MELVILLE'S INVERSION OF JONAH IN *MOBY-DICK*

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The purpose of this paper is to show how Melville, in Father Mapple's sermon in *Moby-Dick*, communicated what he regarded to be a wicked teaching. In a famous letter to Hawthorne Melville had claimed, in reference to *Moby-Dick*, to "have written a wicked book" while "feel(ing) spotless as a lamb." In that letter he wrote that his book had been broiled in hell-fire and baptized secretly not in the name of God but in the name of the Devil.[1] Near the end of *Moby-Dick*, Melville put these very words in Captain Ahab's mouth when the captain of the *Pequod* "baptizes" his harpoon in the blood of his three pagan harpooners.[2] It is the thesis of this paper that Mapple's sermon is an epitome of Melville's "wicked" teaching in *Moby-Dick*. I will endeavor to show how Melville broiled Mapple's sermon in hell-fire and baptized it in pagan blood.

In regard to Mapple's sermon,[3] Melville sought to promote a wicked teaching wickedly by using a biblical text (the book of Jonah) to set forth what is perhaps the

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[1]Jay Leyda, *The Melville Log A Documentary of Herman Melville*, 2 vols (New York Cordian Press, 1969), I, p 415

[2]All page references in *Moby-Dick* will be from the Norton Critical Edition of *Moby-Dick* (New York W W Norton and Co , 1967), p 404

[3]Critics have been unable to agree on a wide variety of questions on the role and function of Mapple's sermon Critical analysis of the sermon pivots around two inter-related questions 1 Is Mapple's sermon a spiritual yardstick with which to measure Ahab? and 2 If Ahab and Mapple represent antithetical positions, then which one represents Melville's own viewpoint? While, eg , interpreters like Leonard Thompson in *Melville's Quarrel with God* (Princeton University Press, 1952), pp 154f , 163f , 182, 419, Martin Pops in *The Melville Archetype* (Kent State University Press, 1970), p 128, Newton Arvin in *Herman Melville* (New York William Sloan Associates, 1950), pp 179f , Nicholas Canaday, Jr in *Melville and Authority* (Gainesville University of Florida Press, 1968), pp 50f , 55, and Harry Slochower in "*Moby-Dick* The Myth of Democratic Expectancy," *Discussions of Moby-Dick*, ed by Milton R Stern (Boston D C Heath and Co , 1960), pp 49f agree that Ahab and Mapple represent divergent viewpoints, they do not agree what it is that Mapple's sermon sets forth or whether Mapple himself is a Melvillean spokesman or one in a long line of Melville's hypocritical clergymen who point the way with the back of his neck Then there are scholars like Nathalia Wright in *Melville's Use of the Bible* (Durham Duke University Press, 1949), pp 79ff , 82f , 84, 92f , 96, Alan Lebowitz in *Progress Into Silence* (Bloomington Indiana University Press, 1970), p 138, William Braswell in Melville's *Religious Thought* (New York Octagon Books, 1973), pp 50, 70, John Seelye in *Melville The Ironic Diagram* (Evanston Northwestern University Press, 1970), pp 62, 70f , Tyrus Hillway in *Herman Melville* (New York The Literary Guild of America, 1929), p 159, Ray Browne in *Melville's Drive to Humanism* (Lafayette Purdue University Studies, 1971), pp 50ff , 70, Henry Murray in *"In Nomine Diaboli," Discussions of Moby-Dick, op cit* , p 29 and R E Waters in "Melville's Isolotoes," *ibid* , p 110 who discern elemental accord between Mapple and Ahab but who nonetheless cannot agree on what is the sermon's role and function in *Moby-Dick*

anti-biblical teaching par excellence. For as we will see, both the sermon itself and the context in which Melville placed it posit a paganism which affirms that man is at the mercy of forces either alien or indifferent to man.

Mapple delivers his sermon in the ninth chapter of *Moby-Dick*, a book of 135 chapters. Preceding these 135 chapters is an etymology of the word whale and a series of extracts from a variety of sources (beginning with five from the Bible) having to do with whales. Prior to the sermon, are two chapters featuring descriptions of the chapel, the congregants, and Mapple himself.

