

“I MUST TURN IDOLATOR”: RELIGIOUS INVERSION AND THE
QUEST FOR GENUINE FAITH IN MOBY-DICK

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the major religious themes of repentance, redemption, and expiation in *Moby-Dick*. While critics have examined some of these themes in isolation, my thesis will demonstrate how Melville takes these Christian doctrines and inverts them in order to display a shift from traditional religious practice to a genuine faith for those outside of God's covenant people. Using Father Mapple's sermon on Jonah as a paradigm through which to see the other religious inversions, I will explore how Ishmael repents of a false view of immorality, finds redemption through an immoral union, and follows a wicked captain who offers the hope of expiating spiritual guilt. When seen together, these inverted religious themes help us understand the cohesive nature of Melville's religious allusions in *Moby-Dick*, and also explains how Melville can express in a letter: "I have written a wicked book and feel spotless as the lamb."

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| ABSTRACT..... | iii |
| CHAPTER | |
| I. INTRODUCTION: RELIGIOUS INVERSION AS THE KEY TO A WICKED BOOK..... | 1 |
| II. JONAH'S TWO STRANDED LESSON..... | 11 |
| III. REDEFINING IMMORALITY: BECOMING BEDFELLOWS..... | 26 |
| IV. REDEEMING IMMORALITY: UNITING WITH A SOOTHING SAVAGE AND GODLESS GOD-LIKE MAN..... | 37 |
| V. EXPIATING IMMORALITY: AHAB AS CHRIST FIGURE..... | 55 |
| VI. CONCLUSION: THE WORD BECAME FLESH..... | 73 |
| REFERENCES..... | 77 |
| VITA..... | 82 |

CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION: RELIGIOUS INVERSION AS
THE KEY TO A WICKED BOOK

One of the major issues in *Moby-Dick* consistently explored by critics is the spiritual message of the novel. No doubt, this is due in large part to the vast amount of spiritual allegory present within novel, but also more specifically, because of how Melville handles it: he often uses Christian imagery in ways that appear to contradict orthodox Christian teaching, such as when Ishmael's idolatry is presented as true obedience to the will of God. This seeming contradiction leads critics to explore possibilities as to how the Christian allegory functions: whether it serves as a critique of religious systems like Calvinism, or a rejection of the Christian faith altogether, or if his allegory serves as a biting satire which mocks Christian faith. The difficulty of interpreting the religious allegory is compounded by equally dense spiritual allegory in his letters, such as one highly scrutinized letter to his friend Nathaniel Hawthorne in which Melville describes *Moby-Dick* as a wicked book:

A sense of unspeakable security is in me this moment, on account of your having understood the book. I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb. Ineffable socialities are in me. I would sit and dine with you and all the gods in old Rome's Pantheon. It is a strange feeling—no hopefulness is in it, no despair.

Content—that is it; and irresponsibility; but without licentious inclination. I speak now of my profoundest sense of being, not of an incidental feeling.

(*Correspondence* 142)

Melville attempts to explain a profound change that has occurred on account of his writing the novel. Struggling to express this feeling using the words “contentment” and “irresponsibility,” he turns to religious terminology, as his statement “I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb” evokes the Christian doctrine of expiation: a religious act where a lamb without blemish is sacrificed in order to atone for sin. Melville takes this familiar image and inverts it: wickedness, traditionally the object to be purged from the individual, becomes the very sacrament that leads to purification. Understanding this type of religious inversion is critical to grasping the spiritual imagery in the letter and in the novel itself, as Melville’s composition of *Moby-Dick* serves as a means to bring about ritual cleansing, expiating any sense of guilt or wrongdoing.

Moreover, this use of allegory is similar to how he uses it within the novel: not as a means of attacking religious faith, but as a means of obtaining and presenting what he understands as “Truth.” Indeed, the reason so many critics are confused by Melville’s use of Christian imagery is because they fail to understand Melville’s spiritual ambition. He is not interested in religious systems but in Truth, which he believes cannot be found in one system of religious thought alone. This is why Melville could both say that the more he reads Solomon he finds “deeper and deeper and unspeakable meanings in him” (*Correspondence* 193), and say similarly of Hawthorne his “deeper meanings are worthy of a Brahmin” (*Correspondence* 181). Such dichotomy exists in *Moby-Dick* as well, as pious Father Mapple and wicked Ahab are both speakers of Truth. This does not mean that both of their messages are equally true, but that when

taken together they allow listeners to evaluate and find the Truth contained within. In this manner, at the heart of the novel is a re-defining of immorality: Ismael must turn pagan to be a good Christian and set at ease his conscience. Or to put it more positively, Melville is returning to a true Christian faith, declaring something similar to what Sir Thomas Brown¹ said regarding Christianity: “I am of that reformed new-cast Religion, wherein I dislike nothing but the name” (7). This is what Melville meant by his paradigm of wickedness expiating guilt, which serves also as the central spiritual concern of *Moby-Dick*: Ishmael’s quest for Truth necessarily involves entering into what was commonly seen as spiritual immorality and expiating the remaining Christian guilt, all in the hope of “speaking the Truth to the face of falsehood.”

As one might expect there is an immense amount of criticism regarding how wickedness is portrayed in the novel. Hershel Parker, in his essential biography on Melville, connects this “wicked book” to the location where Melville composed much of the novel. He makes note of a passage that Melville marked in a book on the history of Berkshire County, explaining that Jonathan Edwards, a popular Calvinist preacher, wrote some of his major works precisely where Melville composed much of *Moby-Dick* (1: 795-796). This leads Parker to conclude that Melville’s novel is wicked “because it challenged conventional American piety and because much of it was composed near where a great and saintly book had been written on Original Sin” (2:15).

Similarly, other critics view the novel’s wickedness in light of the darker themes that pervade it. In his article “The Meridians of Melville's Wicked World” Joseph Lawrence Basile

¹ In *Sacred Uncertainty* Brian Yothers describes the influence of Browne upon Melville, focusing particularly on how both appear to be divided regarding religious faith: “Browne becomes most evident in the words and phrases of Ishmael, Melville’s narrator and the figure who provides the novel as a whole with its witty and paradoxical blend of farce, satire, irony, introspection, and exaltation. Thus, the ‘crack’d Archangel’ of Melville’s conversation with Duyckinck seems to indicate most powerfully the idea of a fractured religious consciousness, representing a faith that is at once potent and divided” (16).

focuses on the rampant immorality that exists in the novel, giving particular attention to the wickedness of its characters:

Utilizing the chase or quest motif as a central unifying structural element in *Moby-Dick*, Melville describes the manifold types of human frailty, ineffectual goodness, and total depravity seen in the questers. A careful consideration of the various characterizations, when viewed within the context of the quest, reveals that one fundamental way in which *Moby-Dick* is 'wicked' is in its pervasive presentation of wickedness in the world of man. (62)

Basile argues that the wickedness of the novel is limited to that of its characters, a point that he further reiterates saying: “Melville's universe is unchristian, but only because unchristian-acting men have made it so” (75). The central hope of the novel then becomes Ishmael’s ability to overcome such evil in order to attain salvation. In this, Melville is optimistic, as Basile argues that courage, perseverance, and a profound love of life can aid a person in overcoming such evil, thus allowing Melville to write that he feels “spotless as the lamb” (75).

