Introduction

Middle East Interests

Every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.
—Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History"

This is a book about the cultural and political encounters that have made the Middle East matter to Americans. It chronicles how, in the years between World War II and the turn of the twenty-first century, Americans engaged the Middle East, both literally and metaphorically, through its history as a sacred space and its continuing reality as a place of secular political conflict. Thus people in the United States encountered the Middle East through war, but also on television shows; as part of the struggle over oil, but also in debates over ancient history; in discussions of religion, and also in constructions of race. This study, therefore, aims to expand the idea of "encounters" to include those that happen across wide geographic spaces, among people who will never meet except through the medium of culture. And like so many encounters that cross social or spatial divides, those chronicled here were often ambivalent and confusing: they were fraught with tension and ripe with possibility.

Two factors, the presence of oil and the claim to religious origins, have been particularly important to these encounters. Oil has often seemed the most obvious of these two—an irreducible material interest. And for decades, beginning in the 1940s and intensifying after the oil crises of the 1970s, narratives of a U.S. "national interest in oil" were present in everything from presidential statements to car advertisements. By the time of the 1990–1991 Gulf War, when the United States led a multinational coalition to support Saudi Arabia and Kuwait against Iraq, oil was presumed, both by those who supported and those who opposed the war, to be a primary American interest and a motivation for U.S. policy.

Claims to the Middle East as a site of religious origin have wielded a similar power, if in a different register. Because Judaism, Islam, and Christianity each take the "Holy Land" as their site of origin, religious narratives helped forge the connection that allowed many people in the United States to see

themselves as intimately involved with the Middle East, as having a legitimate cultural investment that was sometimes a profound political interest as well.

Yet to speak of oil or religious origins is not so much to explain the relationship as it is to open a question. The Middle East has loomed large as a U.S. interest, especially since 1945, when the United States became a global superpower and the Middle East became one of the most contested regions in the world. But neither the investment in oil nor the meaning of religious history was preordained; each emerged from a complex layering of cultural, religious, and social practices. Representations of the Middle East—of both the ancient religious sites and the modern nations—helped to make the area and its people meaningful within the cultural and political context in the United States. In other words, the Middle East was not immediately available as an American interest; instead, it had to be made "interesting." *Epic Encounters* examines the role of cultural products, from films to museum exhibits to television news, in establishing the parameters of U.S. national interests in the region. Cultural practices have been central to that project, and claims about oil and origins were the twin pillars of its logic.

With the Arab-Israeli conflict providing a constant context, official American policy toward the Middle East in the last fifty years has vacillated between two poles: distance, othering, and containment define the first; affiliation, appropriation, and co-optation constitute the second. In some moments and from some perspectives, particular nations in the region have appeared as partners and allies in the extension of U.S. power. Indeed, during the first decades after World War II, American encounters were most often posited as affiliations, and U.S. interests were framed in terms supportive of the region's anticolonial movements. At the same time, U.S. policymakers posited as an alternative to colonialism a "benevolent" American partnership, which included nearly unlimited U.S. access to Middle Eastern oil.

As policies and politics hardened in both the United States and the Middle East in the 1970s and 1980s, however, attention focused on the Middle East as a military and/or cultural threat requiring containment. Antiterrorism and the "oil threat" emerged as primary concerns in the media and in U.S. policy. Then, with the fall of the Soviet Union and the defeat of Iraq in the 1990–1991 Gulf War, the older theme of U.S. benevolent partnership reemerged, this time in the context of President H. W. Bush's New World Order. Of course, the poles of containment and co-optation often existed simultaneously, sometimes contesting each other, sometimes simply as two aspects of one policy.

If we want to understand the consistent involvement that Americans have had with the Middle East, however, we will need to go beyond, without discarding, this official story. In practice, Americans' encounters with

the Middle East have included everything from pilgrimage to captivity to war, and they have been defined by emotions ranging from admiration to fear to disdain. To understand *these* multifaceted relationships, we must consider the politics of representation: that is, the negotiation of political and moral values, as well as the development of an often uneven and contested public understanding of history and its significance. I argue that cultural products such as films or novels contributed to thinking about both values and history in two ways. First, they helped to make the Middle East an acceptable area for the exercise of American power. Second, they played a role in representing the Middle East as a stage for the production of American identities—national, racial, and religious. The two aspects were interdependent, as the construction of identities and the staging of U.S. "interests" in the Middle East have often gone hand in hand.

