

Moby-Dick and Buried St. John

Mary BLISH RSCJ

***Moby-Dick* and Buried St. John** _____

It is a commonplace of scholarship on *Moby-Dick* by Herman Melville to assume agreement that the Bible was one of the important influences on that great fiction. However, most studies focus on the Old Testament, particularly the books of Job and Jonah. This paper explores overt and covert references to the New Testament, actually announced in the first chapter and emphasized in the important chapter on "The Whiteness of the Whale." This reading shows that Melville's skillful use of reversals, a device that underlies the meaning throughout the book, relies heavily on the Gospel of John especially in the great final chapters.

Many scholars have already demonstrated how important are the Old Testament stories of Job and Jonah to any study of *Moby-Dick*. But they generally use the term 'Melville and the Bible' to describe studies of Old Testament references only.¹⁾ However, in "Loomings" a seemingly offhand remark by Ishmael about being ordered to sweep the decks provides the clue to the values underlying the novel: Ishmael says, "What does that indignity amount to, weighed . . . in the scales of the New Testament."²⁾ Following are covert allusions to several New Testament passages: money as the root of all evil (1 Tim 6: 10), the difficulty a rich man will have to enter heaven (Mt 19: 23-24; Lk 18: 24-25), the equality of all persons (Gal 3: 28; Col 3: 10-11), and the inversion by which the first shall be last the last first (Mt 19: 30, 20: 16; Lk 13:30). Here I will first explore a few of the New Testament allusions that are highly significant and then focus on the allusions to the Gospel of St. John, showing how Melville's reversal or ironic restatement of New Testament passages adds an important subtext to the fiction.

Ishmael says in the first chapter that because Narcissus could not grasp the phantom of life he fell into the water and was drowned, an echo of "whosoever will save his life shall lose it" (Mt 16: 25; Mk 8: 35; Lk 9: 24; Jn 12: 25);³⁾ in attempting to grasp he wants to hold, to save, to control, and it is this which leads to his death (5). Just three paragraphs later Ishmael refers to weighing matters in the scales of the New Testament, so this early use of covert New Testament allusions introduces yet another strand in the "dense imaginative coherence" Harrison Hayford described.⁴⁾ Nathalia Wright has specified why Melville's use of biblical allusion is effective. She says that between his secular or realistic material and the biblical allusions there is "a permanent gulf, to be crossed by the imagination." This gulf enables "an older, a weightier, and often a supernatural theme to be suggested."⁵⁾ As in this first chapter, the context is sometimes humorous, but the meanings are profound.

This strand is picked up again in Chapter Two when Ishmael enters

the church of the Negro congregation and discovers that "the preacher's text was about the blackness of darkness," and thus based on Jude 13 (10). However, in the chapters immediately following there are so many overt references to the Old Testament, to Job and Jonah, to Ahab, Peleg, Bildad, and Elijah, that the New Testament allusions are usually passed over.

At the end of Chapter 9, "The Sermon," Father Mapple's "other lesson" is the passage of Woes and Delights which reverses the blessings and woes of the Beatitudes as presented in Luke (6: 20-26) and climaxes with "top-gallant delight is to him who acknowledges no law or lord, but the Lord his God, and is only a patriot to heaven" (48). We know the importance of the Sermon on the Mount to Melville from *The Melville Log* and from *White Jacket*, where it stands as the touchstone of Christianity.⁶⁾ In contrast, Ahab is early described as alien to the census of Christendom (153), and Harold Bloom notes that Ahab's final speech uses language which recalls Father Mapple's sermon: it moves with "equal but antithetical intensity," proceeding "from 'unsundered spires of mine' through 'my topmost greatness lies in my topmost grief' to end in 'top this one piled comber of my death'".⁷⁾