While many go directly to the novel, other critics examine Melville’s treatment of wickedness in light of his own religious beliefs. Gail H. Coffler argues along similar lines, as in her article “Melville's Allusions to Religion” she attributes *Moby-Dick*’s wickedness to Melville, describing him as “a romantic, rebel, and iconoclast,” who writes during “a time in America when a writer who broke the religious taboos could have his career ended by the religious right” (108). In this respect, *Moby-Dick* reflects the wickedness of its author. Furthermore, although it is a wicked book, Melville is enabled to feel “spotless as the lamb because he thought his blasphemies and heresies could not be proven, due to his expert wordplay, irony, symbolism, and double and triple meanings” (108).

Other critics take this further, connecting the spiritual themes in the novel with Melville's own religious struggles. In *Moby-Dick and Calvinism*, T. Walter Herbert Jr. argues along this line, saying: "In writing *Moby-Dick*, Melville confronted a spiritual conflict that had been generated during childhood and youth" (2). This spiritual battle reaches its climax in the writing of *Moby-Dick*, allowing decades of struggles to pour across its pages. Herbert further argues, "*Moby-Dick* is more than a major episode in Melville's life-long struggle with religious issues; it records the decisive combat in which the sacred image was defaced" (2).

Taking a similar approach in *Melville's Quarrel with God*, Lawrance Thompson argues that Melville's novels are meant to display "in vivid and dramatic pictures, his so-called heretical and blasphemous views" (6). Although his heretical views are presented in the text, Melville knows that he cannot be outright about his beliefs without facing persecution from a largely Christian readership. Therefore, he expresses these views in such a way as to guard them from those who would take offense, allowing for him to have the satisfaction of making his views known, while at the same time being unable to be discovered by the casual religious reader. To hide his views, Thompson argues that Melville "formulated a complex variety of stylistic and structural methods for expressing himself in such a way as to protect himself from heresy hunters" (6). This system provides Melville the freedom to express his views without fear, thus composing *Moby-Dick*, which Thompson sees as "his personal declaration of independence not only from the tyranny of Christian dogma but also from the sovereign tyranny of God Almighty" (147).

While many critics argue that Melville sought to protect beliefs that would be deemed heretical, others argue the opposite: he intentionally includes such views in order to challenge the prevailing beliefs of his day. Zach Hutchins, in "*Moby-Dick* as Third Testament" postulates that

Melville's heretical views are meant to challenge traditional Christian beliefs, while further arguing that Melville intentionally elevates the stature of his novel by placing it alongside of the Bible as a sort of new gospel, one that “will question nineteenth century Christian customs but remain faithful to the content and form of the Bible, just as Jesus's teachings denounced first-century Jewish practices by reiterating Old Testament themes and doctrines” (19). In this way, *Moby-Dick* earns the label of a wicked book because it challenges traditional Christian dogma. Interestingly, Hutchins also interprets the latter half of Melville's statement to reveal that he sees himself as a type of Christ figure, referencing 1 Peter 1:19, which describes Christ as “a lamb without blemish and without spot” (19).

Of all of the critics, Stephen J. Bennett offers insight that draws us closer to what I seek to argue. In “A Wisdom that is Woe” he traces the similarities between *Moby-Dick* and *Ecclesiastes*: “Both books were ahead of their time and iconoclastic. Both books challenged the worldly pursuits of wealth and happiness and also the justice of God. Both books are enigmatic and have left interpreters arguing over their underlying meaning, and the meaning of life” (48). In drawing out these similarities, Bennett refers to Melville's description of *Moby-Dick* as a “wicked book,” noting ironically that the author of *Ecclesiastes* “could have written the same thing on the completion of his book” (48).

As I stated earlier, Bennett's insight leads us close to my argument by illustrating the similarities between the content of *Moby-Dick* and Biblical texts. While other critics typically hold that *Moby-Dick* is antithetical to Christian teachings, Bennett shows that this is not the case, but that a wicked book might even hold more in common with Biblical teachings than others. To return to his statement to Hawthorne, Melville desires to show how a wicked book can serve to bring about religious awakening, and how not only a Jonah, but also an Ishmael, can serve as

prophet. In doing this, Melville's narrator strives to carve out his own spiritual identity, rightfully placing him among his religious brethren Job and Jonah. Rather than discrediting Christian teachings, as many critics assume, Melville uses them to tell his own story. Just as Father Mapple's sermon puts forward Jonah as a picture of humble submission to the commands of God, Melville utilizes an alienated son—or at least descendent—of Abraham in his own pagan homily. As such, *Moby-Dick* functions as an apologetic work that defends the spiritual outcasts, demonstrating that they too may be faithful in their prophetic role in the same way as a Jonah, as both fulfill the same purpose: “To preach the Truth in the face of Falsehood” (54).

More precisely, this is the argument I wish to present: *Moby-Dick* presents readers with a spiritual cycle of repentance, redemption, and finally expiation of Christian guilt. Ishmael begins as “a good Christian; born and bred in the bosom of the infallible Presbyterian Church” (58). Yet, his friendship with Queequeg leads him to a crisis of conscience. While attempting to convert his friend out of paganism, Ishmael himself undergoes a conversion of sorts, leading him to embrace a spiritual identity that exists outside of the bounds of traditional orthodox Christianity. Despite his newfound faith, what remains for Ishmael is to expiate the spiritual guilt stemming from his Calvinistic upbringing. A solution is offered in the person of Ahab, who offers the prospect of freedom through joining him in his “quenchless feud” to destroy the whale that so terrorizes the conscience. For Ahab, the whale is a symbol of inscrutable malice, while for Ishmael the whiteness is an almost undecipherable code and reminder of the various competing conceptions of reality.

My thesis begins in chapter one with an examination of Father Mapple's sermon, and how it serves as a lens through which to view the rest of the narrative, presenting the key spiritual themes of repentance, redemption, and expiation. I will investigate the ways in which

the sermon prefigures the struggles of major characters, focusing on Ishmael in particular, and how Mapple's sermon is meant to be read alongside of Ishmael's equally strong sermonic voice. Both sermons focus on the problem of the conflicted conscience, one that isn't unique to the novel but was a central struggle for Melville and his contemporaries like Emerson.

My second chapter explores the theme of repentance, and how Ishmael's encounter with Queequeg calls for a redefining of immorality, one which puts him at odds with his Presbyterian upbringing. In this manner Ishmael mirrors Jonah, who must also undergo a similar redefinition in order to preach to the citizens of Nineveh and fulfill his prophetic task. As Mapple praises Jonah for his repentance and humble obedience, so Ishmael, through his relationship with Queequeg, comes to a new mindset and understanding as to what true Christian obedience is, seeing formerly pagan practices such as idolatry as that which constitutes faithful Christian orthopraxy. Such redefinition prepares him for the redemption that will come through Queequeg, and ultimately through his experience with Ahab.

This theme of redemption becomes the focus of my third chapter as Ishmael undergoes a spiritual conversion, not through the orthodox teachings of Christianity but his relationship with Queequeg, one which ironically resembles the prophet Hosea and his wife Gomer. As bedfellows, Queequeg redeems Ishmael out of the spiritual depravity in which he finds himself in "Loomings," one which puts within him constant thoughts of suicide as he remains enslaved by the vast materialism that is so encumbering on land. Queequeg's redemptive powers are only able to begin the process, one which Ishmael finds completed upon joining with Ahab's maniacal hunt of the white whale Moby Dick. Finally, Ishmael becomes fully redeemed out of his narrow Christian past and finds purpose alongside of Ahab who promises to punch through the metaphorical wall and see beyond the pasteboard masks of the material world. While redemption

has taken its full effect, Ishmael nevertheless remains in need of expiation as the white whale reveals lingering doubts about his newfound faith, as whiteness can represent seemingly contradictory spiritual truths.