The depiction of the chapel and the congregants is dominated by the lurking presence of death. In the chapel small clusters of mourners eye marble tablets on which are inscribed names of whalers lost at sea. Ishmael, the narrator of *Moby-Dick*, is almost unmanned by despair over the dead and over the fact of death itself. He wonders ". . . in what eternal, unstirring paralysis, and deadly, hopeless trance, yet lies antique Adam who died sixty round centuries ago; how is it that we still refuse to be comforted for those who we nevertheless maintain are dwelling in unspeakable bliss. . . ."[4]

Every aspect of the chapel — even the placement of the Bible — serves only to deepen Ishmael's gloom. Ishmael observes that the Bible rests on a "a projecting piece of scroll work, fashioned after a ship's fiddle headed beak." He then discerns a metaphorical connection between a ship at sea and Mapple's calling:

> What could be more full of meaning? . . . for the pulpit is ever the earth's foremost part; all the rest comes in its rear; the pulpit leads the world. From thence it is the storm of God's quick wrath is first descried, and the bow must bear the earliest brunt. From thence it is the God of breezes fair or foul is first invoked for favorable winds. . . .[5]

In the very first chapter Ishamel had employed the same metaphor when giving his reasons for shipping out as a common sailor:

> . . . I always go to sea as a sailor, because of the wholesome exercise and pure air of the forecastle deck. For as in this world, head winds are more prevalent than winds from astern (that is, if you never violate the Pythagorean maxim [to avoid beans]), so for the most part the Commodore on the quarter-deck gets his atmosphere at second hand from the sailors on the forecastle.[6]

Ishmael's second rendering of the metaphor completes and thereby explicates the first. In the first, Ishmael, as the prototypical sailor, is first to breathe God's "pure air" and then passes it on to the Commodore on the quarter deck. In the second, we learn that God's wind is for the most part foul, consisting largely of His wrath.

[4] *Moby-Dick*, p. 41.

[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 43f.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

Ishmael's renderings of this metaphor suggest that the story he is passing on will be, for the most part, unpleasant ("I have written a wicked book."). Moreover, the metaphor doubles back to the very beginning of the story and anticipates much that is to come, including Mapple's sermon. Going back to the story's beginnings it underlines the spiritual morbidity which prompted Ishmael to ship out on a whaler.[7] And pointing forward to Mapple's sermon it presages Mapple's extraordinary biblical exegesis, the hidden teaching ("and I feel spotless as a lamb") whose proposition it is that man must continually fight a foul headwind from God.

The wider context which circumscribes Ishmael's experience in the chapel has to do with his deepening friendship with Queequeg, a pagan harpooner. Initially dismayed at having to share a bed with Queequeg Ishmael is increasingly drawn to the savage, and concludes that it is ". . .better (to) sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian."[8]

After the episode in Mapple's chapel, Ishmael scrutinizes Queequeg and what he discerns — the savage's decency and confidence — mollifies his despair: "No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world. This soothing savage had redeemed it."[9] In no uncertain terms Ishmael notes that his new pagan friend has done for him what Christians and Christianity had been unable to do: "I'll try a pagan friend . . . since Christian kindness has proved but hollow courtesy."[10]

Giving Ishmael an embalmed head and half of his money as tokens of his friendship, Queequeg promises to protect Ishmael even at the risk of his own life. The two friends then join in worship before Queequeg's black wooden idol. Here is how Ishmael justifies his participation in an idolatrous rite:

> I was a good Christian; born and bred in the bosom of the infallible Presbyterian Church. How then could I unite with this wild idolater in worshipping his piece of wood? But what is worship? thought I. Do you suppose now, Ishmael, that the magnanimous God of heaven and earth — pagans and all included — can possibly be jealous of an insignificant bit of black wood? Impossible! But what is worship? to do the will of God — *that* is worship. And what is the will of God? — to do to any fellow man what I would have my fellow man to do to me — *that* is the will of God. Now, Queequeg is my fellow man. And what do I wish that this Queequeg would do to me? Why, unite with me in