"A Bosom Friend," immediately following "The Sermon," shows Ishmael conducting himself with Queequeg in accordance with the New Testament injunction: "And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise" (51-52; Mt 7: 12, Lk 6: 31); in response Queequeg shares his thirty pieces of silver with his new friend Ishmael, reminding us of and reversing Judas's betrayal of Jesus for thirty pieces of silver (51; Mt 27: 3)⁸⁾. Given this context, I see the fear that Christians have unfitted Queequeg for the pure throne of his native island (56) not as Ishmael's summary judgment on the Christian message, but as his ironic comment on the way many Christians live. This reading is confirmed by Ishmael's conclusion, after meeting the Bible-reading but greedy Quaker, Bildad, that for the man of the world religion is one thing and practical life another, a stance Bildad illustrates by quoting Matthew on not laying up treasure on earth (6: 19-21) while he tries to allot the 777th lay or part of the voyage to the new recruit, an arrangement even the crusty

Peleg rejects (77-78). As these owner-agents leave the ship after piloting it to open water, Bildad admonishes them not to whale on Sundays, but also not to miss a chance (105), again illustrating the dilemma of one who proposes to be both religious and a worldly success.⁹ In the event, the crew of the Pequod follow the second part of Bildad's instruction, as shown in Chapter 67: "It was a Saturday night, and such a Sabbath as followed! Ex officio professors of Sabbath breaking are all whalemens. The ivory Pequod was turned into what seemed a shamble; every sailor a butcher. You would have thought we were offering up ten thousand red oxen to the sea gods" (303).

Chapter 41, "Moby-Dick," includes echoes of a verse in the letter of James: "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights" (1: 17). This is transformed into "All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in *Moby-Dick*" (184). This is followed by a reference to the madness of Ahab "in his hidden self" (185), recalling Paul's prayer that the Father "would grant you to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith" (Eph 3: 16-17).

In "The Whiteness of the Whale" the paragraph on white as having a special power culminates with: "in the Vision of St. John white robes are given to the redeemed, and the four-and-twenty elders stand clothed in white before the great white throne, and the Holy One that sitteth there white like wool" (189). This reference would seem to be written from memory as the various elements are from scattered parts of the Book of Revelation, the Apocalypse: white robes for the redeemed are mentioned in 3: 4-5, 6: 11 and 7: 9 and 14; elders clothed in white in 4: 4; the white throne appears in 20: 11, and the one who is white like wool in 1: 14. The "pallid horse" on which death rides when "personified by the evangelist" is also from the Book of Revelation (192; 6: 8).

Other Scriptural allusions in the middle chapters of the novel are

chiefly to the Old Testament. However, in Chapter 96, "The Try-Works," there is a second reference to "the blackness of darkness" (Jude 13); in Chapter Two this was the text being expounded in the Negro Church Ishmael inadvertently entered, but here it "seemed the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander's soul." Ishmael at the helm, surrounded by this darkness, experienced an "unnatural hallucination of the night." He anticipates the morrow with its natural sun, referring to it as "the only true lamp," echoing Revelation (21: 23 and 22: 5). At the end of this chapter, when Ishmael has realized that in following Ahab he has been fatally wrong, he says, "The truest of all men was the Man of Sorrows" (423-24). This is not the first allusion to the Jesus of Calvary. When Ahab first appeared in the novel, he looked "like a man cut away from the stake" (123), and appeared as one "with a crucifixion in his face; in all the nameless regal overbearing dignity of some mighty woe" (124). Ahab confirms this connection himself: in his first soliloquy he questions: "Is, then, the crown too heavy that I wear? this Iron Crown of Lombardy" (167), which was said to contain a nail from the Cross.¹⁰ Ahab's question is real, and in fact he is not able to bear his affliction with the humility and compassion of the true Man of Sorrows. These with the passages explored in the next section of this paper support the interpretation of many that Ahab is an anti-Christ figure.