In chapter four I explore the theme of expiation: the hope of removing spiritual guilt. Ahab becomes central in serving as a Christ figure, one who serves as the necessary guilt offering to expiate the lingering spiritual guilt that has accrued in moving from the traditional Christian faith to one which embraces immoral practices. Ahab has been “dismasted” by the whale, leaving a smoldering conscience simmering in the wake, and now captains a crew who feel a similar alienation and injustice done, each seeing the whale as emblem of a deeper conflict that must be overcome to find peace. In this way Ahab acts as Messiah to the spiritual outcast, resembling both the Christ presented in the Gospels but also as Melville conceived of him, as “the heroic outsider who dares to speak the truth and expresses bitterness over the ways in which the truth is frequently betrayed” (Yothers 2). Furthermore, in a story whose narrator exists outside of the covenant people of God, it is fitting that its Messiah be unorthodox as well, representing a new type of Christ, one who is able to serve as atoning sacrifice for Ishmael, and to a greater extent Melville.

In evaluating the centrality of Melville’s religious allusion, Lawrence Thompson astutely wrote, “I am interested in Melville’s spiritual idiom primarily because it controlled and determined his artistic idiom” (6). Through this thesis, my hope is to prove this statement true and demonstrate how the major spiritual inversions of repentance, redemption, and expiation help make sense of what Melville is trying to accomplish artistically through *Moby-Dick*. Yet, I also hope to push Thompson’s statement further and demonstrate how this spiritual idiom also

reflects the struggle for true faith that Melville himself undergoes as he seeks to be faithful in his task to speak the truth in the midst of a world that he views as dealing in falsehood.

CHAPTER II

JONAH'S TWO-STRANDED LESSON

Melville introduces the key spiritual themes of repentance, redemption, and expiation through Father Mapple's sermon, which significantly takes place right before Ishmael embarks aboard the *Pequod*, thus setting the tone for the rest of the novel. In *The Trying-Out of Moby-Dick* Vincent comments on the sermon's placement: "Melville undoubtedly intended that Father Mapple's sermon should be the vehicle for the central theme of *Moby-Dick*... Philosophically, *Moby-Dick* remains closed to us until we understand Father Mapple's sermon on Jonah and the Whale. With this key Melville unlocked the novel" (70). Outwardly, Mapple himself embodies the substance of the work. Having served as sailor and harpooner in his youth (43), Mapple serves as a tangible expression of the whaling profession as he enters into his pulpit, one which closely resembles a ship: "Its paneled front was in the likeness of a ship's bluff bows, and the Holy Bible rested on a projecting piece of scroll work, fashioned after a ship's fiddle-headed beak" (45). He even begins his sermon as if commanding a crew: "Starboard, gangway, there! Side away to larboard –larboard gangway to starboard! Midships! Midships!" (46). While outwardly manifesting the whaling profession, he also embodies a spiritual profession, having devoted himself to the ministry of preaching as "pilot of the living God." By incarnating both aspects of the narrative focus, Mapple serves as a doppelganger for Ishmael, who likewise encompasses the occupation of whaler and preacher as he presents his own two-stranded lesson.

Mapple's inner piety matches his spiritual image, as we are further informed that Mapple held "a wide reputation for sincerity and sanctity" (44). Some critics are inclined to see phrases like this as satirical on the part of Melville, making Mapple's function one in which Melville uses to take aim at the folly of Christian truth and practice. Thompson argues along these lines, namely that Melville engages in a type of "triple talk" in which he appears to affirm Christian doctrine as presented by Mapple, yet in reality is using an indirect method in order to ridicule Christian dogma.² Other critics like Geoffrey Stone argue that Mapple is secularizing the Biblical material "There is no Christianity in the sermon and, indeed, very little concern elsewhere in the book with anything that could be called specifically Christian: in neither is there a recognition of salvation as a freely bestowed gift" (195). My approach is that readers are meant to understand Mapple as a genuine Christian (not merely satiric) character³, whose sermon on Jonah provides a spiritual paradigm through which to read the rest of the narrative. That is, through the lens of Mapple's Jonah we see the central struggles of the novel's major characters, Ishmael in particular, as they seek to overcome burdens of guilt of conscience in order to reach spiritual enlightenment. In this manner, Mapple is correct in asserting that Jonah's lesson becomes one for "us all as sinful men" (47).

While critics attempt to extrapolate the importance of the sermon, none have yet traced the central themes of repentance, redemption, and expiation through the sermon. Vincent come

² An example that Thompson gives of this triple meaning involves Melville's discussion of the pulpit: "the first level of meaning, in terms of the specifics, is merely a picture of the chapel interior; the second level, in terms of Christian doctrine, would see to be orthodox in its affirmation; the third and covert level of meaning, which illuminates Melville's own viewpoint, again represents a sarcastic and sneering burlesque of Christian doctrine" (163).

³ In "Sin and Redemption in Melville's *Moby-Dick*: The Humaneness of Father Mapple" Robert C. Evans presents a convincing argument that Father Mapple is not meant to be a figure of derision or satire as some critics suggest, but "one of the most fundamentally decent, compassionate, and humane figures in *Moby-Dick*, and it is his humanity and humaneness that both Ishmael and Melville seem to find attractive" (149). Evans also emphasizes that Mapple "expresses values ratified by the novel as a whole" (149).

close to the mark in describing the theme of the sermon and novel as self-realization: “*Moby-Dick* is concerned with the problem of self-realization. Melville attempts in Father Mapple’s sermon to establish the profoundest meaning of the concept of ‘self’” (71). According to Vincent, Mapple presents this path of realization as first and foremost one that entails the denial of self, a point affirmed in Mapple’s sermon when he says: “And if we obey God, we must disobey ourselves; and it is in this disobeying ourselves, wherein the hardness of obeying God consists” (48). For Vincent, this humble submission is meant to contrast sharply with Ahab’s self-exultation: “Ahab acknowledges no law but his own; his search will be carried on in self-assertion, not in self-submission” (75). Indeed, Vincent focuses mainly on the contrast between Ahab and Mapple, which certainly has its merit. As “Pilot of the living God” the figure of Father Mapple is certainly meant to draw comparisons to Ahab, captain of the *Pequod*. However, there is much agreement between the two. Jonah’s sin is disobedience to the will of God, refusing “to sound those unwelcome truths in the ears of a wicked Nineveh, Jonah, appalled at the hostility he should raise, fled from his mission, and sought to escape his duty and his God by taking ship at Joppa” (53). In the end, Jonah overcomes his initial refusal to preach and engages in an active obedience: “To preach the Truth to the face of Falsehood” (54). This of course is fulfilled by Ahab who has no problem declaring his truth, even winning over unlikely converts like Starbuck through the power of his word.

Besides Ahab, Mapple’s sermon finds resonance with other characters as well. For instance, the proximity of the sermon to Queequeg’s narrative is certainly intended to be a contrast. Both begin as castaways: Jonah, bound for Tarshish, seeks waters over which God does not reign, while Queequeg, going to sea in order to find Christianity, throws himself onto the deck of a passing ship (61). The two are even given chapters that deal with historical

background, the only two with such chapters: Queequeg allotted one titled “Biographical,” and “Jonah Historically Regarded.” The greatest connection between Queequeg and Jonah is the spiritual guilt that both share. Jonah’s guilt arises from a refusal to obey the command of God, while Queequeg’s guilt, mentioned in the chapter “Biographical,” stems from his conception of being ruined by Christianity. Compelled by a “strong desire to see something more of Christendom” and with the hope of learning “to make his people still happier than they were,” he instead finds himself defiled by that which he believed offered spiritual enlightenment to he and his people. Therefore, because of his spiritual excursion, he is now afraid that his time among Christians has “unfitted him for ascending the pure and undefiled throne of thirty pagan Kings before him” (62). This of course, sounds similar to Jonah’s response in the Biblical account, who after obeying his prophetic task finds himself unfit to continue to live: “Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live” (Jonah 4:3). In a similar manner, Queequeg now finds himself alienated from both the false world of Christianity and that of his native Kokovoko, a land to which he hopes to one day return once he feels “himself baptized again” (62).

