretative procedure More illustrates and recommends. Huck, we venture to suggest, would reject More herself as something of a "Bulrusher" (one who "rushes" the "bull"?), as would Huck's creator, "Mr. Mark Twain." Huck's rejection and Twain's irony probably extend to biblical typology in general, which had by the end of the Victorian era, as a result of advances in the natural sciences and philological studies (advances which undermined the belief in the literal truth of the Bible necessary to typological interpretation), fallen into disrepute.

Hannah More writes that Christ will come to "redeem / Not Israel only, but the human race." This is, of course, the same race that Mark Twain thought inexorably "damned." Landow observes that "typology connects... two times, the second of which is said to 'complete' or 'fulfill' the text, and therefore it provides a meaningful structure to human history" (5). Twain, from the very start of his career, expressed doubts about such hopeful teleologies. In one of his letters from the Holy Land - which letters would serve as the basis for *The Innocents Abroad* (1869) - Twain writes of a difference of opinion he had with his fellow pilgrims: "They thought that they could have saved Sodom and Gomorrah, and I thought that it would have been unwise to risk money on it" (*Traveling* 310). By the end of his life Twain had become even more convinced of the impossibility of the sort of "reality" typological interpretation presupposes; he once remarked to his biographer Paine, apropos of religion, "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" (*Ensor* 89). Given these comments, the idea that Twain intended that Huck be received by his reader as a sincere antitype of the Moses/Christ type - in other words, that Huck be seen as a truly redemptive figure - appears highly improbable.(4) In the final analysis I must agree with Robert Sattelmeyer, who observes of Twain's intertext that "the biblical images help to figure forth and amplify the secular themes of the novel, and in fact they are often inverted or displaced in order to undercut the conventional morality associated with the stories themselves" (255). In his use of biblical typology, Twain does not so much look back to More or other Victorian champions of what Sattelmeyer terms "conventional morality," but rather forward to modernists like James Joyce, whose Leopold Bloom serves as an ironical antitype to Moses. No coincidence that Twain and Joyce should employ the same dark riddle, "Where was Moses when the candle went out?"(5)

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## NOTES

1. Collins cites previous analyses of the Exodus motif by Kenneth S. Lynn and Daniel Ramon Barnes but does not cite Jose Barchilon's and Joel S. Kovel's psychoanalytic study. Brief analyses after Collins's include Kenneth Seib's and Earl Briden's.
2. Linda H. Peterson notes that biblical typology offered a structural paradigm for the autobiographical writings of eminent Victorians such as Carlyle, Ruskin, and Newman.
3. The editors of the University of California edition of *Huck* note that in "an 1866 sketch, Mark Twain published a letter from [his niece] Annie which began, 'Uncle Mark, if you was here I could tell you about Moses in the Bulrushers again, for I know it better'" (375). Given that such a letter did exist, it seems probable that Annie was echoing her uncle's playful misspelling or mispronunciation of "Bulrushes," rather than he echoing hers. Even if

Annie was the original source of the mistake, Twain still could have employed it with More's title in mind.

4. Collins appears convinced that the "straight" reading of the Huck-Moses correspondence is the correct one, for he writes of Twain's novel that "the concluding chapters in which Jim is finally assured of his freedom are highly important because they fulfill the quest for freedom which brought Jim on the voyage" (102). Barnes, on the other hand, argues that "the effect of the reader's awareness of these parallels is generally to heighten the ironic impact of the novel" (item 62).

5. Buck Grangerford asks Huck the riddle in chapter 17 of Twain's novel. Huck - perhaps because he "don't take no stock" in Moses - cannot answer. Bloom asks himself and answers the riddle in the "Ithaca" chapter of *Ulysses*.

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Studies on the 'Adventures of Huckleberry Finn' suggest that Mark Twain used biblical typology in several portions of the book. Twain alludes to the Resurrection in chapter 33, personifying Huck as Christ and Tom as doubting Thomas. He then alludes to the Crucifixion in chapter 18, again using Huck as a personification of Christ. Twain showed that God provided anticipations of Christ in the events, laws and personages of the Old Testament.

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**Gale Document Number:** GALE|A16674092

Title: Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Complete. Author: Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens). Release Date: August 20, 2006 [EBook #76]  
Last Updated: May 25, 2018 Language: English. Character set encoding: UTF-8 \*\*\*. Start of this project gutenber ebook huckleberry  
finn \*\*\*.Â There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth. That is nothing. I never seen anybody but lied one time or  
another, without it was Aunt Polly, or the widow, or maybe Mary. Aunt Pollyâ€”Tomâ€™s Aunt Polly, she isâ€”and Mary, and the Widow  
Douglas is all told about in that book, which is mostly a true book, with some stretchers, as I said before. Now the way that the book  
winds up is this: Tom and me found the money that the robbers hid in the cave, and it made us rich. Huckleberry Finn is something more  
complex and wide-ranging, generally acknowledged as Twainâ€™s masterpiece and as one of the first American novels in its scope  
and power, if not in terms of pure chronology. It is also, like Walt Whitmanâ€™s Leaves of Grass, a book about travel and the open road  
(or, in Twainâ€™s case, the open river), which ranges widely across the center of the continent, exposing the reader to a panorama of  
American life. In this sense, it rivals Whitmanâ€™s collection of poems for the accolade of being considered Americaâ€™s national  
epic. Download The Adventures of Huckleberry Fin... After reading Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, I realized that I had absolutely  
nothing to say about it. And yet here, as you see, I have elected to say it anyway, and at great length. Reading this novel now, at the age  
of mumble-mumble, is a bit like arriving at the circus after the tents have been packed, the bearded lady has been depilated, and the  
funnel cake trailers have been hitched to pick-up trucks and captained, like a formidable vending armada, toward the auburn sunset.Â  
Or am I old-fashioned? Letâ€™s face it. In the greater social consciousness, there are two stars of this book: (1) the word 'nigger' and  
(2) the Sherwood Schwartz-style ending in which Tom Sawyer reappears and makes even the most casual reader wonder whether he  
might not be retarded.