While the idea of a U.S. national interest in oil has made the Middle East central to constructions of expansionist nationalism, the sense of religious connection (Muslim, Jewish, or Christian) has sometimes worked in the opposite direction, as a basis for racial solidarities or transnational affiliations. Ancient histories and biblical tales have influenced how people viewed contemporary Middle East politics, in part because events of the religious past have been, in Walter Benjamin's terms, "recognized by the present as one of its own concerns." Narratives of the Middle East's distinctive historical and moral significance have voiced convictions about community, identity, and faith. The fact that the Middle East was the site of religious origin stories has made it, perhaps more than anywhere else in the world, a powerful site of affiliation not only for Jews or Arabs but also for others—African American Muslims, fundamentalist Christians, and amateur Egyptologists, among them—who have claimed the spaces and histories of the Middle East as their own.

Religious, racial, and national narratives frame identity in distinct ways. The stories they tell and the loyalties they require often overlap, but just as often they are in profound, sometimes violent, conflict. This study examines both the official and the unofficial versions of the U.S. encounter with the Middle East. It explores the cultural logic that supported U.S. policies in the region, from the remarkable intersection of biblical epic films and cold war security doctrine in the 1950s to the news media and popular culture accounts that made Israel an icon of effective power after Vietnam. It also traces mobilizations of the Middle East that challenged or offered alternatives to that dominant logic, including African Americans' construction of an Islamic-influenced cultural radicalism in the 1960s, debates over the legacy of ancient Egypt in the 1970s, and Christian conservatives' focus on Israel as a major site for fundamentalist narratives of Armageddon.

I intend *Epic Encounters* to be a contribution to placing U.S. history and culture firmly within the overall history of colonial and postcolonial power. The analysis here aims to address what Amy Kaplan has defined as three major absences in scholarship on the United States: "the absence of culture from the history of U.S. imperialism; the absence of empire from the study of American culture; and the absence of the United States from the postcolonial study of imperialism."[1] To place the history of U.S. global power at the heart of the study of U.S. cultures, and to give culture a central place in an analysis of the production and reproduction of U.S. power, is to resist many of the categories that have separated the "domestic" from the "international." Identities, cultures, and conflicts have often refused to be contained within the borders of the nation-state; in the case of the extraordinary growth of U.S. hegemony in the last fifty years, the nation-state itself has expanded its influence and its reach so profoundly as to belie any attempts to understand "Americanness" outside of that expansion. This study highlights the fact that American global reach has significantly transformed the meanings of the nation itself; in the postwar period, the realities of U.S. power have structured the process of defining a rich variety of American—and "un-American"—identities.

MORAL GEOGRAPHIES AND THE CULTURAL FIELD

The postwar significance of the Middle East for Americans coalesced as part of the process of constructing a cognitive map suitable for the new "American Century." This mapping involved the development of what Michael Shapiro has called "moral geographies": cultural and political practices that work together to mark not only states but also regions, cultural groupings, and ethnic or racial territories. Moral geographies shape human understandings of the world ethically and politically as well as cognitively; they consist of "a set of silent ethical assertions" that mark connection and separation.[2] Different moral geographies can coexist and even compete; each represents a different type of imaginative affiliation linked to certain ideas about significant spaces.

In the following chapters, I trace the cultural history of the moral geographies that Americans have used to understand the Middle East. The book explores how Americans have claimed their "interests" in the Middle East, from Suez to Iran to the Persian Gulf, with the understanding that those interests have included not only oil or political influence but also religious affiliation, cultural power, and racial identity. I argue that the Middle East has been both strategically important and metaphorically central in the construction of U.S. global power. Yet the development of U.S. foreign policy in

the postwar period was also intimately intertwined with the construction of a larger set of values and meanings that were not limited to, invented by, or entirely under the control of policymakers. Moral geographies of the Middle East have also provided alternatives to official policy, framing transnational affiliations and claims to racial or religious authority that challenged the cultural logic of American power. Moral geographies, in other words, are deeply historical and highly contested products, forged at the nexus of state power, cultural productions, and sedimented presumption.