Allusions to the New Testament increase in number and are clearly focused in the last chapters. At the beginning of Chapter III, "The Pacific," which opens the final phase of the quest for the white whale, Ishmael refers to "the buried Evangelist St. John" (482). In view of what follows, the implication is not that John is buried under the sod of Ephesus as referred to in the passage, but that his message is buried under neglect and ignorance of its importance; and also that it is buried in the final chapters of the novel, chiefly in blasphemous reversals which clearly echo Biblical language. The story Stubb earlier tells Flask about the Devil wanting to use a certain John foreshadows this (325-26).

Shortly Ahab has his special harpoon forged, and as he tempers it with blood from the three harpooners (all men of color) he utters the

sacrilegious, "Ego non baptizo in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli" (489), perverting the command of the risen Jesus to go forth to all nations and baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Mt 28: 19); since baptism is a concept that does not appear in the Old Testament, Melville is making a New Testament allusion here. Thus is the stage set for the crucial last chase of the Pequod: Ahab—seen within a New Testament frame of reference, particularly John's Gospel and its message of love—pursuing a dumb brute.

This frame is confirmed in Chapter 117 when Fedallah rehearses the three pledges that assure Ahab he will be successful. We are reminded here not only of the witches' prophecies in *Macbeth* but also of the Old Testament which distinguishes true prophets of judgment from court prophets who, like Fedallah, were personal prophets who reassured the king with comfortable words.¹¹ Fedallah's assurance, "Though it come to the last, I shall still go before thee thy pilot" (499), is an ironic allusion to John 14: 2 where Jesus assures the Apostles that he is going to prepare a place for them.

"The Quadrant" opens by comparing the beauty of the Japanese sea with "the insufferable splendours of God's throne" (500; Rev. 21). Against this peaceful background Ahab curses and destroys the quadrant, his instrument for determining his position (501). A few pages later, with his foot on the kneeling Parsee, Fedallah, Ahab begins his theological bombast by looking up to heaven and declaring, "I now know that thy right worship is defiance" (507), thus scorning Father Mapple's top-gal-lant delight of acknowledging the Lord God. This contrasts with Jesus telling the non-Jewish Samaritan woman that "the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth" (Jn 4: 23).

In Chapter 127, Ahab asks, "Faith? What's that?" (528), just as Pilate asked Jesus, "What is truth?" (Jn 18: 38). And the chapter ends with Ahab studying Queequeg's coffin, carved with a complete theory of the heavens and the earth and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth (480) and now used as a lifebuoy. He muses: "Here now's the very dreaded symbol of grim death, by a mere hap, made the expressive sign of

the help and hope of most endangered life. A life-buoy of a coffin! Does it go further? Can it be that in some spiritual sense the coffin is, after all, but an immortality preserver! I'll think of that. But no. So far gone am I in the dark side of earth, that its other side, the theoretic bright one, seems but uncertain twilight to me" (528). Had he continued that line of thought, Ahab would have remembered that the Christian cross is both a reminder of suffering and death and a sign of salvation.¹²⁾

Then the Pequod meets the Rachel whose captain is searching for his lost twelve-year-old son, a situation reminiscent both of the grief of his parents when the twelve-year-old Jesus remained in the temple and of the Good Shepherd searching for a single lost sheep (531-32; Lk 2:42-50; 15: 1-7). But Ahab explicitly refuses to do unto others as he would want others to do unto him (Mt 7:12, Lk 6:31), reversing the actions of both Ishmael and Queequeg in earlier chapters. Instead he says, "may I forgive myself" (532), a blasphemous parody of Jesus's prayer: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Lk 23: 34).¹³⁾