Ironically, the character who has the most in common with Jonah has received the least amount of attention by critics: Ishmael. The commonalities between the two are intentional, as Jonah’s spiritual quest parallels Ishmael’s so as to highlight it, as both experience repentance, redemption, and the hope of expiation. This is first evidenced by the similarity in tone, as Ishmael’s narrative is structured so that his sermonic voice matches Mapple’s. In *Preaching and the Rise of the American Novel*, Dawn Coleman explores the idea of sermonic voice in American literature, and argues that Mapple’s sermon employs the Miltonic sublime, a strategy in which he intentionally adds an abundance of detail and even hyperbole to what are considered well-known

Biblical texts. This sets the stage for Ishmael's own sermonic voice, which like Mapple, adds detail and hyperbole to his narration in order to portray spiritual significance: "The overarching effect of Mapple's sublimity is to announce that *Moby-Dick* will aim to give readers an experience comparable to that of listening to great preaching. The sermon, in effect, prepares the way for the book's many other sublime elements – Ahab's hunt, Moby Dick, the sea, Ishmael's quest for knowledge, the fellow-feeling of 'A Squeeze of the Hand'" (146). Coleman reiterates this point by drawing our attention to the place in the narrative where Ishmael's ordination as preacher is confirmed by Captain Peleg who, in response to Ishmael's defense of Queequeg as member of "the great and everlasting First Congregation of this whole worshipping world," says: "I never heard a better sermon. Deacon Deuteronomy –why Father Mapple himself couldn't beat it" (97).

However, Mapple's use of the Miltonic sublime causes problems, of interpretation leading critics to question why he embellishes and even amends Jonah's story, one with which he and his audience would be familiar. Some critics see Mapple's adaptation of the story as evidence of an attempt to secularize the sermon. This perspective is taken by Jay Holstein, who in "Melville's Inversion of Jonah in *Moby-Dick*," explains these adaptations as evidence of "how Melville broiled Mapple's sermon in hell-fire and baptized it in pagan blood" (13).⁴ One key piece of evidence that propels arguments such as Holstein's is that Mapple neglects to mention the ending of Jonah, which presents a Jonah that is angry at the outcome of his preaching to the Ninevites. Instead, Mapple presents a Jonah who in the end as one who exercises willful obedience to the command of God. While in some sense this is true, Jonah is nonetheless defiant

⁴ It is also important to note the arguments that Mapple's sermon matches the Bible stylistically. Wright notes that the "woes" at the end of Mapple's sermon align with passages such as Jeremiah's sevenfold denunciation of Babylon and others in Isaiah and Joel that yield similar contrasts (147-148). With such evidence, one could argue that contrary to leaving out Biblical material, Mapple is in fact being faithful to its style and content.

in his obedience, even angry at God for his mercy, a point which seems in conflict with Mapple's Jonah who is held up as a beaming example of Christian piety. While critics such as Holstein raise valid points in regards to these adaptations, there may be an alternative explanation as to why Mapple alters, and even flattens the Biblical details in his sermon, while emphasizing others. My approach is that in doing so, these amendments to Jonah's story are meant to cause the story to align with Ishmael's narrative, so as to emphasize his spiritual quest in relation to Jonah's. While comparing Mapple's sermon with its Biblical counterpart certainly yields insights, the amendments are only properly understood when seen in light of Ishmael's own spiritual quest, which mirrors Jonah's "two-stranded lesson." When seen as such, Mapple's neglect to mention the final chapter of Jonah is not an oversight, as Ishmael's narrative and response fills in the void that is left.

Through Jonah, the reader is first introduced to the concept of repentance, one which necessitates a redefinition of immorality: as Jonah moves from willful disobedience to humble submission to the will of God, he must break out of the former manner in which he viewed immorality. Initially, Mapple mentions little regarding what Jonah's command from God consists of, contented to leave it as disobedience: "As with all sinners among men, the sin of this son of Amittai was in his willful disobedience of the command of God –never mind now what that command was, or how conveyed –which he found a hard command" (47). In remaining intentionally vague, Jonah's command from God foreshadows Ishmael's own, as he too is given a command from God which he finds to be difficult but necessary: "I must turn idolater." Mapple later describes the command of God to Jonah, to "sound those unwelcome truths in the ears of a wicked Nineveh" (53). Here, we are made aware that his task involves engaging with an immoral people, which if successful would essentially lead to Jonah redefining the immoral people of

Nineveh. If his preaching succeeds, they will move from their pagan roots to a new identity as those who worship the true God, placing them alongside of Jonah and the people of Israel. This in fact is what inspires Jonah to stray from his prophetic task in the Biblical account, as he understands that his message will lead to the salvation of the people of Nineveh: “That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster” (Jonah 4:2). The text implies that Jonah does not deem the people worthy of redemption, but wants the Ninevites to incur disaster.

What the final chapter of Jonah is concerned with is the necessity of changing one’s mind, as God seeks to present the truth of how he views the immoral people of Nineveh. Whereas Jonah sees them as worthy of destruction, God sees them as worthy of redemption. To drive the point home, God uses an illustration, causing the sun to scorch a plant that gives shade to Jonah. God then asks “You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle? (Jonah 4:10-11).” Although we are left to wonder whether Jonah repented, the reader is nevertheless presented with a God-like perspective regarding the people of Nineveh, who sees them as a people deserving of mercy and in need of truth. This is the type of perspective that Ishmael adopts regarding Queequeg.

At the end of his sermon, Mapple confidently holds up Jonah as one to be emulated: “Shipmates, I do not place Jonah before you to be copied for his sin but I do place him before you as a model for repentance. Sin not; but if you do, take heed to repent of it like Jonah” (52). The term repent works on two levels: one in which it refers to the simple action of changing

one's mind, but also one which carries spiritual significance, indicating a turning from disobedience to obedience, a crucial step in a person's conversion and pre-requisite to salvation. Mapple (and Ishmael) might have both uses in mind, and indeed both work together: it is Jonah's change of mind that ultimately secures his salvation, as one who recognizes his error and becomes obedient to the truth. Jonah's repentance finds fulfilment in Ishmael, who too undergoes a change of mind in redefining immorality, which leads to his redemption. Ishmael begins as one repulsed by the pagan Queequeg, and moves to one who becomes bedfellows with him, even engaging in open idolatry. Ishmael's spiritual journey is one which moves from his Presbyterian upbringing to boldly declare the truth that he and Queequeg are of the same faith, belonging to "the great and everlasting First Congregation of this whole worshipping world" (97).

In this way, Jonah's task as preacher would lead to the redemption of a people who stand outside of the people of God. Such a task terrifies Jonah due to "the hostility he should raise." He therefore flees, only to find himself in the end following the will of God: "To preach the Truth to the face of Falsehood" (54). Here, a reversal of sorts has happened. Rather than solely helping to redeem the Ninevites, Jonah finds himself redeemed through his interaction with them, once again foreshadowing the redemption that Ishmael finds through Queequeg. While initially preaching at the pagan harpooner, he finds the true sermon incarnate in the virtue of Queequeg, leading him to exclaim: "No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world. This soothing savage had redeemed it" (57).