In examining these diverse histories, I have operated from certain more general understandings of the connections between culture and politics. In particular, the arguments in the chapters that follow depend on two fundamental premises: first, that foreign policy has a significant cultural component; second, that understanding the political import of culture requires that we position cultural texts *in* history, as active producers of meaning, rather than assuming that they merely "reflect" or "reproduce" some preexisting social reality.

The first premise is simply that foreign policy itself is a meaning-making activity, and one that has helped to frame our ideas of nationhood and national interest. Foreign policy statements and government actions become part of a larger discourse through their relation to other kinds of representations, including news and television accounts of current events, but also novels, films, museum exhibits, and advertising. To examine these very different types of materials in relationship to one another is not to suggest that they are all the same thing, or that they work the same way. Obviously, the practice of foreign policymakers, be it the establishment of diplomatic contacts with a former guerrilla leader or an order to send troops into a foreign territory, works from a set of assumptions and constraints that differs from that of filmmakers or television news producers. But foreign policy is a semiotic activity, not only because it is articulated and transmitted through texts but also because the policies themselves construct meanings. By defending borders, making alliances, and establishing connections, foreign policy becomes a site for defining the nation and its interests.

In fact, the conduct of foreign policy plays a central role in the construction of nationalism, though foreign policy is only a part of that process. As Benedict Anderson has argued, "nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time."[3] On Anderson's account, nationalism is a cultural development; nations are "imagined communities" rather than natural entities, and as such they depend on cultural articulation and construction. The cultural and political mapping of salient space plays an important role in constructing the political legitimacy of the nation

as the site of political subjectivity and identity.[4] This mapping occurs in many sites, from the weather maps on the nightly news to the daily newspapers' lists of the nation's best-selling novels. The nation-state is modernity's most powerful moral geography. Today, in the postmodern era of globalization, the nation-state may be undergoing a fundamental challenge, as the following chapters discuss. Global capital, virtual communities, and mobile populations threaten both the nation's political legitimacy and its status as an identity container. Postmodernity has produced it own powerful geographic imaginations, in which territory, community, and political affiliations are being reconfigured. As of yet, however, nationalism remains a crucial part of world politics: people battle to achieve or maintain their nations, as in Palestine or among the Kurds in Iraq; to forge new ones out of disintegrating empires, as in Russia or the Balkans; or to maintain the power of their own nation against others, as in the Gulf War.

Foreign policy is one of the ways in which nations speak for themselves; it defines not only the boundaries of the nation but also its character, its interests, its allies, and its enemies. The affiliations and disaffiliations that the discourse of foreign policy seeks to construct are never permanent, however. They are always unstable and subject to change. Alliances shift or "national interests" alter, expanding or contracting in an unstable global environment. The nation finds itself threatened by the specter of doubt or dissent within, and by the very real possibility of challenge by those outside its boundaries. In fact, this sense of danger and instability in foreign policy discourse is central to its success. As David Campbell has argued: "Ironically, ... the inability of the state project of [ensuring] security to succeed is the guarantor of the state's continued success as a compelling identity. The constant articulation of danger through foreign policy is thus not a threat to the state's identity or existence; it is its condition of possibility."[5] The continuing sense of threat provides support for the power of the state, but it also provides the groundwork for securing "the nation" as a cultural and social entity. The "imagined community" of the nation finds continuing rearticulation in the rhetoric of danger.

The second premise of this study is that culture is an active part of constructing the narratives that help policy make sense in a given moment. The historical and political significance of cultural texts lies in the fact that they are integral aspects of both history and politics. The task of any study of culture, then, is to reconstruct the larger world in which a given cultural form was made meaningful. This means, first and foremost, that a cultural product, be it a novel or a painting or a film, cannot be understood solely through "immanent" analyses that stay within the text itself. An exami-

