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MARK TWAIN'S YANKEE AND THE PROPHET OF BAAL

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In writing *A CONNECTICUT YANKEE IN KING ARTHUR'S COURT*, Mark Twain made extensive use of sources, ranging from Cervantes' *DON QUIXOTE* and W. E. H. Lecky's *HISTORY OF EUROPEAN MORALS* to Gilbert and Sullivan's *H. M. S. PINAFORE* and the autobiography of a former slave, Charles Ball--to say nothing of the principal source which is quoted and parodied in the novel, Sir Thomas Malory's *MORTE D'ARTHUR*.¹ So far no one seems to have noted what to me is a fairly likely Biblical parallel: the Yankee Hank Morgan's contest with Merlin to determine whose power is the greater bears a resemblance to a highly dramatic event described in the Old Testament book of I Kings, chapter 18: Elijah's contest with the prophets of Baal, carried out on Mount Carmel. I believe that there is a notable resemblance between the two stories and will further demonstrate that Mark Twain was familiar with the Elijah story and had made use of it in a humorous sketch written during the previous decade, one he was still using in his platform performances at the time he was writing *A CONNECTICUT YANKEE*.

We need first to recall the Biblical story. Accused by King Ahab as the troubler of Israel, Elijah proposes a great contest on Mount Carmel at which he and the 450 prophets of Baal will try their abilities at calling down fire from heaven. As he puts it to them: "And call ye on the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the Lord: and the God that answereth by fire, let him be God." "All Israel" is summoned to be present for the great confrontation. The prophets of Baal do their utmost, through the course of an entire day, enduring various satirical remarks from Elijah, who suggests that Baal may be gone on a journey, asleep, or otherwise indisposed. When evening comes, Elijah has his turn and makes the most of it. Not content simply to call down fire upon his altar at once, he makes it appear much more difficult by drenching the altar with twelve barrels of water. He prays to God; the fire descends and consumes his sacrifice and the altar. The people are convinced, though not for long. Elijah moves to make sure of his new foothold in Israel by taking care that there will be no further trouble out of the opposition. "Take the prophets of Baal," he cries, "let not one of them escape." The narrator adds, "And they took them: and Elijah

brought them down to the brook Kishon, and slew them there." This does not, however, entirely subdue his opposition, for in the very next chapter we find him fleeing for his life.

Hank Morgan was not opposed by 450 prophets; his chief opposition in the part of the novel with which we are dealing comes from the magician Merlin. It is Merlin, of course, who tries to get Morgan burned at the stake even after the eclipse of the sun begins. Seeing Merlin as his primary opponent, Morgan sets about in chapter seven to discredit him in the eyes of the people of King Arthur's realm: he gives notice that he will destroy Merlin's tower "by fires from heaven" (p. 87).² When the day for the demonstration arrives, a vast assemblage is gathered: Morgan describes "the whole country filling up with human masses as far as one could see" (p. 89). As in the Biblical story, the wrong side--that of conservative superstition--gets its chance first. Morgan offers to let Merlin work any enchantments he will to thwart the Yankee's magic. As he says, in language which must have seemed a little puzzling to the old man, "step to the bat, it's your innings" (p. 89). Merlin does his best, burning pinches of powder, muttering, making passes in the air with his hands. Morgan then takes over and begins making some gestures of his own--purely for show, of course. And then, as he tells it, "there was an awful crash and that old tower leaped into the sky in chunks, along with a vast volcanic fountain of fire. . . . Well, it rained mortar and masonry the rest of the week. This was the report; but probably the facts would have modified it" (pp. 90-91). The result is much the same as in Israel: opposition to Morgan is effectively stifled, at least for the time being, and he comments with obvious relish that "Merlin's stock was flat" (p. 91). Morgan shows far greater magnanimity than Elijah, rejecting Arthur's proposal that the magician be banished and even having his tower rebuilt.

