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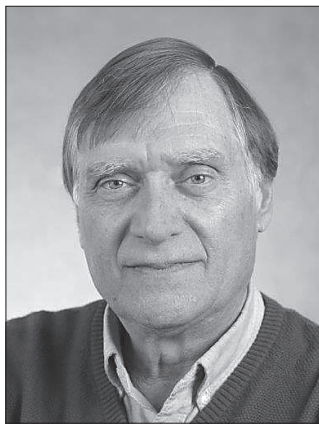
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Pursuing the White Whale: Why Christians Should Read *Moby-Dick*



by Raymond Ide

This year marks the 200th anniversary of Herman Melville's birth—August 1, 1819. Unfortunately, his novel *Moby-Dick*¹ probably remains the least read American classic. This is especially unfortunate for Christians who have not read this literary and religious masterpiece.

The author's life is interesting in itself. As a young man, Melville was baptized in the South Reformed Dutch Church in Manhattan² and later attended the Reformed Dutch Church in Albany, New York.³ His family's Scottish ancestry included Pastor Andrew Melville, who succeeded John Knox as a leader of the Scottish Reformed Church. When King James VI of Scotland, who later became James I of England, proclaimed that

he was the head of the church, Pastor Melville had the audacity to tell the king to his face that he was only "God's silly vassal" while Christ was really head of the church.⁴ Melville was eventually imprisoned for his disagreements with the king.⁵

At age twenty-one Herman Melville showed some of the same audacity as his Scottish ancestor by signing aboard a whaling ship, *The Acushnet*, which sailed out of Fairhaven, Massachusetts, in 1841. But before he departed, he visited The Seamen's Chapel in nearby New Bedford.⁶ Visitors to that church on Johnny Cake Hill can still see this small church, which used to have a plaque outside the door, saying that Melville, in his great novel, made the greatest journey of all—the journey into the human mind. I would add that the author sailed even further—into the human heart and soul. For in the quest described in *Moby-Dick*, where Captain Ahab seeks revenge on the whale that took off his leg—"dismasted" him (174)—Melville the creative genius puts before his readers questions of free-will and predestination, the problem of evil, and the character of God.

Nathalia Wright, in *Melville's Use of the Bible*, says that Melville knew the Bible so well that "he could smell the burning of Gomorrah and the pit; hear the trumpet in the Valley of Jehoshaphat,... taste Belshazzar's feast, feel the heat of the fiery furnace."⁷ She adds that Melville's "mind seems to have been saturated with its [the Bible's] stories, its ideas, and its language."⁸ Melville's per-

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sonal Bibles are heavily marked by the author, who has numerous underlinings devoted to the book of Job and Ecclesiastes. In a letter to his friend Nathaniel Hawthorne around the time he was writing his whaling novel, Melville wrote, "I read Solomon more and more, and every time see deeper and deeper meaning in him."⁹

Biblical names flavor this wild whaling story, where we meet not only Captain Ahab but also a man named Elijah, who warns sailors to beware of Ahab; a bartender named Jonah; and the narrator of the story, who famously begins his tale by saying, "Call me Ishmael." Of all the names Melville could have chosen, why Ishmael? Perhaps the narrator resembles his famous namesake in Genesis in that he too is a wanderer and an outcast on the sea. Just like Ishmael in the Bible, his name means "God hears," and by the end of the novel, that will prove to be the case.

However, the titular character of the story stays under the surface until the last few chapters of the book. This is the mysterious whale who readers realize after a while is more than just "a spouting fish with a horizontal tail" (147). In the first chapter of the novel the white whale is alluded to as "one grand hooded phantom, like a snow-hill in the air" (26). Later Ishmael says, "Gazing on...[the sperm whale's head] you feel the deity and the dread powers more forcibly than in beholding any other object in living nature" (350). The chapters devoted to whales, the cetological chapters that comprise a quarter of the book, might seem tedious at first, but they are central to the author's intention to contemplate leviathan. J. A. Ward argues that Melville, in passages devoted to describing the whale, is "showing the insufficiencies of empirical knowledge and establishing Moby Dick as a creature of spiritual and physical dimensions"¹⁰ and revealing "science's inability to describe the whale adequately."¹¹

For example, at one point the narrator Ishmael expresses his bafflement at trying to understand the different movements of the whale's magnificent tail as he exclaims, "But if I know not even the tail of the whale, how understand his head? Much more, how comprehend his face, when face he has none? Thou shalt see my back

parts, my tail, he seems to say, but my face shall not be seen" (380-81). This biblical comparison of the whale to Moses' vision of God¹² is one of Melville's most audacious hints at what he is getting at in the book.