Another key theme that Mapple introduces through Jonah is expiation, or the removal of guilt, a need that arises out of a conflicted conscience. This tension is brought about in the struggle towards obedience, as Mapple is clear that "if we obey God we must disobey ourselves;

and it is in this disobeying ourselves, wherein the hardness of obeying God consists” (48). Denying oneself becomes a struggle to overcome old patterns of thought in order to embrace the new: Jonah must redefine immorality in order to preach the truth to Nineveh, overcoming past patterns of thought in which he viewed them as unworthy of salvation and hostile to his faith and message. Yet, herein lies the difficulty of such change, as this type of thinking necessitates overcoming fear and guilt, which leads Jonah to refuse his prophetic task, resulting in deep-seated guilt, as he knowingly flees what he knows is right and true. Here, as in the rest of the novel, spiritual guilt attaches itself to an object. As Jonah sits alone in his room his focus gravitates to the light above him, becoming a terrifying reminder of the task he is avoiding:

Screwed at its axis against the side, a swinging lamp slightly oscillates in Jonah’s room; and the ship, heeling over towards the wharf with the weight of the last bales received, the lamp, flame and all, though in slight motion, still maintains a permanent obliquity with reference to the room; though, in truth, infallibly straight itself, it but made obvious the false, lying levels among which it hung. The lamp alarms and frightens Jonah; as lying in his berth his tormented eyes roll round the place, and this thus far successful fugitive finds no refuge for his restless glance. But that contradiction in the lamp more and more appals him. The floor, the ceiling, and the side, are all awry. ‘Oh! So my conscience hangs in me!’ he groans, ‘straight upward, so it burns; but the chambers of my soul are all in crookedness!’ (50)

Jonah’s own spiritual torment attaches itself to the lamp: the light’s “contradiction” appalls him, reminding him that he cannot escape the presence of God or his divine mandate to speak the truth, as he finds nowhere that he can escape the light above him. The light also, because of its

contradiction, causes the rest of the room to seem out of balance, causing Jonah to question his decision to flee his task, pricking his mind with images of a disjointed reality around him as the “floor, the ceiling, and the side, are all awry.” This disjointed reality prefigures Ishmael’s experience with the whiteness of Moby Dick, as it likewise will cause him to question his own reality, due to the contradictory meanings inherent in the whiteness. For Jonah, his experience with the lamp mirrors his spiritual turmoil as he has been called to a task that goes against all that he has been taught to regard as true, elevating the light to become a powerful spiritual symbol of his own mind racked with guilt: “So my conscience hangs in me!”

Similar to the lamp, Moby Dick becomes a visible object that awakens deep-seated fears within the novel’s characters due to its own seeming contradictions. To many, the whale appears to possess supernatural qualities, leading whalers to attach the superstitions that Moby Dick is ubiquitous and immortal, unable to suffer harm by spears (198). Such belief Starbuck is quick to label as blasphemous, while others such as Ahab believe the whale possesses an “inscrutable malice sinewing it,” which becomes the principal target of Ahab’s rage. While Ahab realizes that the whale itself is only the front piece of a deeper spiritual agency: “All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks,” he nevertheless is unable to separate the symbol from its deeper reality, seeing the whale as the wall that he must punch through in order to get to the spiritual malignity (178). With this understanding, he therefore attributes to the whale “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, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung” (200). Like Jonah, Ahab finds himself unable to move away from the whale, as its haunting presence forces him to continue his spiritual quest for revenge.

Above all, Ishmael finds similarity with Jonah's conflicted conscience: as the lamp so "appalls" Jonah, so Ishmael uses the same term in relation to Moby Dick: "It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me" (204). Furthermore, like the lamp, it is the contradiction inherent in whiteness that so devastates Ishmael, causing him to doubt his understanding of truth. Having followed Queequeg and Ahab away from the orthodox Christian faith of his upbringing, the whiteness serves as pasteboard mask to subconscious doubts about his newfound faith, acting as a visible reminder of the Christian faith he left behind: "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" (205). On the other hand, the whiteness also "shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the depths of the milky way" (212). Such a seeming contradiction feeds doubts about his recent religious conversion, and almost certainly playing upon an abiding sense of Christian guilt. Removing such guilt is difficult. According to Mapple, there is nothing that can overcome such terror besides accepting one's spiritual task: "for conscience is the wound, and there's naught to staunch it" (50).

This problem of religious guilt is not unique to Melville's novel, but a key problem considered by Melville and his contemporaries, with one of the foremost being Ralph Waldo Emerson. To be sure, Emerson and Melville held common ground: both ardent seekers of truth, and each held to nature as a reliable guide in this quest. Melville would almost certainly affirm along with Emerson: "We must trust the perfection of the creation so far as to believe that whatever curiosity the order of things has awakened in our minds, the order of things can satisfy. Every man's condition is a solution in hieroglyphic to those inquiries he would put. He acts it as life, before he apprehends it as truth" (35-36). This statement aligns closely with Melville's

conception of the world, which he saw as a “great allegory⁵,” a concept that comes across through the words of his narrator Ishmael, who maintains that “some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth, and the round world itself but an empty cipher” (470). Furthermore, in saying that man experiences truth before apprehending it, Emerson is almost perfectly describing the experience of Ishmael, who as narrator, initially didn’t grasp the significance of his journey when first lived, but which he now undoubtedly sees and presents as truth.

For all of their commonalities, Emerson and Melville had their stark differences. In his essay on “Spiritual Laws” Emerson describes the ideal intellectual mindset, one which operates in accordance with the fixed laws of the universe and ignores problems that are none of its concern: “The intellectual life may be kept clean and healthful, if man will live the life of nature, and not import into his mind difficulties which are none of his” (81). By using the terms “clean” and “healthful” Emerson is holding forth the prospect that such a mindset is attainable simply by cleansing it of all illegitimate forms of thought that aren’t in accordance with nature and reason. One such area that Emerson would deem impure are the theological difficulties inherent in religion, which for Emerson are more akin to an unnatural intellectual disease, rather than those presenting genuine philosophical difficulties: “Our young people are diseased with the theological problems of original sin, origin of evil, predestination, and the like. These never presented a practical difficulty to any man--never darkened across any man’s road, who did not go out of his way to seek them” (82). Critics of Emerson, Herman Melville being among them, felt that his dismissal of these theological difficulties was too easily given. In fact, a major

⁵ “Appreciation! Recognition! Is Jove appreciated? Why, ever since Adam, who has got to the meaning of this great allegory--the world? Then we pigmies must be content to have our paper allegories but ill comprehended” (*Correspondence* 212).

criticism Melville levies against Emerson is that his success as an artist is due in large part to his “avoidance of all topics but smooth ones” (“Mosses” 247). Emerson may believe that problems like original sin or the origin of evil are theological diseases best to be avoided, but from Melville’s perspective, he gives no practical solutions as to how to help those who already suffer from them. In contrast to this, Melville hopes to offer such solutions through *Moby-Dick*: a wicked book that can leave the reader feeling spotless as the lamb.

This problem of the conflicted conscience leads to the necessity for expiation. In Jonah’s story, expiation is presented in two ways: through sacrifice and preaching, both of which constitute true obedience. Jonah’s prophetic task requires risk, as the people of Nineveh might respond negatively to his message. This in fact is Jonah’s assumption, as he is afraid of the hostility he should raise, and decides to flee his task. In essence, Jonah’s mission entails his offering of himself as a willing sacrifice before God and a pagan people. It is Jonah’s fear of sacrifice that causes his sinful disobedience and subsequent punishment. Yet, what Mapple promotes is his change of mind and his final acceptance of punishment for his sin: “And here, shipmates, is true and faithful repentance; not clamorous for pardon, but grateful for punishment” (52). In being swallowed up by the whale Jonah prefigures Ahab’s sacrificial task, as he too takes on punishment for his own disobedience and the sins of an immoral people. Once Jonah is thrown from the ship “instantly an oily calmness floats out from the east, and the sea is still, as Jonah carries down the gale with him, leaving smooth water behind” (52). This result of Jonah’s punishment matches Ishmael’s description of the calm after Ahab’s death, as “the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago” (624).

