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

JAY A. HOLSTEIN

Eloise M. Behnken's "The Joban Theme in *Moby-Dick*" (*The Iliff Review*, Fall, 1976), with its emphasis on the biblical and religious dimensions of Melville's classic, is a welcome addition to Melvillean scholarship. Although this present study questions aspects of Behnken's method and some of her conclusions, appreciation is expressed at the outset for her efforts to explain elements of *Moby-Dick* too often ignored in critical scholarship.

The purpose of this paper is to present a fresh examination of Melville's use of *Job* in *Moby-Dick*. Our goal is to uncover, to the extent possible, Melville's intentions in regard to his allusions to *Job* and Joban themes in *Moby-Dick*. Accordingly, we will avoid assumptions about *Job* in particular and the Bible in general which run counter to Melville's own approach to the Bible. In this we differ with Behnken who subjects *Job* to source analysis in line with the conventional opinions about *Job* found in Higher Criticism. Thus she declares that "... before discussing the biblical book of *Job*, one must decide what pieces are to be taken as the original or authentic parts, since scholars have long recognized that there are five sections to be considered ..." Then, based on her analysis of the "authentic" *Job*, an analysis which is dependent on an unpublished study, she concludes that "... the solution to the authentic book of *Job* ... is quite similar to that of Moby Dick [sic.], for in both the defiant, unshattered hero faces a world which has been set up with inherent contradictions ... God has put eternity in men's minds, and then he punishes the person who reaches out to grasp it."[1]

But in the first place, Melville's scorn of Higher Criticism is well known.[2] And in the second place, the biblical Job is not punished because he seeks to decipher the riddles of human existence. To the contrary, it is his suffering which prompts him to begin the quest. Leaving aside the prose epilogue in which Deity rewards Job, in what Behnken takes to be a part of the "authentic" *Job*, YHWH appears

JAY A. HOLSTEIN is Associate Professor of Bible and Jewish Studies at the School of Religion, University of Iowa, and Visiting Lecturer in Bible and Religion and Literature at Grinnell College.

[1]39, 44n. 8, 46.

[2]See Nathalia Wright, *Melville's Use of the Bible* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1949), p. 12. See, too, H. Melville, *Journal of a Visit to Europe and the Levant* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), p. 167. Compare Melville's *Clarel* (New York, 1960), I, p. 136.

to Job and not to those who have been so furiously defending Him.[3]

How did Melville use *Job* and Joban themes in *Moby-Dick*? The number of explicit references to *Job* is not large.[4] However, two references—one implicit, the other explicit—appear to be of particular significance. In the implicit allusion, Stubb burlesques *Job* in a story he tells about the devil and God (the "'old governor'"). In Stubb's tale the devil forces Deity to permit the Job-like figure to suffer undeservedly. God's fear of the devil is ridiculed by Stubb when he declares: "'Damn the devil . . . do you suppose I'am afraid of the devil? Who's afraid of him, except the governor who doesn't catch him and put him in double darbies, as he deserves, but lets him go about kidnapping people; aye, and signed a bond with him, that all the people the devil kidnapped, he'd roast for him. There's a governor!'"[5]

Stubb's parody of *Job* strips that biblical book of the exquisite ambiguity which has stimulated exegetical debate for a millenium and more. Stubb's solution to the problem of evil is simplicity itself: God is evil.

But is Stubb Melville's spokesman? Stubb, who proclaims "'Think not, is my eleventh commandment; and sleep when you can, is my twelfth . . .'" I believe that an answer to this question allows one to penetrate to the core of Melville's dark vision in *Moby-Dick*, a vision which is more at odds with *Job* than even Stubb's caricature.

The outlines of this vision are apparent in a context in which the men of the *Pequod* have harpooned a whale which then sounded:

> As the three boats lay there on that gently rolling sea, gazing down into its eternal blue noon; and as not a single groan or

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[3]Another problem with Behnken's paper is her linkage of the "orthodox Jew" and "Calvinist," both of whom, she asserts, ".-.-. would argue that the central conflict in the Garden of Eden story is between mortals who seek knowledge and a God who sees the aggressive attempt to get wisdom as an encroachment on His territory. . . . Therefore, the righteous person, whether a Jew or a Calvinist, is the obedient and submissive one who avoids seeking any knowledge of the roots and springs of the cosmos" (38, 39). But that which she identifies as the orthodox Jewish and Calvinist position is identical to the formulation put in the mouth of the snake in Eden (Gen. 3:1-5). It would be strange indeed if orthodox Judaism and Calvinism were indistinguishable, on this critical point, from the Edenic snake. To comprehend the extent to which intellectual questing is promoted in the name of God in orthodox Judaism and Calvinism consider Moses Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed,* trans. S. Pines (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964), pp. 23-26 and Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* Ed. J. T. McNeil,trans. F. L. Battles, "Library of Christian Classics,"(Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959), I, pp. xv., 8; II, ii, 2.