nation of the formal qualities or narrative strategy of a single text, be it Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* or Sylvester Stallone's *Rambo*, is often the first step toward understanding how culture works, but it is *only* a first step, if one wants to explain how and why that product was meaningful in its time. Textual analysis, standing alone, tends toward what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls a "derealization" of cultural works: "Stripped of everything which attached them to the most concrete debates of their time ... they are impoverished and transformed in the direction of intellectualism or an empty humanism."[6] Bourdieu also argues, however, that many cultural critics make the opposite error: determined to connect "culture" to "society," they assume that "society" exists somewhere outside of "art," which is then presumed to "reflect" society, in some direct or indirect way. Bourdieu calls this presumption "the short circuit effect," and warns against attempts to interpret a cultural text as a straightforward expression of an outside reality, be it the author's biography (Amy Tan writes about Chinese mothers because of her childhood experience with her Chinese mother) or the world of politics (*Rambo* as an expression of men's fear of feminism).[7] Such "external" analyses are inevitably limited, in that they assume a direct one-to-one correlation between an artistic product and the interests or situation of the artist (whether the artist is viewed in terms of her individual biography or as a "representative" of some larger social group). Such "imputations of spiritual inheritance" fail to acknowledge the specific rules and conditions of what Bourdieu calls "the field." In the case of the cultural field, those conditions would include the meanings of "art" in a given moment, how different types of art relate to each other, the rules for what counts as "good" or even "profitable" in the world of culture, and the economic situation of cultural producers.

The cultural field exists in continuous relationship with the other fields in the larger social system, and this relationship is far more complicated than direct reflection. If we want to argue that cultural products are politically significant—and they often are—we simply cannot make the assumption, implicitly or explicitly, that movie producers or struggling novelists are producing (or reproducing) the ideologies needed by the ruling political elite, which is itself often quite divided. Instead, we have to "explain the coincidence" that brings specific cultural products into conversation with specific political discourses.[8] Even if a movie explicitly attempts to justify a political position (as the 1956 version of *The Ten Commandments* tried to do), the impact of its statement depends on the overall situation, including artistic questions, such as how seriously the film is reviewed; the issue of whether or not audiences interpret the film as a political statement (which is then re-

lated to the history of film viewing and the status of the particular film genre, among other things); and the larger political question of whether the statement being made speaks in harmony with, or in opposition to, other important political positions at the time. The apparent "statement" of a text, then, is not the same as its historically constituted meaning.

A central thesis of this book is that cultural productions help make meanings by their historical association with other types of meaning-making activity, from the actions of state policymakers to the marketing of Bible prophecy. This suggests that we might ask less about "what texts mean"—with the implication that there is a hidden or allegorical code to their secret meaning—and more about how the texts participate in a field, and then in a set of fields, and thus in a social and political world. By focusing on the intertextuality, the ecumenicalism, and the common logic of diverse representations, I indicate the ways in which the production of a discourse about the Middle East comes to be understood as authoritative, as "common sense." This production of knowledge occurs not through the conspiracy or conscious collaboration of individuals but through the internal logics of cultural practices, intersecting with the entirely interested activity of social agents. Instead of focusing on the problem of negative stereotypes of people in the Middle East (and there have been many) or on the role of the media in directing public opinion, this model focuses on the cultural work that happens at the messy intersections. We can begin to see how certain meanings can become naturalized by repetition, as well as the ways that different sets of texts, with their own interests and affiliations, come to overlap, to reinforce and revise one another toward an end that is neither entirely planned nor entirely coincidental. If the end product is the successful construction of a discourse of expansionist nationalism, what we examine here is not a conspiracy, nor a functionalist set of representations in the service of power, but a process of convergence, in which historical events, overlapping representations, and diverse vested interests come together in a powerful and productive, if historically contingent, accord.

ORIENTALISM AND BEYOND

Since the publication of Edward Said's groundbreaking analysis in 1978, the term "Orientalism" has become shorthand for exoticizing and racist representations of "the East." Orientalism is a certain type of lens; through it, Europeans and Americans have "seen" an Orient that is the stuff of children's books and popular movies: a world of harems and magic lamps, mystery and decadence, irrationality and backwardness. Said's *Orientalism* pro-

vided a detailed analysis of the history of such images, as well as a language for understanding how the cognitive mapping of spaces (East versus West) and the stereotyping of peoples are both intimately connected with the processes of economics, politics, and state power.[9] Since its publication, *Orientalism* has served as the inspiration and the model for a flowering of academic and political analyses of colonial and postcolonial power. The scholarship that has productively used Said's framework is so extensive that a comprehensive list is impossible; it includes a broad range of studies of European or American encounters with Asia, the Middle East, and Africa.[10] Precisely because it has been and continues to be so valuable, scholars who want to suggest other models, as I do, must first account for the limits of the Orientalist framework.