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 12.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 30.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 51.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 53.

my particular Presbyterian form of worship. Consequently, I must unite with him in his; ergo, I must turn idolater.[11]

But is Ishmael a "good Christian"? More specifically, does he believe the Presbyterian Chruch to be "infallible"? Later in his story, in response to one Bildad's query about Ishmael's church membership — a Bildad whose "Christian" piety never interferes with his profiteering, a Bildad who is only too willing to consign the noble Queequeg to eternal damnation, until, that is, he sees the pagan's astonishing ability as a harpooner — Ishmael asserts that he belongs to the:

> First Congregational Church . . . the same Catholic Chruch of which you and I . . . and Queequeg here, and all of us, and every mother's son and soul of us belong; the great and everlasting First Congregation of the whole worshipping world; we all belong to that . . . in *that* we all join hands.[12]

Ishmael's declaration here is simply a variation on his rationalization for joining with Queequeg in worship, a rationalization which mocks the exclusive claim of any given creed.

But Ishmael goes further. He employs what is perhaps the most famous text in the New Testament (the so-called Golden Rule in the Sermon on the Mount) to rebut and repudiate two of the most famous texts in the Hebrew Bible (Exod. 20:5-6; Exod. 34:6ff).[13] Recall now Ishmael's words:

> Do you suppose now . . . that the magnanimous God of heaven and earth — pagans and all included — can possibly be jealous of an insignificant bit of black wood?

The biblical contexts of the Decalogue and the worship of the Golden Calf reveal that the biblical God not only does not regard idolatry as insignificant, but that it is precisely in regard to idolatry that this God is "jealous":

> You shall have no other gods to set before Me. You shall not make a carved image for yourself nor the likeness of anything in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous god. I punish the children for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me. But I keep faith for thousands with those who love Me and keep My commandments (Exod. 20:5-6).

The last two sentences of this passage constitute an affirmation of the biblical God's magnanimity in the contrast of the long-lasting reward for good deeds and

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 54.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 83.

[13] Matthew 5:3-7:27, in particular 7:12. The Decalogue is recorded in Exod. 2 and Deut. 5

the short-term punishment for bad deeds. However, Ishmael's characterization of God as "magnanimous" bespeaks neither graciousness nor compassion but rather an indifference to the biblical cardinal sin, idolatry. Analogously, it is surely with malice prepense that several pages after Ishmael has characterized God as "magnanimous," he is moved to wonder at the "magnanimity of the sea which will permit no records."[14]

We will see later what qualities Ishmael attributes to the "magnanimous" sea and we will see how Mapple treats the prophet Jonah's own reference to the Decalogue context which defines the biblical God's magnanimity. For the present, however, let us restate the point at which we have arrived. It is the "magnanimous" sea which "permits no records" which dominates the mood in Mapple's chapel before the sermon; and in both the prelude and the postlude to Mapple's sermon it is the pagan Queequeg who is glorified. We turn now to the sermon itself.

Mapple begins his sermon on the book of Jonah by appearing to quote part of the last verse of the first chapter: "And God had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah."[15] Strangely, Mapple substitutes "God" for the "Lord" even though Ishmael had noted that Mapple had turned in his Bible to Jonah and is apparently reading from the biblical text. Since the same verse appears in the Extracts in its correct form,[16] it seems reasonable to conclude that Mapple is deliberatley emending the biblical text. In fact, Mapple's minor substitution anticipates the good Father's treatment of Jonah which, in effect, completley re-works that biblical book.

As Mapple tells it, the book of Jonah is a story of hard-heartedness, fear, punishment, repentance, and "finally the deliverance and joy of Jonah." It is true that the prophet Jonah exhibits hard-heartedness as he disobeys God by heading west by sea rather than east by land. And it may be true that Jonah is afraid in the belly of the great fish, although the psalm he utters there (ch. 2) contains not a hint of fear. Of interest is the fact that that pagan sailors' fear and repentance is described explicitly (1:7-16), while there is not a shred of evidence to indicate that Jonah repents. In fact, the fourth and final chapter of Jonah records not the "deliverance and joy of Jonah" but rather the prophet's deep disgruntlement that God has magnanimously spared Ninevah. Any attempt to understand Mapple's sermon must come to terms with the fact that he never once refers to Jonah's fourth and climactic chapter.