In "The Cabin" we find the beginning of a series of echoes of the Farewell Discourse in John, Chapters 13-17, in which Ahab's use of New Testament language reverses the message of love.¹⁴⁾ Ahab tells Pip he cannot follow him now (534), just as Jesus told his apostles the same thing (Jn 13: 33). As Jesus says "the time cometh" (Jn 16: 2), so Ahab says "The hour is coming," to indicate that he must abandon Pip in order to continue his quest. And Pip responds, as Peter did, that he would go with Ahab, that he would never desert him (534; Jn 13: 37). In the chapter describing the second day of the chase, an epic simile shows that Father Mapple's injunction to acknowledge no law or lord but the Lord God has not only been ignored but also perverted; the chapter concludes: "all the individualities of the crew, this man's valor, that man's fear; guilt and guiltlessness, all vanities were welded into oneness, and were all directed to that fatal goal which Ahab their one lord and keel did point to" (557). In the context this is a perverted echo of Jesus's prayer: "Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are" (Jn 17: 11). During the chase on this day,

the boats are upset and Ahab's ivory leg is snapped off. His response to Stubb's concern, "But even with a broken bone, old Ahab is untouched" (560), alludes to Jn 19: 36: "For these things were done, that the scripture should be fulfilled, A bone of him shall not be broken."

At the conclusion of this chapter Ahab reverses the action of Jesus who protects his Apostles in the Garden by saying to the soldiers, "If therefore ye seek me let these go their way" (Jn 18: 8). Ahab, rather, refuses to listen to Starbuck's plea "In Jesus' name" to end the chase; instead he reacts as if Starbuck were Peter tempting Jesus to avoid His passion and death (Mt 16: 23), and he equates his monomaniac quest for *Moby-Dick* as "the Fates' lieutenant" with Jesus's obedience to His Father (561; Jn 18: 11). Further New Testament echoes emphasize this movement of the fiction. Jesus predicted his Apostles' desertion and both accepted and forgave their weakness (Jn 16: 31-33), but Ahab seeks to deceive his crew to keep them as instruments of his mania. This is manifest in the final chapter where Ahab threatens to harpoon any crewman who deserts him (568), rather than he as Captain trying to protect them, although on an earlier voyage, as Peleg relates, "Life was what Captain Ahab and I was thinking of; and how to save all hands—how to rig juries—how to get into the nearest port. . ." (90).¹⁵

Finally, Ahab expends his last breath in hatred of the white whale, knowing that all may be dragged down with him, the exact opposite of the situation described in the introduction to the Farewell Discourse: Jesus "having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end" (Jn 13: 1). This is the weight of Jesus's final word: "It is finished" (Jn 19: 30). Ahab's final words: ". . . from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee. Sink all coffins and all hearses to one common pool! and since neither can be mine, let me then tow to pieces, while still chasing thee, though tied to thee, thou damned whale! Thus, I give up the spear!" are uttered as he attacks the white whale in rage (571-72); whereas Jesus, having forgiven those who nailed him to the cross (Lk 23: 34), had his own side pierced with a lance after he died (Jn 19: 34).

Ishmael's last view of the Pequod is of the sky-hawk being nailed to the tip of the mainmast — "a living part of heaven" (572), reminiscent of the eagle in flight which is the symbol of John in Christian tradition (Rev. 4: 7). It supplants the now awash doubloon with which Ahab had sealed the crew's dedication to his mad quest, confirming Ishmael's original wry comment on money as "the root of all earthly ills" (6). Thus from first chapter to last, by allusion and echo, key actions of the fiction are weighed in the scales of the New Testament.

The meaning of the Vision of St. John in "The Whiteness of the Whale" at first seems specific to that Chapter; then an allusion can be seen in the reference to "the only true lamp" in "The Try-Works" (424-25; Rev 21: 23, 22: 5), and the meaning is broadened when the implications of "buried St. John" are followed. In the light of the New Testament allusions and echoes in the body of the novel as well as the elements of an apocalypse, the Epilogue of Melville's great fiction (573) takes on new dimensions. Its leading quotation: "And I only am escaped alone to tell thee" is the word of the four messengers bringing Job news of the calamities that have befallen his household (Job 1:15-19). Job was left to find meaning in the events, as the fictional Ishmael himself was left; and now Melville leaves us, his readers, to interpret what has happened. Let me try.