In Said's classic formulation, Orientalism is a large and multifaceted discourse, a "textual relation," that became central to European self-representation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Focusing on representations of the Middle East, Said argues that Orientalism distributed a certain kind of geopolitical awareness—"the world is made up of two unequal halves, Occident and Orient"—through various aesthetic, scholarly, and historical texts.[11] Orientalism operates on a binary logic: Orient versus Occident, Europeans versus Others, Us versus Them. These binaries parallel and draw heavily upon the logic of gender construction: the Oriental is "feminized," thus constructed as mysterious, infinitely sexual and tied to the body, irrational, and inclined toward despotism; the European is "masculinized," and posited as civilized, restrained, rational, and capable of democratic self-rule. Orientalism, Said suggests, is preeminently a "citational" discourse, in which authors or artists draw heavily on previous representations, using travel accounts or paintings as if they were their own experiences (some haven't even gone to the "Orient" at all). In this oddly self-enclosed network of authorities, citing other Western writers or an earlier generation of images is the primary proof of "authenticity" and accuracy.

Orientalism provided one primary grid through which Europeans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries made sense of their imperial project. During the heyday of European power, imperialist representations were part and parcel of an enormously effective practice of world rule. In 1914, at the high point of classical imperialism, Europe held most of the world outside the Americas as colonies, protectorates, dominions, dependencies, and commonwealths.[12] The moral logic of imperialism required that Europeans form what Etienne Balibar has described as an "imperialist superiority complex," through which the project of imperialist expansion was able to transform itself, in the minds of its practitioners, "from a mere enter-

prise of conquest into an enterprise of universal domination, the founding of a 'civilization.' "[13]

Orientalism was politically important because it had an extraordinary identity-forging power at the moment that modern identities were coming into being. The Orientalist concept of the "East" played a significant role in constructing European identity, in defining an "us" that was opposed to "them," and in constructing the "modern" and rational self as opposed to the primitive and irrational Orient. For example, anti-Islamic representations were frequent, even (or especially) among experts on Islam, who often presented Islam as an "imposter" religion that bred both fanaticism and corruption. Islam was the "bad" alternative to Christianity, just as the "Orient" was the backward and decadent (if also strangely appealing) half of the East-West binary.[14] For Said, Orientalist scholarship, art, and travel narratives were intimately entangled with the military, economic, and political strategies of European states. By offering Europeans the certainty that they already knew what there was to know of the East, representations became practices: they laid the foundation for imperial rule.

Recognizing the usefulness of Said's intervention, scholars in recent years have also challenged and revised important aspects of his argument. Several have pointed out that Orientalism in colonialist Britain and France was never as internally unified or as stable as Said argues. Instead, it existed as "an uneven matrix" that was taken up differently in different moments.[15] In addition, critics have argued, Said seems to suggest that the best alternative to Orientalism is simple humanism. If only Europeans had been able to see Arabs in terms of their "ordinary human reality," history might have been very different. This vision of an unadorned human encounter ignores our inevitable imbrication in the political and moral assumptions of our historical moment. There are no "empty humans" who can face each other outside of history or cultural values.[16]

In addition to these general concerns, other problems arise when the Orientalism paradigm is brought to bear on the study of U.S., as opposed to European, encounters with the Middle East.[17] As I discuss in detail later, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century popular culture and political narratives frequently did mobilize the Orientalist fascination with exoticism, sexuality, and decadence. Like their European precedents, American cultural texts often seemed to take a mix-and-match approach to representing the "East," making of China and Saudi Arabia and India and Morocco a single world deemed "Oriental." At other times, however, the Middle East emerged as a distinct entity, separated out from the logic of a generalized "East." Quite often, too, different nations in the Middle East were distin-

guished from each other: not only Israel as opposed to the Arab states but also Egypt versus Saudi Arabia, or Jordan as distinct from Libya. The bulk of this book, in fact, tells the story of *post*-Orientalist representation in the United States, that is, the period after World War II when American power worked very hard to fracture the old European logic and to install new frameworks.

