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A Focus on “The Fossil Whale” from *Moby-Dick*



by Channon Visscher

Can you touch the bottom? You've probably been asked or asked this question yourself, either as an honest query (*How deep is it here?*) or as a mild challenge (*Can you do it?*). Growing up in South Dakota, I usually heard this question when I went swimming in the Missouri. The river water is turbid, so you use your foot to see the bottom. You rise high in the water, suck in a big breath of air, and plunge back down, big toe stretched out, feeling the water grow colder as you go deeper. But you're still waiting to touch the muddy bottom. And very soon you start thinking about the trip back up to the top. You get a knot in the pit of your stomach—and a catch of whatever breath remains—when you consider the amount of water below you. In Chapter 104

of *Moby-Dick* (“The Fossil Whale”), Melville-as-Ishmael relates the story of the recent excavation, in Alabama, of the bones of a “Leviathan skeleton, ...one of the most extraordinary creatures that the mutations of the globe have blotted out of existence.”² Written during the emergence of modern geology, this chapter provides a snapshot of the current state of geological thinking (circa 1850)³ and an unsettling encounter with the deep history of the Earth.

Along with James Hutton's description of a vast, cyclical geological history was the 18th-century realization that most fossils (including Ishmael's “pre-adamite whales”) belong to creatures of a former age, the bones of what Ishmael calls “monsters now almost completely extinct” (401). Following these ideas into the early 19th century, Georges Cuvier and others advanced arguments for catastrophism,⁴ whereas scientists including Charles Lyell (such as in his 1830 masterpiece *Principles of Geology*) presented arguments for uniformitarianism.⁵ By the time of *Moby-Dick*, however, there was wide acceptance (shared by Ishmael) even among catastrophists and many clergy that many fossils were not created during Noah's flood but predated it and, moreover, that the flood was responsible (if at all) for only the most recent geological features overlying older rocks.

It is here that we sense Ishmael's simultaneous thrill and dread as he considers the immense antiquity of creation, personified—like so much else in *Moby-Dick*—by the great whale. The time-scales are unfathomable: if all geologic history were compressed to a year, *Moby-Dick* was writ-

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ten one second ago; if all of Earth's history were told by a 100-foot depth of Missouri River water, a human life would span 1/100th the thickness of a human hair. This is humankind plumbing the depths of time and finding no bottom, a failure that gives rise to an almost panicked response in the face of incomprehensible age:

Here Saturn's grey chaos...rolls over me, and I obtain dim, shuddering glimpses into those Polar eternities; when wedged bastions of ice pressed hard upon what are now the Tropics; and in all the 25,000 miles of this world's circumference, not an inhabitable hand's breadth of land was visible. Then the whole world was the whale's; and, king of creation, he left his wake along the present lines of the Andes and the Himmalehs. Who can show a pedigree like Leviathan? Ahab's harpoon had shed older blood than the Pharaoh's. Methuselah seems a schoolboy. I look round to shake hands with Shem. I am horror-struck at this antemosaic, unsourced existence of the unspeakable terrors of the whale, which, having been before all time, must needs exist after all humane ages are over. (401-2)

In this Job-like interrogation (cf. Job 41), the whale achieves a kind of immortality. And what is immortality, Ishmael quips, but "ubiquity in time" (175)? The whale was swimming the oceans long before our lives, and will swim for ages after:

Wherefore, for all these things, we account the whale immortal in his species, however perishable in his individuality. He swam the seas before the continents broke water; he once swam

over the site of the Tuileries, and Windsor Castle, and the Kremlin. In Noah's flood he despised Noah's Ark; and if ever the world is to be again flooded...then the eternal whale will still survive, and rearing upon the topmost crest of the equatorial flood, spout his frothed defiance to the skies. (405)

Whale men might "fill Leviathan's hide with harpoons" and "pull it in with a fishhook"⁶—to its near extinction. But the whale survives, and Ishmael is left speechless.

Endnotes

1. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, Longman Critical Edition, edited by John Bryant and Haskell Springer (Pearson & Longman, 2007).
2. His description includes a description that reminds of Tennyson's line *Nature, red in tooth and claw* from "In Memoriam," published in 1850.
3. For a comprehensive treatment of the rise of modern geology, see Davis A. Young and Ralph F. Stearley, *The Bible, Rocks, and Time* (IVP Academic, 2008).
4. This is the idea that the earth's surface is mostly shaped by catastrophic events in geologic history.
5. This is the idea that the Earth's surface is mostly shaped by everyday forces acting gradually over long periods of time.
6. See Job 41:1, 6 NIV (Grand Rapids: Zondervan House, 1984).