Among whale men, Moby Dick is identifiable in that he is not just a formidable creature with "a peculiar snow-white wrinkled forehead, and a high, pyramidical white hump" (193); what is especially puzzling to these sailors is that this particular whale seems not only all-powerful but also "ubiquitous [in] that he had actually been encountered in opposite latitudes at one and the same instant of time" (192). And not only does this whale seem omnipresent, but he has been cited over the course of centuries as if he is immortal. Hints of the white whale's supernatural qualities abound in the story.

At one point in the novel, Moby Dick will be alluded to as Job's whale, which for Melville means the leviathan described in the 41st chapter of Job. Here God in the Voice out of the Whirlwind proclaims, "Can you fill his hide with harpoons or his head with fishing spears? No one is fierce enough to rouse him. Who then is able to stand against me?"¹³

Note how God first speaks of the leviathan as "him," which morphs into "me" where God speaks of himself. Carol Newsom, in her commentary on Job, states that "there is a curious level of identification between God and leviathan. God represents himself as being in the image of leviathan, only more so. Indeed, as has often been pointed out, the physical description of leviathan is uncannily evocative of the theophanic descriptions of God."¹⁴

The Voice out of the Whirlwind gives a picture of both God and leviathan: both are powerful, fierce, and awe-inspiring. Like C. S. Lewis's Aslan, the whale is not tame and certainly not safe.

Captain Ahab will make this same identification between the leviathan Moby Dick and the Deity. The revengeful captain at one point tells his first mate Starbuck why he hates this ferocious albino whale: "He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly

what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him" (176).

In other words, in Ahab's imagination the whale that took off his leg is either an agent of the Deity or the Deity himself, and the monomaniacal captain sees himself in nothing less than a cosmic struggle. Interestingly, *inscrutable* is one of John Calvin's favorite words to describe God, and it is at the center of why Captain Ahab hates the albino whale.

This deity represented by or corresponding to the white whale in Ahab's mind is only evil, inspiring him to convince his crew to swear to kill Moby Dick. The revenge-obsessed captain sees himself as the master of his fate, and at one point, Ahab will even exclaim, "I'd strike the sun if it insulted me" and asks, "Who's over me?" (176). Many critics praise the ruthless captain, arguing that he is a Promethean hero who stands up to God or the gods, but the author undercuts this idea regularly, concluding one chapter with Ishmael saying, "In his fiery eyes of scorn and triumph, you then saw Ahab in all his fiery pride" (508). Indeed, the monomaniacal pride of Ahab will bring about his undoing.

In spite of forebodings and omens, Captain Ahab relentlessly pursues the white whale for two days, and each day the leviathan will give a warning to the revengeful captain by damaging some of the whale boats sent out to kill him before swimming away. But on the third day of being pursued, Moby Dick finally responds. He surfaces from under the dark sea and shakes his "predestinating head" before he attacks (559). Melville's word choice here is striking since only one Being in the universe has ever been described as "predestinating."

Contrasted with Captain Ahab, however, is Father Mapple, who used to be a harpooner but now is the minister of The Whaleman's Chapel in New Bedford. In physical appearance the venerable pastor is described as being "in the hardy winter of a healthy old age...for among all the fissures of his wrinkles, there shone certain mild gleams of a newly developing bloom—the spring verdure

peeping forth even beneath February's snow" (56). This pleasant description stands in stark contrast to Ahab, who in his first appearance before his crew is described as "moody stricken Ahab [who] stood before them with a crucifixion in his face; in all the nameless regal overbearing dignity of some mighty woe" (137).

Ahab stands in further contrast to Father Mapple when he first addresses his crew by inciting them to seek revenge on the white whale. How different from Father Mapple, who first addresses his congregation after he enters his pulpit and kneels in prayer: he "folded his large brown hands across his chest, uplifted his closed eyes, and offered a prayer so deeply devout that he seemed kneeling and praying at the bottom of the sea" (58).

He then proceeds to give a sermon on Jonah that has been called "the greatest sermon in literature."¹⁵ The pastor begins by describing Jonah, who is on the run from God, and imagines how he skulks along the docks of Joppa with "a slouched hat and guilty eye," looking for a ship to take him far away to Tarshish (61). Interestingly Captain Ahab will twice be described as wearing a slouched hat, identifying him with the disobedient Jonah.

But Father Mapple will draw an irenic message from the story of Jonah when he tells his congregation, "As sinful men, it is a lesson to us all, because it is a story of the sin, hardheartedness, suddenly awakened fears, the swift punishment, repentance, prayers, and finally the deliverance and joy of Jonah" (60).