Two factors in particular have complicated Orientalism in the United States. First, the Orientalist paradigm fundamentally depends on the presumption that the "us" of the West is, or is perceived to be, a homogeneous entity. Said argues that Orientalist discourse represented the European subject as (racially, ethnically, and culturally) unified, and thus clearly distinct from the peoples of the East. However, U.S. representations of the Middle East, especially those since 1945, have been consistently obsessed with the problem of domestic diversity. Narratives of nationality are perhaps always more concerned with internal difference than Said acknowledges,[18] but in the United States in particular, racial distinctions within the nation were a structuring concern. As I discuss later, the racial status of Middle East immigrants has been part of the dynamic, but only a relatively small part. More often, the politics of black-white relations have influenced the meaning given to different parts of the Middle East—be it Israel or Mecca or Egypt. African Americans, both civil rights activists and black nationalists, have claimed certain histories as their own, and these claims have challenged, complicated, and conspired with dominant discourses that have represented the region as a resource for American nationalism and a site for the expansion of U.S. power. Thus in the postwar period, the us-them dichotomies of Orientalism have been fractured by the reality of a multiracial nation, even if that reality was recognized only in its disavowal. In other words, there was never a simple, racial "us" in America, even when, as was generally the case, whiteness was privileged in discourses of Americanness.

A second problem is *Orientalism*'s neat mapping of the "West" as masculine and the "East" as feminine. In many ways, Said's argument that the East was linked to femaleness (and thus to irrationality, sexuality, and lack of capacity for democracy) makes sense. For more than two decades, political theorists and women's historians have carefully dissected the division of public and private spheres, analyzing the ways in which industrializing nations began to separate out certain spaces designated as "private"—those signified by home and hearth—and then to gender those spaces "female." Women's association with the private world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was supposed to provide a haven of tranquillity for men, an escape from their stresses in the industrializing, competitive, market-driven "public." But it also

worked to ensure women's unequal access to citizenship, voting, and political life.[19] Similarly, Said and others have suggested that the representations of "Orientals" as feminized (sensual, domestic, nonrational) and the West as masculinized (rational, intellectual, and public) served to legitimate the exclusion of colonized peoples from democratic rights. In this model, citizenship and nationality were necessarily represented as white and male.

Important as such analyses are, however, they do not adequately account for the ways in which "the feminine" has been mobilized to represent nationality, citizenship, and the public. Certainly in the postwar United States, the "universal" subject of the nation-state is *not* imagined simply as male, and citizenship is not simply a matter of *public* life. Instead, the discourse of Americanness has insisted on the centrality of properly ordered private life—inevitably understood as the heterosexual couple and the family—to the public legitimacy of the nation. Women are central figures in this project of representing the nation through the figure of a family. And like the nation itself in foreign policy discourse, the family is imagined as continuously imperiled, under threat from within and without. Thus the "private" world of the marriage, home, and family is necessary to constructing the "inside" of the national community; that "inside" is then mobilized to represent the nation itself in its public mode.[20]

The complexities of race and gender also highlight the fact that, too often, scholars and activists have used the term "Orientalism" to characterize everything from *Madame Butterfly* to television news accounts of the Viet Cong. Yet not all stereotypes, even those of Asians or Arabs, are Orientalist; they might be racist, imperialist, and exoticizing without engaging in the particular logic of Orientalism: binary, feminizing, and citational. When "Orientalism" is used to describe every Western image of every part of the Eastern half of the world, the definition has become too flexible for its own good. Despite these theoretical and historical limitations to the Orientalism framework, however, it remains a useful and evocative characterization of a certain European and American "way of seeing."[21] Rather than endlessly fracturing the definition of Orientalism, or throwing it out altogether, I believe we need to be careful to distinguish when Orientalism *is* at work, and when it is not. If Orientalism does not adequately explain all the diverse ways that Americans came to represent the Middle East, it nonetheless does describe one important version of that encounter. If it was never the *only* manifestation of public fascination with the region, it also never disappeared as a way of comprehending and ultimately domesticating the Middle East for American consumption. Putting Orientalism in its place, then, becomes part of the analytical and historical task at hand.