[4]All page references in *Moby-Dick* are from the Norton Critical Edition (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1967). See pp. 2 and 118 (allusions to *Job* 41); p. 100, "Who wrote the first account of our Leviathan? Who but mighty Job!"; p. 162, where Ahab is described as '. . . this grey-headed, ungodly old man, chasing with curses a Job's whale round the world. . . .'"; pp. 72, 85, 96 where the sanctimonious Bildad is featured; and p. 420 where the Epilogue begins with a quote from *Job.*

[5]*Ibid.*, pp. 276ff.

[6]*Ibid.*, p. 114.

> cry of any sort, nay, not so much as a ripple or a bubble came up from the depths; what landsman would have thought, that beneath all that silence and placidity, the utmost monster of the sea was writhing and wrenching in agony! Not eight inches of perpendicular rope was visible at the bows. Seems it credible that by three such threads the great leviathain was suspended like the big weight to an eightday clock. . .. Is this the creature of whom it was once so triumphantly said—'Canst thou fill his skin with barbed irons? Or his head with fish-spears? The sword of him that layeth at him cannot hold, the spear, the dart, nor the habergeon: he esteemeth iron as straw, the arrow cannot make him flee; darts are counted as stubble; he laugheth at the shaking of a spear!' This the creature? This he? Oh! That unfulfillments should follow the prophets. For with the strength of a thousand thighs in his tail, leviathan had run his head under the mountains of the sea, to hide him from the Pequod's fish-spears.[7]

Melville here quotes *Job* 41 (vv. 7, 26-29), a chapter which is the capstone of YHWH's speeches to Job. However unclear the thematic relationship is between the speeches of YHWH and what precedes them, the message of *Job* 41 is luminous: the mighty leviathan, before whom man stands in helpless awe, is itself as nothing in comparison with God ("Who then is able to stand before me... *Wh*atever is under the heavens is mine"). The leviathan, the great monster of the deep, *the* biblical representative of chaos, is, in *Job*, under the absolute dominion of the one God of the Heavens and the Earth.

The Melvillean context overturns the Joban reference in two important ways. In the first place, the awesome Leviathan of *Job* 41 is reduced to virtual helplessness by man; that is, the power of man is emphasized while the biblical context underlines man's impotence. In the second place, the Melvillean context is silent about God and the power of God. The resolution of the drama shows that the power of man is hopelessly inadequate, as Ahab, the most powerful of men, is engulfed by the white whale. Less obvious, but equally inadequate, is the power of the Heavens, for, as we shall see, in *Moby-Dick* ultimate and absolute power is found not in man, or the artifacts of man, not in Leviathan (even one such as Moby Dick) but rather in the sea itself; which is to say, in chaos.

At the virtual midpoint of *Moby-Dick* Ishmael delivers himself of a disquisition on the sea which gives prominence to the sea's mind-

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 300.

less rapaciousness. As for man's capacities in comparison with the sea:

> 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 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 mad battle steed that has lost its rider, the masterless ocean overruns the globe.[8]

And spaced throughout *Moby-Dick* are references to the sea which depict it as "sharkish," "murderous," "boundless;" an arena in which "might is right."[9] Moreover, the words which bring down the curtain on the drama could not be clearer: "Now small fowls flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf; a sudden 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."[10]

Even a calm sea betokens terror. The abandoned Pip sees through to the very center of Ishmael's vision of the sea as a force horribly inimical to man and the hopes of man, and he sees this on a calm sea. It is a vision of terror for it invests in the sea not simply power, not simply indifference, but a "tiger heart"; a "remorseless fang"; and "strong, troubled, murderous thinkings."[11]

The difference between *Mob-Dick* and *Job* is as fundemental as the split between biblical monotheism, in which an independent creator God rules over all that is, and Ancient Near Eastern paganism, in which the gods are dependent upon a water chaos which generates them spontaneously. In *Moby-Dick* the "masterless ocean" brings life into being and destroys it mindlessly. In *Job,* of course, there is in God not a shred of the willy-nilly; YHWH's speeches emphasize not simply His power but His resolution as well. The whole series of questions which Deity hurls at Job are rhetorical; the contrast drawn is between man's ignorance and God's awareness: God can frame questions not simply because He knows the answers but because He *is* the answer. In *Job,* security prevails because man can understand at least this much: at the root of things order and not chaos prevails.