As noted, the verse which Mapple misquotes appears correctly in the Extracts in the company of biblical citations from the books of Genesis, Job, Psalms, and Isaiah. These five biblical selections, which begin the Extracts, extol the power of

[14] *Moby-Dick*, p. 60.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 45.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 2.

a benevolent God, a power which renders helpless even the great monsters of the deep. In the book of Jonah, for instance, the great fish signifies both God's power and His benignant concern for man. Power in that the great fish obeys its directives from Deity and concern in that a way must be found to get Jonah to Nineveh in order to emphasize what is at issue in the book: the magnanimity of God as contrasted to the overweening pride of one of His spokesmen. Melville's references to Isaiah, Psalms, and Genesis follow the same format: the exaltation of the power of God which He disposes for the good of man.

These opening selections from the Bible are succeeded by more than seventy excerpts from a wide variety of sources which completely change the mood of the Extracts. Increasingly, the Extracts emphasize not the benevolent power of God but the destructive power of the whale whose habitat is the even more powerful insensate ocean. Consider, for example, the fact that while the first extract reads "And God created great whales," the last, a whale song, goes:

> Oh, the rare old Whale, mid storm and gale
> In his ocean home will be
> A giant in might, where might is right,
> And King of the boundless sea.

The Extracts, thus, begin by emphasizing an orderly continuity made possible by a gracious creator God, and end by underlining a discontinuity which is typified by the whale and the "boundness sea."

The reference in the whale song to the "boundless sea" is particularly noteworthy because both Gen. 1 and Psalm 104 (the first and fourth excerpts) state clearly that God had gathered together the waters beneath the domed Heaven and confined them into clearly bounded areas. Thus Gen. 1:9 reads: "God said, 'Let the water below the sky be gathered into one area, that the dry land may appear' "; and in the ninth verse of Psalm 104 the poet declares: "You (God) set bounds they (the primal waters) must not pass, so that they never again cover the earth."

The whale song which ends the Extracts has its counterpart in the last sentence of the last chapter of *Moby-Dick*: "Now small fowls flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf; a sullen white surf beat against its steep sides; then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago," which is to say, at the time of the flood.[17] Real and ultimate power is thus attributed not to the magnanimous biblical God but to the insensible primordial waters. Ishmael's characterization of the sea as magnanimous is supremely ironic. To understand the depth of his irony one need only consider the disquisition which Ishmael delivers on the sea at the virtual midpoint of *Moby-Dick*. Ishmael describes the sea's mindless rapaciousness:

> However baby man may brag of his science and skill, and however much, in a flattering future, that science and skill may augment, yet forever and ever, to the crack of doom, the sea will insult and murder

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 469.

> him. . . . Yea foolish mortals, Noah's flood is not yet subdued; two thirds of the fair world it yet covers . . . no mercy, no power, but its own controls it. Panting and snorting like a battle steed that has lost its rider, the masterless ocean overruns the globe.[18]

And spaced throughout *Moby-Dick* are references to the sea which depict it as "sharkfish" and "murderous."[19] In *Moby-Dick* the sea is an uncontrolled and uncontrollable arena in which, as the last extract proclaims, only might is right.