Ishmael is saved by the coffin life-buoy which, as shown above, is analogous to the Christian cross, the symbol of God's love for mankind.¹⁶⁾ Ishmael and Queequeg had reached out to one another in friendship — white man and colored man — as Pip had appealed to Ahab by his innocence and need — black man to white man.¹⁷⁾ Ahab abandoned Pip. But Queequeg earlier in the novel had twice risked his life to save men from drowning and thus lived the Gospel ideal articulated in the Farewell Discourse: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (Jn 15: 13). And now Ishmael is rescued by means of the coffin on which are carved the very meanings that were tattooed on Queequeg's person, "a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth" ; the passage goes on to

say that these mysteries would be destroyed with the destruction of Queequeg's body and thus would "be unsolved to the end" (480-81), an ironic indication that only the reader, rather than Ishmael the narrator, can come to an understanding of this fiction.

As Ishmael with the coffin life-buoy floats on the lap of a benign nature whose beauty Ahab had refused to embrace during the three days of the chase, a ship comes to his rescue—the Rachel, not adhering to a fixed goal as the Pequod had under Ahab, but "devious cruising" in the hope of finding some sign of its missing whaleboat. At this point the Rachel is a true community, all on board united in the search for the Captain's son and willing to forego several days of whaling and possible profit in order to find the boy. Instead they come upon Ishmael and pick him up—a last echo of John, where the dying Jesus gives the Apostle John to His mother as son in His place (19: 26-27). This scene is in strong contrast to the earlier one of Ahab who, in refusing help to the Rachel and continuing his pursuit of the whale even to the death of his crew, plays the role of Herod in the murder of the innocents, fulfilling the prophecy that Rachel would weep for her children (Jer 31: 15, Mt 2:17-18).

Ishmael is the one survivor. He is one who did the truth as he saw it (Jn 3: 21) from his first meeting with Queequeg in New Bedford, who left "all his deliverance to God," as Father Mapple admonished at the end of the first part of his sermon (46). He is one who faced the reality of the world as he found it, however rough, rather than reaching to grasp the phantom of life. And in the course of the voyage he came to understand the diabolic malice which Ahab represented.

At the end of this novel, the mood of fiction has been so transcended that the appropriate descriptive is apocalyptic. However, Melville, in the Epilogue, does not settle for an eschatological hope, outside of history. He creates a situation in which the saving event can be within history, within the conduct of man to man, man's humanity to man, weighed in the scales of the New Testament.

Notes

- 1) See Mark Heidmann, *Melville and the Bible: Leading Themes in the Marginalia and Major Fiction, 1850-56* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1979). His appendices give the extensive markings and annotations which Melville made in his copies of the Bible and New Testament, showing his familiarity with the New Testament as well as the Old Testament. See also Heidmann, "The Markings in Melville's Bibles" in Joel Myerson, ed., *Studies in the American Renaissance 1990* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1990): 341-398; William Braswell, *Melville's Religious Thought* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1943); Nathalia Wright, *Melville's Use of the Bible* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1949). Wright's study is considered authoritative but its focus is primarily on the Old Testament.
- 2) Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick: or The Whale*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern Univ. Press and the Newberry Library, 1988), 6. All subsequent references noted parenthetically in the text.
- 3) The Holy Bible: Authorized King James Version. All subsequent references noted parenthetically in the text.
- 4) See Harrison Hayford, "Loomings': Yarns and Figures in the Fabric" in Robert J. DeMott and Sanford E. Marovitz, eds., *Artful Thunder: Versions of the Romantic Tradition in American Literature in Honor of Howard P. Vincent* (Kent State Univ. Press, 1975), 119-37.
- 5) Wright, 42.
- 6) Jay Leyda, *The Melville Log: A Documentary Life of Herman Melville 1819-1890* (New York: Gordian, 1969), e. g. 288-89 where Melville refers to Shakespeare as "full of sermons-on-the-mount, and gentle, aye, almost as Jesus" ; and Herman Melville, *White Jacket: or The World in a Man-of-War*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern Univ. Press and the Newberry Library, 1970), 293 and 314. Kris Lackey, "The Holy Guide-Book and the Sword of the Lord: How Melville Used the Bible in *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*," *Studies in the Novel* 17 (1985): 241-54, studies the use of Biblical allusion by the narrators of these books completed just prior to *Moby-Dick*.
- 7) Introduction to *Modern Critical Views: Herman Melville*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 6.
- 8) Noted also by Robert K. Martin, *Hero, Captain, and Stranger: Male Friendship, Social Critique, and Literary Form in the Sea Novels of Herman Melville* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1986), 78.
- 9) Martin, 88.
- 10) Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick: An Authoritative Text, Reviews and Letters by Melville, Analogues and Sources, Criticism*, ed. Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker (New York: Norton, 1967), 147n. 1.