In *Moby-Dick,* however, it is the sea which rules; and the sea is a destroyer of not only the body but of the spirit as well. Thus Ahab wishes he could communicate with the severed head of a whale for

[8] *Ibid.,* p. 235.
[9] *Ibid.,* pp. 18, 159, 227, 272, 378.
[10] *Ibid.,* p. 478.
[11] *Ibid.,* pp. 347, 405, 413, 442.

it has dived "amid the world's foundations" where death and hopelessness rule: "'O head! Thou hast seen enough to split the planets and make an infidel of Abraham, and not one syllable is thine.'" And the inscriptions in Mapple's chapel for those sailors who died at sea indicate "deadly voids" and "unbidden infidelities" which "gnaw upon all faith and refuse resurrections of the beings who have placelessly perished without a grave."[12]

In *Moby-Dick* the primal force is chaotic, and chaos rules. As Ishmael declares near the beginning of the story: everyone's a slave" ... either in a physical or metaphysical point of view ... and so the universal thump is passed around. ... "[13] To be thumped by the biblical God —even if the rationale for the punishment may be beyond the ken of man (as is apparently the case in *Job*)— is quite different than to be at the mercy of chance. In *Moby-Dick* chance "rules ... and has the last featuring blow at events."[14] Even one such as Stubb perceives clearly the distinction. In a dream he is thumped by Ahab's ivory stump. But he avers that it could be a lot worse, there being all the difference between a living thump and a dead stump."

The elemental security provided by an independent and cognizant Deity—a security made manifest even in *Job*—is in *Moby-Dick* replaced with disorder. The biblical model has imaged in some way with this security (so that, e.g., in *Job* man and God communicate and are reconciled), while in *Moby-Dick*, Ahab, perhaps the greatest of Melville's searchers, finds chaos not simply in the watery depths but within himself.

> Ahab at last came to identify with him [the white whale], not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations. The white whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them ... that intangible malignity which has been from the beginning ...[15]

Thus it is Ahab's innermost self which drives him out to sea and which then continues to impel him to seek out the white whale. Ahab's fate is anticipated in this observation of Ishmael:

> Consider all this [the "devilish" quality of the sea; its "universal cannibalism"; all ascribed to its lack of cognizance], and then turn to this green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them

[12] *Ibid.*, pp. 204, 41.
[13] *Ibid.*, p. 15.
[14] *Ibid.*, p. 185.
[15] *Ibid.*, p. 160.

both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself? For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life. God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return.[16]

Melville's heroes do, however, "push-off"; and they do so because they seek on the sea what they feel to be most true about themselves. And what they feel in themselves is not the "image" of an almighty God but the "appalling" sea. Thus Ishmael's explanation of man's universal longing for water leads him to refer to the story of Narcissus . . . who because he could not grasp the tormenting mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and *this is the key to it all.*" several pages later the same thought is particularized in terms of the literal and metaphorical hunt for the white whale: ". . . there floated *in my inmost soul,* endless processions of the whale, and midmost of them all, one grand hooded phantom, like a snowball in the air."[17] All of which leads to the conclusion that radical disorder pervades all that is, including the soul of man.

Understandable then is Ishmael's declaration that ". . . that mortal man who hath more of joy than sorrow in him, that mortal man cannot be true—not true, or undeveloped."[18] From Melville's point of view even the author of *Job* had more of joy than sorrow in him. In *Moby-Dick* the ultimate arbiter is the sea, and the sea arbitrates haphazardly.

In *Moby-Dick,* to the extent that nature reveals itself, it is revelation not of hope but of horror. Those familiar with Melville's prose fiction will recognize this as a recurring theme as one Melvillean character after another[19] is immobilized by the discovery of disorder both outside himself and within him. Melville's spokesmen come to understand finally not that they do not know or even that they cannot know, but that what they do know is alien, frightening, unmanning. In the Bible, what God is, man is urged to seek to be. In Melville,

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[16]*Ibid.,* p. 236.

[17]*Ibid.,* pp. 12ff., 16. Emphasis added. See, too, p. 326 where Ishmael refers to "the tornadoed Atlantic of my being." See, as well, p. 249 where Stubb's meal of whale meat is equated with the feasting of the sharks on the whale's carcass moored to the *Pequod.*

[18]*Ibid.,* p. 355.

[19]Consider, for instance, characters as dissimilar as Tommo, Taji, Ahab, Pierre, Bartleby, the narrator of "The Encantadas," and Daniel Orme. What these characters become, to say nothing of what becomes of them, is in marked contrast to Job.

whatever good there is, is introduced by man.[20] It is no surprise then that Melville's use of the Bible is, for the most part, ironic. His use of *Job* in *Moby-Dick* is no exception.

[20]*Moby-Dick*, p. 443: "From beneath his slouched hat Ahab dropped a tear into the sea; nor did all the Pacific contain such wealth as that one wee drop."