Yet, final freedom from guilt is found not only in accepting punishment but in fulfilling his prophetic task: speaking the truth to the face of falsehood. Significantly, Mapple stops short

of describing this aspect of the story, not giving details as to what Jonah says or how Ninevah responds, all we are told is that “Jonah did the Almighty’s bidding” (53). Yet, Mapple himself incarnates such a prophetic task, preaching the truth to a room full of sinful men. This is “that other lesson” of Jonah’s two stranded lesson carries significance for Mapple, Ahab, and most importantly Ishmael. Mapple does not skirt his task, but stands free of guilt before the Lord: “O Father! –chiefly known to me by Thy rod –mortal or immortal, here I die. I have striven to be Thine, more than to be this world’s, or mine own. Yet this is nothing; I leave eternity to Thee; for what is man that he should live out the lifetime of his God?” (53). Mapple is able to embrace death because he carries no guilt, as his faithfulness to speak the truth has expiated any sinful guilt he might have incurred. Ahab will face death in a similar vain: “Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; 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!” (623).

In the end, Mapple’s sermon sets the tone for the rest of *Moby-Dick* as its numerous sermons demand response. Mapple, after concluding his sermon lays facedown in silence allowing for response as his listeners depart the chapel. While Ishmael leaves the chapel seemingly unchanged Mapple’s words serve as a lens through which to express his own religious conversion. Although he rarely speaks, Queequeg nevertheless produces a powerful homily through his virtuous acts that command a response from Ishmael which borders on religious conversion: “I must turn idolater.” Queequeg’s silence prepares the way for Ahab’s dominant voice, as his impassioned plea to hunt Moby Dick is answered by his faithful mongrel crew who swear an oath, uniting their wills with that of their monomaniac commander’s. Each sermon

elicits a response from Ishmael, thus setting the stage for his own narrative sermon in which he too demands a response from his reader, one he offers in the opening line: "Call me Ishmael." This line invites readers to respond Ishmael's sermonic narrative as he preaches from his place aboard the Pequod: "Yes, the world's a ship on its passage out, and not a voyage complete; and the pulpit is its prow" (45). The typical response to such a sermon is repentance: a spiritual act which is explored in the next chapter.

CHAPTER III

REDEFINING IMMORALITY: BECOMING BEDFELLOWS

If Mapple's Jonah is meant to serve as a lens through which we view the rest of the narrative, then one area in which Ishmael clearly follows after Jonah is in his repentance: like Jonah, he turns from willful disobedience to humble contrition. Also like Jonah, this change does not come about easily for Ishmael, as he is called to put aside deeply held convictions that stem from his Christian faith in order to embrace a greater understanding of truth. At the heart of it, both Ishmael and Jonah undergo a change of mind in which they come to understand obedience to God's will as different from their prior faith and practice, and through a spiritual struggle come to willingly embrace it. Where Ishmael differs is that his repentance is an inversion of Jonah's: rather than turning from a blatant disobedience to a more orthodox form of Christian obedience (as Mapple would have in mind) Ishmael repents of his Christian faith and embraces what he perceives to be a larger and clearer expression of it, one brought about by his perception of religious difference between what is Christian and pagan.⁶ This does not mean that Ishmael (or Melville for that matter) is turning his back on Christianity. Rather, he believes that he is coming to a fuller understanding of the true Christian faith, one in which Queequeg, although

⁶ In *The Sacredness of Uncertainty* Brian Yothers takes a look at the "religious difference" within Melville's novels, a phrase which he uses to express "the ways in which religious traditions jostle uncomfortably with each other" (6). Religious difference is not primarily a means to express what is wrong with religious belief, but a tool utilized in order to find truth. As such, Yothers writes "Melville offers a rich instance of the complexity of religious and secular impulses, and defining the contours of his fluid and evolving understanding of the doubts and intuitions, the communal experiences and individual quests that define human attempts to comprehend the ineffable" (6). This understanding of religious difference squares with my argument that Melville isn't abandoning the Christian faith, but plumbing the depths of it and other religious faiths in order to gain true understanding.

himself not Christian, nevertheless practices Christian ideals in the same manner as a Father Mapple. Indeed, it is Ishmael's introduction to Queequeg, a pagan harpooner and peddler of heads, who brings Ishmael to a crisis of faith, causing him to question his own prior religious experience and knowledge, by demonstrating a sort of faith that not only matches Christian ideals, but in many respects transcends them.

Ishmael's first experience with Queequeg, however, is not one of spiritual awakening, but of religious abhorrence. While Ishmael may fashion himself as "tormented with an everlasting itch for things remote" his first glimpse of Queequeg sets his Christian sensibilities on edge, producing both fear and revulsion. This reaction arises from his commitment to what he deems as faithful Christian practice, as we later discover that Ishmael has been "born and bred in the bosom of the infallible Presbyterian church" (58). By deeming the church as infallible, he is elevating, like the rest of his Presbyterian brethren, the doctrines of the church to a level that are unquestionable in their validity, even above the dictates of reason and experience. Such phrasing is likely meant to be satirical, but even so it expresses the doctrines that Ishmael would hold to as a Presbyterian. These doctrines would be derived from what the church would deem as the clear teachings of Scripture, infallible because they are not a product of man, but the very words of God, and as such are without error⁷. Ishmael's Presbyterian upbringing also provides an explanation as to why he initially views Queequeg and his idolatry with such fear and trepidation, as he is simply following the faith as he has been instructed. Looking back on Ishmael's earlier claim to be "born and bred" in the Presbyterian Church gives subtle hints towards the doctrine of predestination, one in which God predetermines who is saved and who is

⁷ This is also the type of religious tradition that Melville himself would have been brought up in. In *Melville's Religious Thought*, William Braswell examines Melville's religious influences, noting that his family inherited traditions from Dutch Reformed and Congregationalist ancestors (4). As such, Braswell explains that Melville's family would have Calvinist roots firmly established before his birth (4).

damned, differentiating the two groups as the elect and the reprobate. Ishmael clearly fashions himself as one from birth who is included into the people of God, while Queequeg is a vile pagan, who according to his very nature is completely depraved. Yet, Ishmael's name presents a touch of irony: although a child of Abraham and therefore rightful heir of the covenant, he is rejected by God in preference for Isaac.