How did Hank Morgan destroy Merlin's tower? Was he really able to call down fire from heaven? Hardly; there was a fair amount of trickery and deceit involved. As Morgan told his chief assistant Clarence, this was the sort of miracle that "required a trifle of preparation" (p. 88). The preparation amounted to planting a sufficient amount of blasting powder (according to Morgan, enough to blow up the Tower of London), installing a lightning rod, and running the proper wires from one to the other. All that was necessary then was to await a thunderstorm and the miracle could take place. The fire fell from heaven, all right, but it wasn't summoned thence by Hank Morgan.

What then are the similarities between the two stories? In both a great crowd of people gathers to witness a contest between representatives of opposing systems of belief. The forces of error and superstition try first and fail; the forces of right then succeed, after employing a certain amount of showmanship. In both stories the climax comes when fire dramatically descends from heaven to consume some object below. The onlookers appear convinced, and the enemies of the protagonist are temporarily but not finally defeated.

We have noted two differences: Elijah faces some 450 prophets whom he later kills; Morgan faces only one, toward whom he behaves in a generous way. Some will certainly want to say at this point that Morgan's miracle was only a trick and that Elijah's was genuine. This difference, however, may not have been clear in the mind of Mark Twain, as will be seen when we begin considering what Twain thought about the Biblical story and what previous use he had made of it.

In 1877 and 1878 Mark Twain published in the ATLANTIC MONTHLY a long piece called "Some Rambling Notes of an Idle Excursion." It is aptly named, for it is a rambling, leisurely account of a ten-day trip which he made to Bermuda some dozen years before he published A CONNECTICUT YANKEE. In the second installment Twain recalls a conversation between a Captain Hurricane Jones and a minister named Peters, in which the captain undertakes to instruct the minister in the art of proper Biblical interpretation. It may be noted that the two men are thinly disguised: Hurricane Jones is really Capt. Ned Wakeman (who also figures in "Capt. Stormfield's Visit to Heaven"), and Peters--a name Twain once planned to give his Connecticut Yankee³--is really Rev. Joseph Hopkins Twichell, Twain's close friend and Hartford pastor.

As Mark Twain sets up the episode, Capt. Hurricane Jones does not know that Peters is a clergyman. They begin talking about the Bible, which is endorsed by Jones as a book that "lays over 'em all,"⁴ even though, as he says, "There's some pretty tough things in it" (p. 589). He asserts that with a little thought these "tough things" can be properly understood. When Peters questions him about the miracles reported in the Bible, Jones proceeds to retell the story which he calls "Isaac and the prophets of Baal." A note from Twain assures us that this was "the captain's own mistake" (p. 590). As the story goes along, the captain reveals a few details not mentioned in the Bible, such as the fact that Isaac/Elijah was a Presbyterian--the religion of the Connecticut Yankee, Tom Sawyer, and several members of the Clemens family of Hannibal, Missouri.

When the great contest on Mount Carmel began, Hurricane Jones informs Peters, the other team took "the first innings" (p. 590), exactly the baseball metaphor that Morgan was to use. Capt. Jones does not wholeheartedly approve of Isaac's behavior during the efforts of the prophets of Baal to produce fire. "Now, what would a magnanimous man do?" he asks. "Keep still, wouldn't he? Of course. What did Isaac do? He graveled the prophets of Baal every way he could think of. Says he, 'You don't speak up loud enough; your god's asleep, like enough, or maybe he's taking a walk; you want to holler, you know,'--or words to that effect; I don't recollect the exact language" (p. 590).

In the captain's story, as in the Bible, twelve barrels of water are poured on the altar before the prophet of the Lord begins. The climax is best expressed in the captain's own words:

Isaac knelt down and began to pray: he strung along, and strung along, about the heathen in distant lands, and about the sister churches, and about the state and the country at large, and about those that's in authority in the government, and all the usual programme, you know, till everybody had got tired and gone to thinking about something else, and then, all of a sudden, when nobody was noticing, he outs with a match and rakes it on the under side of his leg, and pff! up the whole thing blazes like a house afire! Twelve barrels of water? Petroleum, sir, PETROLEUM! that's what it was! (p. 591)

And the captain concludes his edifying narrative by saying: "You read the Bible. Don't you worry about the tough places. They ain't tough when you come to think them out and throw light on them. There ain't a thing in the Bible but what is true; all you want is to go prayerfully to work and cipher out how 't was done" (p. 591).