Mapple concludes his sermon that contrasts two kinds of people. The first is like the disobedient prophet Jonah, and by extension Ahab, when he is rebelling against God. Seven times Mapple will say woe unto them as their lives can only be full of grief. Then he describes those who obey God, and nine times talks of their delight, concluding by saying, "Delight,—top gallant delight is to him, who acknowledges no law or Lord but the Lord his God, and is only a patriot to heaven" (66-67).

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In some of his last words in his encounter with

the white whale, Ahab will echo Father Mapple's message of woe when he exclaims, "Oh, lonely death on lonely life! Oh, now I feel my topmost greatness lies in my topmost grief" (559). Father Mapple is a picture of a man who finds delight in obeying God, while Ahab finds only sorrow as he shakes his fist at the heavens.

However one of the crewmen, Ishmael, who was at first mesmerized by the over-powering captain and shouted, "Death to Moby Dick" with the rest of the crew, has second thoughts about whether this mysterious white whale is indeed evil (178). This young man observes the captain day after day and slowly realizes that Ahab is "intent on an audacious, immitigable and supernatural revenge" and describes him as a "grey-headed, ungodly old man chasing with curses a Job's whale round the world" (197).

Before the climactic showdown between Ahab and Moby Dick in the Sea of Japan, Ishmael gets a glimpse of the magnificent whale that Ahab has described as a monster and evil, but now perceives for the first time something very different. Upon seeing the albino whale surface surrounded by a glistening wake, he exclaims, "A gentle joyousness—a mighty mildness of repose in swiftness invested the gliding whale" (534-35). The whale is not something hideous and evil as seen by the revengeful captain, but more ambiguous and at times even something beautiful and joyous.

The novel ends by invoking the words of the messenger in the book of Job: "And I only am escaped to tell thee." And what is it that the lone survivor has to tell us from what is hinted at as a supernatural encounter?

D. H. Lawrence wrote that *Moby-Dick* "commands a stillness in the soul, an awe...[it is] one of the strangest and most wonderful books in the world."¹⁶

What is more needed today than for Christians to experience a stillness in the soul and an awe of the almighty God, whom an enraged Captain Ahab rails against—unlike the young Ishmael, who sees transcendent beauty in the whale and consequently whose cry will be heard by God and who will be saved?

The epic tale called *Moby-Dick* has been described as "a spiritual voyage"¹⁷ and "a religious

text, a world-redeeming epic."¹⁸ The French philosopher Albert Camus wrote that "Melville's works trace a spiritual experience of unequaled intensity."¹⁹

Theologian R. C. Sproul kept a picture behind his desk of a whale breaching—leaping out of the waves and twisting in the sunlight in all its magnificence. He gave this advice to Christians about his favorite book: "Read *Moby-Dick*—and then read it again."²⁰

Endnotes

1. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick, or The White Whale* (Washington Square Press, 1999); this is my source for all quotations from the novel.
2. Laurie Robertson-Lorant, *Herman Melville* (Clarkson-Potter Pub., 1996), 19.
3. Ibid, 34.
4. Herman Hanko, "Andrew Melville, Father of Presbyterianism," *Portraits of Faithful Saints* (The Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1999), accessed http://www.reformedspokane.org/Doctrine_pages/Doctrine_Intro/Portraits%20of%20Faithful%20Saints/ortraits37.html
5. <http://reformationhistory.org/andrewmelville.html>
6. "About the Seamen's Bethel | New Bedford Whaling Museum," <https://www.whalingmuseum.org/about-seamens-bethel>
7. Nathalia Wright, *Melville's Use of the Bible* (Octagon Books, 1949. Rpt. 1969), 27.
8. Ibid, 11.
9. Merrill R Davis and William H. Gilman, *The Letters of Herman Melville* (Yale UP, 1960), 130.
10. J. A. Ward, "The Function of the Cetological Chapters in *Moby-Dick*," *American Literature* 28 (1956): 180.
11. Ibid, 173.
12. Exodus 23:33, *Holy Bible, New International Version*. Zondervan's, 1984.
13. Job 41: 7-8, *NIV*, 1984.
14. Carol Newsom, *The Book of Job* (Oxford UP, 2003), 261.
15. Bruce Lockerbie, "The Greatest Sermon in Literature." *Christianity Today*, Nov. 8, 1963: 9.

16. D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (Doubleday, 1923), 240.
17. Laurie Robertson-Lorant, *Herman Melville* (Clarkson-Potter Pub., 1996), 262.
18. Christopher Sten, *The Weaver God – He Weaves: Melville and the Poetics of the Novel* (Kent State UP, 1996), 216.
19. Quoted in James Chapman, *Ontological Heroics: Melville's Dialectic of Being and Consciousness*. Master's Thesis. (Simon Fraser University, 1984), 9.
20. Read R. C. Sproul's article at www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/r-c-sproul-a-novel-every-christian-should-consider-reading/