We can further assume that as a "good Christian" Ishmael was taught the Calvinist doctrines of Original Sin and Total Depravity, both of which are evidenced in his observations regarding Queequeg. These Calvinist doctrines teach that by nature, and apart from any sort of Christian repentance, mankind is utterly devoid of good and only has a propensity towards evil. This is the heart of the doctrine of Original Sin, which Jonathan Edwards explains in his lengthy work regarding the topic: "So that, on the whole, it appears, all mankind have an infallibly effectual propensity to that moral evil, which infinitely outweighs the value of all the good that can be in them; and have such a disposition of heart, that the certain consequence of it is, their being, in the eye of perfect truth and righteousness, wicked men" (152). Edwards intentionally focuses on the heart of the depraved individual, making clear that sin isn't something learned, but present within them from birth. All are subject to this depravity: it isn't something unique to Queequeg and those who live removed from society. Yet, someone like Queequeg, in their natural state and removed completely from the influence of the church or Christian society, would demonstrate most clearly this doctrine. This is further proof as to why Ishmael is so terrified of Queequeg, as he sees within him no possibility for good, but only a propensity for evil. This is why at the very core of the doctrine of total depravity is the assumption that it is the wicked heart that drives a person's thoughts and actions, as in Christian theology the actions always flow out of the heart. According to Edwards, it is through "the eye of perfect truth and

righteousness” that such wickedness is seen for what it is, and it is just this sort of eye that Ishmael applies to Queequeg, drawing conclusions regarding his heart based on what Ishmael deems to be Christian truth. With this standard in mind, Ishmael sees Queequeg as completely devoid of good and only bent upon evil: he is totally depraved. Of course, Queequeg certainly doesn’t help to shatter this false image, as the first glimpse of Queequeg that Ishmael gets is of this “wild cannibal” jumping into bed with him, tomahawk between his teeth, grunting, and immediately commencing to feel him (25).

Moreover, some of Queequeg’s practices lend themselves to confirm what Ishmael has been taught. This of course does not include practices which reveal an ignorance of social norms, such as bringing his harpoon to breakfast, or smoking his tomahawk pipe in bed, but those practices that deviate from orthodox Christian teaching, such as cannibalism. It is also this practice which causes a failure on the part of Queequeg to respect the “holy Sabbath” by peddling heads late into the night. In combining these two infractions Queequeg demonstrates the depth of his own depravity. These deviations serve to fuel Ishmael’s self-righteous perspective, leading him to view himself as more spiritually enlightened, something that he struggles to overcome even after coming to accept Queequeg and his faith. This is evidenced in “The Ramadan” as Ishmael is quick to show Queequeg the errors of his religious convictions, even going so far as to educate him regarding “the rise and progress of the primitive religions” because he is acting “so deplorably foolish about this ridiculous Ramadan of his” (94).

Even more than Queequeg’s primitive religious practices like Ramadan, what draws the most religious ire from Ishmael is Queequeg’s propensity towards idolatry. This is owing to the fact that it most clearly violates the law of God and of reason, the sure sign of the depravity of

his heart. In a discourse on “Men Naturally Are God’s Enemies” Edwards addresses such an issue, postulating that it is man’s idolatry that creates enmity between he and God:

Man will necessarily have something that he respects as his god. If man do not give his highest respect to the God that made him, there will be something else that has the possession of it. Men will either worship the true God, or some idol: it is impossible it should be otherwise: something will have the heart of man. And that which man gives his heart to, may be called his god: and therefore when man by the fall extinguished all love to the true God, he set up the creature in his room. (132-133).

It is precisely this type of choice that is reflected in Queequeg’s behavior, a contrast demonstrated by Ishmael leaving Mapple’s chapel and finding him engrossed with his idol, “humming to himself in his heathenish way” (55). Here, Ishmael must choose between the God of Mapple and Queequeg’s idol, just as Edwards describes a man must.

Ishmael’s religious disdain reaches its apex when he considers the possibility of sharing a bed with the pagan harpooner: “The more I pondered over this harpooneer, the more I abominated the thought of sleeping with him” (18). In describing his reaction to the thought of becoming bedfellows, Ishmael uses a term ripe with Biblical meaning, one which is often used in reference to God’s hatred of particular sins. By using the word abominate, Ishmael’s disdain mirrors God’s own perspective on idolatry: “Cursed be the man who makes a carved or cast metal image, an abomination to the Lord, a thing made by the hands of a craftsman, and sets it up in secret” (Deuteronomy 27:15). Queequeg not only meets this description, he surpasses it. Far from keeping his idol a secret, he proudly displays it, carrying it with him wherever he goes and speaking to it.

Furthermore, in using the term abomination Ishmael might have in mind Leviticus 18, a passage that addresses many of the concerns that Ishmael has involving his relationship with Queequeg. First, it admonishes the people of God to follow the rules and statutes of God rather than those of “the native or stranger who sojourns among you” (Leviticus 18:26). This passage closely aligns with Ishmael’s fears regarding “sleeping with an unknown stranger, in a strange inn, in a strange town, and that stranger harpooner, then your objections indefinitely multiply” (17-18). More directly, Leviticus 18 addresses several instances of sexual immorality that are described as an abomination, with one instance in particular that the church has traditionally interpreted as homosexuality: “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination” (Leviticus 18:22). Although Ishmael may not have had a sexual relationship in mind when speaking of becoming bedfellows, the text often makes references (often comical) that are meant to insinuate that Ishmael and Queequeg are engaging in a homosexual relationship, an idea which will be explored in the next chapter. For now, suffice it to say that in becoming bedfellows with Queequeg, Ishmael is violating the exhortation of Leviticus 18. The result of engaging in such an act is to render a person ritually unclean and removed from among the people of God: “For everyone who does any of these abominations, the persons who do them shall be cut off from among their people. So keep my charge never to practice any of these abominable customs that were practiced before you, and never to make yourselves unclean by them: I am the Lord your God” (18:29-30). Such a strong punishment explains why Ishmael would have such strong objections to his new pagan acquaintance. Moreover, by engaging in such an act explains Ishmael’s need for spiritual expiation, which will be covered in the final chapter.

With these Biblical passages in mind, we come to grasp how Ishmael's view of Queequeg aligns with the prevailing Christian perspective of his day. Yet, while Ishmael initially views the prospect of becoming bedfellows with Queequeg as abominable, he undergoes a startling change of mind as the early part of the narrative progresses, one which leads us back to the idea of repentance, which was first introduced in Mapple's sermon. Throughout the early part of the narrative Ishmael has been making assumptions about the heart of Queequeg, judging Queequeg's motives by his behavior and odd customs, and viewing him through the lens of his Christian upbringing. Yet, it is through seeing the true heart of Queequeg, as well as the commonalities between the two of them, that leads Ishmael to repent, to change his mind regarding Queequeg's immorality. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin describes the notion that the doctrine of repentance consists of two main elements: mortification and quickening. Calvin describes mortification as the "grief of the soul and terror, produced by a conviction of sin and a sense of divine judgment" (387). While Ishmael does not explicitly voice such terror in regards to his soul on account of his interaction with Queequeg, he will display this sense of holy terror in relation to the whiteness of Moby Dick. At present, his experience with Queequeg does lead to a crisis of faith which generates a true conviction of sin, as he becomes aware that his attitude towards Queequeg (and immorality in general) was wrong. Calvin clarifies that genuine conviction of sin stems from a true knowledge of it: "For when a man is brought to a true knowledge of sin, he begins truly to hate and abominate sin" (387). What is evident in the beginning is that Ishmael holds a shallow view of immorality, one largely based on conjecture, not firsthand experience, and quickly changes after prolonged interaction with Queequeg, necessitating a refining of immorality.

The process of redefinition begins on the very first night that Ishmael is with Queequeg as he comes to a startling realization: “What’s all this fuss I have been making about, thought I to myself--the man’s a human being just as I am: he has just as much reason to fear me, as I have to be afraid of him. Better sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian” (26). Here, Ishmael is already beginning to redefine immorality in light of the similarity he sees between Queequeg and himself. He sees him as a human being, which may seem like a small detail, but it leaps and bounds away from deeming him as cannibal or idolater. Moreover, their shared humanity is something that goes much deeper than religious systems, leading him to the conclusion that true virtue transcends religious convictions. With this being the case, Ishmael comes to the realization that uniting with Queequeg as bedfellows is better than a hypocritical Christian, and thus forming the beginning of Ishmael’s repentance.