THE MIDDLE EAST AS "HOLY LAND"

To understand the post-Orientalist logic of the years since World War II, we need to examine in more detail the distinctly Orientalist representations that dominated U.S. encounters with the Middle East in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For most of the nineteenth century, Americans' primary interest in the Middle East was the "Holy Land." Although nineteenth-century maps marked all land to the east of Europe as the "Orient," most people nonetheless distinguished the Near East from areas farther east, such as China and Japan. The Near East, particularly the land of Palestine (which had been ruled by the Ottoman Empire since 1517), was understood as inferior and backward, but also as old, exotic, and connected to the West through Jewish and Christian history.[22]

American travelers began to visit Palestine in earnest in the 1830s, and for those with means travel became quite common after the Civil War. Under the Ottoman Turks, the area was relatively sparsely populated (forty thousand in 1890, when the population of New York City was approximately 3 million), primarily by Muslim Arabs but with some small number of Eastern Christians and Jews. Most American visitors went to Palestine for religious reasons. By visiting the places mentioned in the Bible, they intended to see for themselves the proofs of the authenticity of Christian narratives, and to get a better picture of the life and ministry of Jesus.[23] The biblical scholars who began writing and publishing in the 1830s shared the same presumption: in the face of revisionist "higher criticism" of the Bible and challenges to its historical accuracy, the exploration and study of the lands and historical geography of Palestine and other biblical sites would unearth proofs of the Bible's literal truths.[24]

The vast majority of American tourists were Protestant Christians, who saw themselves as having a particularly meaningful connection to the region on the strength of their religious beliefs. This claim to the Holy Land was inseparable from the popular self-perception that Americans were not only the literal inheritors of God's favor but also better versed in the Bible, and thus more intimately connected with its ancient geographies, than Europeans. Historians have noted the extraordinary inculcation of topographical knowledge via church Bible studies in the nineteenth century. The Methodist Episcopal Church, for example, encouraged young students to take up fantasy existence in the Holy Land and to write letters home to their families from their imaginary tours. For visitors, then, the Holy Land was often linked to nostalgia for childhood and the Bible lessons learned at home. As one Episcopal bishop wrote of his 1874 trip to Palestine:

> This is the first country where I have felt at home. . . . As I try to clear away the mists, bring forward the distant, and make present what seems prehistoric, I find myself at my mother's side and my early childhood renewed. Now I see why this strange country seems natural. Its customs, sights, sounds, and localities were those I lived among in that early time, as shown to me by pictures, explained by word, and funded as part of my undying property.[25]

Most travelers also believed that the contemporary residents of Palestine would provide a living illustration of biblical customs, since they presumed that the Arabs would have changed little in the nineteen centuries since the time of Jesus.[26] Facing their Arab contemporaries, they posited them as people untouched by time, living in a continuing "prehistory." Rather than assuming that one moment in time might include many different ways of life, they characterized geographic and cultural difference across space as a historical difference across time. Anne McClintock has described this presumption as the imperial trope of "anachronistic space"—that is, space imagined as "prehistoric, atavistic, and irrational, inherently out of place in the historical time of modernity."[27] Within this representation of a contemporary place as an example of the "living past" was imbedded the assumption that in time the forces of "modernity"—meaning Europeans and Americans—would inevitably sweep it aside. Thus even though Americans had a specific interest in the Holy Land that differed from that of Europeans, they produced images of it that were decidedly Orientalist in character, exhibiting the same kind of exoticism and fascination with decadence as Europeans did, and presuming that white Christians were in possession of a rationality, historical consciousness, and purposiveness that was denied to the Oriental.

The audience for reports and descriptions of the Holy Land seemed insatiable. Travelogues from Holy Land trips were extremely popular in the United States from the 1830s onward. By the 1850s, literally hundreds of travelers were publishing accounts of their trips, and a surprising number of these were frequently reprinted. William Cowper Prime's *Tent Life in the Holy Land* (1857) was one widely read and conventionally pious version; the painter Bayard Taylor's popular 1855 narrative was decidedly more secular. The missionary William Thomson's *The Land and the Book* (1858) became a best-seller and eventually a classic that remained in print well into the twentieth century. Sold by traveling salesmen and given away at church contests, these reports told of the enthusiasms experienced by emotional travelers on seeing Jerusalem and recounted colorful (and sometimes hostile) encounters with the natives of the area. Many expressed shock at what they described as