As interpreted by Capt. Hurricane Jones, then, the story of Isaac/Elijah and the prophets of Baal bears considerable resemblance to many episodes in the career of The Boss at Camelot: a man using nineteenth-century knowledge and material dumbfounds a gullible populace who believe they have seen miracles performed before their very eyes.

Just as the deaths of the 450 prophets of Baal did not put an end to Baal worship in Israel, so Morgan's defeat of Merlin did not suppress all further challenges to his supremacy. In chapter twenty-three the two are at it again, this time both seeking the same goal, the restoration of the holy fountain. Once more Merlin gets his chance first, burning smoke-powders, "pawing the air," "muttering gibberish" (p. 285), and the like. Admitting defeat, he declares that "The mortal does not breathe, nor ever will, who can penetrate the secret" (p. 286) of the enchantment which has been placed upon the well. This, of course, is a fine cue for Hank Morgan to come forth and try his brand of magic. Like Elijah, he jabs his opponent where it hurts: "The thing for you to do is to go home and work the weather, John W. Merlin" (p. 287). (Merlin was a notoriously bad weather prophet.) Like Isaac/Elijah, Morgan lays in the proper supplies--including Greek fire, sheaves of rockets, roman candles, colored-fire sprays, and so on, "everything necessary for the stateliest kind of miracle" (p. 288). This time it is not fire which is desired, but fire is certainly involved. Indeed the Yankee outdoes himself in his beloved "effects" this time, and of course none of them have any relation to restoring the fountain; they are merely to impress the audience. Morgan has been down into the well, found and patched a leak, and installed an iron pump and enough pipe to carry the water to the point where it will be most visible when it begins to flow.

The Biblical story of the prophets of Baal and their defeat by Elijah falls far short of Malory, Lecky, Carlyle, and others as a source for *A CONNECTICUT YANKEE*, and yet I believe that there is reason to think that this story was in Twain's mind when he wrote of the conflict between Merlin and Hank Morgan, especially when that conflict was carried out in a dramatic confrontation before a large crowd of people, a circumstance which involved the apparent bringing of fire or water as a validation of the authenticity of the one who was successful in so doing. That the story of Elijah was on Twain's mind is the more likely since it was, in Capt. Hurricane Jones's version, one of the selections he was reading in his platform appearances. It is mentioned as such in his notebook for August 1887-July 1888,⁵ a time when he was busily involved in writing the story of that latter-day prophet and miracle worker, Hank Morgan, the Connecticut Yankee.

NOTES

¹The sources used in writing *A CONNECTICUT YANKEE* are dealt with in detail in Howard G. Baetzhold, *MARK TWAIN AND JOHN BULL: THE BRITISH CONNECTION* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1970), Chs. 6 and 7.

²All quotations from *A CONNECTICUT YANKEE* are from the first American edition (New York: Charles L. Webster, 1889).

³An account in the Baltimore SUN, Jan. 18, 1889, shows that when Mark Twain read from his manuscript in that city the Yankee's name was "Peters." See Henry Nash Smith's introduction to *A CONNECTICUT YANKEE*, ed. Bernard L. Stein (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1979), p. 13.

⁴All quotations from "Some Rambling Notes of an Idle Excursion" are from the original printing in the ATLANTIC MONTHLY, 40 (Nov. 1877), 589-591.

⁵MARK TWAIN'S NOTEBOOKS & JOURNALS, III (1883-1891), ed. Frederick Anderson, et al. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1979), pp. 355, 462.