- 11) Heidmann, 84n.
- 12) Concerning this section, William Rosenfeld works out an extended parallel between Ahab's conversation with the Carpenter and the visit of Nicodemus to Jesus (Jn 3) to show Ahab's rejection of rebirth through faith, but he does not pick up the allusion to the cross. "Uncertain Faith: Queequeg's Coffin and Melville's Use of the Bible," *Texas Studies in Language and Literature* 7 (1966): 317-27.
- 13) Chapters 127 and 128 with their allusions to the cross and the shepherd respectively echo remarks in Chapter 1: the paragraph which concludes with the reference to Narcissus and the tormenting image which is "the key to it all," begins with a description of a painting in which the artist seems to suggest that a hermit and a crucifix are within his hollow trees. But the artist's enchantment is declared vain "unless the shepherd's eyes were fixed upon the magic stream before him" (4-5). The many allusions to the Gospel of John in the later chapters tempt one to see here an echo of "He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water" (Jn 7: 38) or, perhaps more appropriately in view of the conclusion of the fiction, "And he showed me a pure river of water of life" from the final chapter of Revelation (22: 1).
- 14) Jack Cook says that the scene in "The Cabin" represents "a reverse-image of the Last Supper," that soon "a reverse image of Gethsemane will be played out. . . in 'The Symphony,'" and that "then the final Passion and Death of the Antichrist in the three-day chase" will follow. *The Face of Falsehood: The Key to "Moby-Dick" and "Mosses From An Old Manse"* (Owego, New York: N. p., 182.) However, his development of these ideas differs markedly from the presentation in this paper.
- 15) These jury-masts probably are related to the earlier mention of masts "cut somewhere on the coast of Japan" (169); how that could have happened while Japan was still "double-bolted" (110) and "impenetrable" (483) is explained in my "Melville and the Sea Drifters of Japan," *Melville Society Extracts* 76 (1989): 14-16.
- 16) Appropriately, the Carpenter had provided the coffin life-buoy with thirty life-lines so that all hands could be saved by it (431). The connection between the carved coffin life-buoy and Ishmael's rescue by it is foreshadowed in *White Jacket* where Melville recounted the sailors' superstition that anyone who had a crucifix tattooed on all four limbs would not be attacked by sharks if he fell into the sea (171). Ishmael's rescue provides an ironic complement to his cry of terror when Queequeg flourished a lighted tomahawk at him in their dark-ened room at the Spouter Inn: "Coffin! Angels! save me!" (23). Noted by Harold Beaver, ed. Commentary. *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* by Herman Melville (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 967 n. 687.
- 17) The importance of this has been shown by Edward S. Grejda, *The Common*

Continent of Men: Racial Equality in the Writings of Herman Melville (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1974): 111-12; by Joyce Sparer Adler, *War in Melville's Imagination* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1981): 58; and especially by Carolyn L. Karcher, *Shadow over the Promised Land: Slavery, Race, and Violence in Melville's America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1980): 72-77.