The book of Jonah, by contrast, undermines the thesis that might is right by showing the great capital city (Nineveh) of the most powerful nation then on earth (Assyria) brought to its knees by an unarmed prophet. And the fact that this prophet himself has much to learn only serves to emphasize the book's core teaching: the boundlessness of divine compassion even for pagan humanity. It is precisely this core teaching which Melville subverts repeatedly in *Moby-Dick*. For in *Moby-Dick* Melville attacks not simply Jonah's factual credibility[20] but — and how much more significant in view of Ishmael's reconting of how even the "reverend clergy" have parabolized Jonah — he also dismantles Jonah's central affirmations. Thus, for example, whereas the prophet Jonah brings blessing and hope willy-nilly, Melville's "little old Jonah," a bartender who works appropriately enough in "*Coffin's Inn*," serves potions of "deliriums and death."[21]

Father Mapple's sermon is the centerpiece of Melville's attack on the book of Jonah. Central to the book of Jonah is the prophet's conviction that in God's relations to mankind His primary attributes are patience and compassion; the ironic discomfiture this belief causes the prophet serves all the more to emphasize God's goodness. In Mapple's sermon there is not one reference to divine compassion. This is a striking omission, an omission we could hardly miss, did not the author so cunningly distract us. Mapple's inversion of the book of Jonah's teaching is obscured by Mapple's theatrics ("His deep chest heaved as with a ground swell; his tossed arms seemed the warring elements at work . . . thunders . . . rolled from off his swarthy brow . . . light [lept] from his eye") and rhetorical embellishments. Those parts of the Jonah story to which Mapple refers he spices with details ranging from the price Jonah pays for his ticket to the prophet's dreams as he lies in the bowels of the ship. However, Mapple's silence is far more significant than his embellishments. I refer here to the thunderous silence of his ignoring of Jonah's decisive last chapter. For it is in that chapter that the biblical narrator discloses what prompted the prophet to defy God. In 4:1-2 the narrator relates that when the Lord decided not to destory Nineveh:

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[18] *Ibid.*, p. 235.

[19] *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 159, 277, 272, 347, 405, 413, 442.

[20] See, in particular, chapter 83 which is entitled "Jonah Historically Regarded."

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 23.

> This displeased Jonah greatly, and he was grieved. He prayed to the Lord, saying, 'O Lord! Isn't this just what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish. For I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment.

The biblical narrator here has Jonah paraphrase two of the most famous texts in the Old Testament (Exod. 20:5-6 and Exod. 34:6ff.); both texts stress God's magnanimity. Ishmael, as we have seen, had mockingly referred to these texts in order to justify idolatry. In the case of Mapple's sermon, Melville has Mapple simply ignore Jonah's fourth chapter and has him trumpeting the Deity as a God of wrath: "O Father! — chiefly known to me by Thy rod."[22]

We can now fully appreciate the force of Melville's ironic inversion of the theistic lineaments of the Book of Jonah. In *Moby-Dick*, in contradistinction to the freedom of even the wicked inhabitants of Nineveh to repent, everyone is a "slave . . . either in a physical or metaphysical point of view . . . and so the universal thump is passed around."[23] As the phrase "universal thump" suggests, and as the order of the Extracts imply, *Moby-Dick* gives priority — in the non-human realm — not to a compassionate and personal God but to the mindless chaotic waters of the deep and to a preternatural white whale with "retribution, swift vengeance, eternal malace . . . in (his) whole aspect."[24]

I noted earlier that high praise for the pagan Queequeg surrounds Mapple's sermon. The sermon itself consists, albeit obliquely, of an affirmation of a paganism which sees man at the mercy of powers either alien and malevolent (in the case of the white whale) or indifferent (in the case of the sea) to man. It should occasion no surprise then that Melville has the pagan Queequeg pronounce one of the key theological formulations of *Moby-Dick*. Queequeg, after almost losing his hand in the writhing jaws of a shark which in death is still convulsed in destructive spasms, declares:

> 'Queequeg no care what god made him shark . . . wedder Fejee god (i.e., pagan) or Nantucket god (i.e., Christian); but de god wat made shark must be one dam Ingin.'[25]

It is the pagan Queequeg's theological pronouncement which undergirds Mapple's sermon. But whether the pronouncement comes to us in the uncouth accents of the tatooed pagan or the orotund rhetoric of the New England divine, one is hard put to imagine a formulation more eloquently antithetical to the theological reality posited and championed in the Book of Jonah.

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[22] *Ibid.*, p. 51.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 468.

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 257.