The second aspect of genuine repentance is quickening. Calvin explains: “By quickening they mean, the comfort which is produced by faith, as when a man prostrated by a consciousness of sin, and smitten with the fear of God, afterward beholding his goodness, and the mercy, grace, and salvation obtained through Christ, looks up, begins to breathe, takes courage, and passes, as it were, from death unto life” (387). This second aspect of repentance is the true sign that Ishmael is indeed changing. Rather than terror, there begins a recognition of the virtuous aspects of Queequeg that lead him to a change of heart. He sees the honesty and courage of Queequeg: “You cannot hide the soul. Through all his unearthly tattooings, I thought I saw the traces of a simple honest heart; and in his large, deep eyes, fiery black and bold, there seemed tokens of a spirit that would dare a thousand devils” (55). Significantly, Ishmael uses the term soul in reference to Queequeg. What may seem like an incidental detail alerts the reader that the religious scales are falling from the eyes of Ishmael as he looks beyond the trappings of Calvinist

doctrine and attributes a soul to the pagan idolater. No longer does Queequeg have a heart that only longs to enact wickedness, he has a simple honest heart: no longer himself a cannibalized devil, he bears a spirit that would dare them. Furthermore, there is a contentedness that rests on him that attracts Ishmael: “He made no advances whatever; appeared to have no desire to enlarge the circle of his acquaintances...content with his own companionship; always equal to himself” (56). For Calvin, the attributes of Christ are what quicken the sinner to repentance: seeing his “goodness, mercy, and grace.” Likewise, it is the virtue of Queequeg, that which is absent from Ishmael’s own practice, that draws him in. As he does so, he follows Calvin’s description in passing from death into life: “I began to be sensible of strange feelings. I felt a melting in me. No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world. This soothing savage had redeemed it” (57).

Ironically what has been apparent from the very beginning is that many of the practices of Queequeg have been in line with Christian teachings than Ishmael’s own. While Ishmael derides Queequeg for his Ramadan, he is practicing a discipline similar to that of Christian fasting, one which he assumed his followers would participate in: “And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matthew 6:16-18). Queequeg’s piety, one which causes him to remain steadfast during Ramadan, demonstrates a fast in the manner that Christ describes: he does it alone in his room. Moreover, it is Ishmael’s hypocrisy that is shown, when at the beginning of the chapter he speaks self-righteously: “I say, we good Presbyterian Christians should be charitable in these things, and not fancy ourselves so vastly

superior to other mortals, pagans, and what not, because of their half-crazy conceits on these subjects” (91). It is exactly this sort of self-righteousness that Ishmael displays as he foolishly preaches to Queequeg, seeking to dissuade him from his religious practice. In the end, he comes to recognize Queequeg as the religious authority: “he no doubt thought he knew a good deal more about true religion than I did. He looked at me with a sort of condescending concern and compassion, as though he thought it a great pity that such a young man should be so hopelessly lost to evangelical pagan piety” (95). This is a profound sentiment which Ishmael expresses: in this moment the two are reversed, as the pagan becomes the truly religious, while Ishmael is the lost evangelical. The roles being reversed, immorality has become essentially redefined, moving from something to be cleansed from to something to that is true spirituality.

It is this redefinition of immorality that earlier on leads Ishmael to join Queequeg in his idolatry: “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?” (58). Ishmael contrasts himself with Queequeg, seeing himself as a pious Christian, and Queequeg as a wild idolater. The distance that exists between the two types of faith couldn’t be more clear, as we have seen Ishmael is “born and bred” within the “infallible” orthodox Christian faith, Queequeg is wild: outside the bounds of religious or moral system, and in his ignorance elevates a piece of wood to the level of worship. Moreover, although clearly distinguishing between the two faiths, Ishmael is moments away from joining with Queequeg in his idolatry. The irony here is that the two positions, though on the surface seeming leagues apart, are closer to a same faith than they originally appear. Ishmael’s words confirm this: he chastises Queequeg for worshipping a piece of wood, but fails to account for the fact that Christians also utilize a wooden device, one traditionally used in executions, to be a focal point of their worship. Yet, the more he considers

worship, and what it means to do the will of God, he comes to a decision: he must turn idolater. Here, as in much of the narrative, Ishmael is once again blurring the lines between what is Christian and what is pagan. In “How to Make Double-Talk Speak” Carolyn Porter explains Ishmael’s purpose in blurring boundaries: “He aims to undermine our most basic and fixed assumptions and beliefs, to destabilize our culturally inscribed patterns of perception, to decenter our rooted perspective as landsmen” (93-94). Yet, in doing so Ishmael is doing more than blurring the lines, he is radically redefining it, and in doing so, as we shall see in the next chapter, he moves from redefining immorality to embracing it.

CHAPTER IV
REDEEMING IMMORALITY: UNITING WITH A SOOTHING SAVAGE AND
GODLESS GOD-LIKE MAN

The “quickenings” that occurs within Ishmael is proof of the redeeming work occurring through his relationship with Queequeg, a process he describes when saying that this savage has redeemed his heart. This process begins with repentance, but transitions to the salvific action of breaking down religious divisions that formerly stood as barriers to faith: Jonah moves from disobedience to obedience, the Ninevites from an immoral people to worshipers of the true God, and Ishmael from his Presbyterian roots to a God-fearing idolater, one which he sees as in-step with the precepts of Christianity. What is happening in this breakdown is not a dismissal of the former, but a redemptive action, one which takes a formerly negative religious connotation and makes it a positive religious force. As such redemption necessarily encompasses the move from a change of mind to a change of identity: that which was once alienated is now, to use a religious metaphor, born-again.

This is the religious meaning behind the term redemption. Similar to his use of the term abomination, Ishmael once again selects a term loaded with Biblical meaning, one which he uses to express the profound alteration in his spiritual state. If the theological term repentance demonstrates the change of mind and heart that is occurring in Ishmael, the term redemption carries with it the idea that a transaction has taken place: something or someone has been rescued or purchased out of bondage and moved into the realm of spiritual enlightenment. In the Old

Testament, the most prevalent form of redemption occurred at the hands of a kinsman-redeemer, typically “a close male relative (e.g. a brother, father, uncle, cousin) obliged under Israelite family law to assist relatives in distress. He would buy back their mortgaged property (Lev. 25:25-34; cf. Jer. 32:7-8)” (Hubbard Jr. 717). The word kinsman is particularly important, denoting a likeness that is necessary to the process of redemption, one that will be echoed in the person of Christ and within *Moby-Dick* in the person of Ahab, who bears similarities to those whom he seeks to redeem. The religious custom of redemption served practical purposes: to execute justice among the people and other such practical cultural considerations, but these common practices were also intended to mirror the overarching spiritual work of redemption in which Yahweh served as redeemer of his people. The basis of this is Yahweh’s redemptive act in rescuing his people out of the land of Egypt and the bond of slavery (Exodus 15:13), and thus becomes a major paradigm for the people of Israel, one echoed throughout the books that comprise the Old Testament. In the New Testament, Christ once for all redeems his people by purchasing them with his blood, or as Paul would write in *Galatians*: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.” Moreover, Christ fits the model of kinsman-redeemer since he shared in mankind’s attributes so as to fully redeem them⁸. This idea of redemption is familiar to Ishmael, who in “The Whiteness of the Whale” exclaims that “white robes are given to the redeemed” (205). Ishmael uses the term redeemed in reference to spiritual status, those who have cleansed of their sin and are presented pure and blameless, that which is typified in the white robes they wear.

⁸ This point is brought forward by the writer of Hebrews who seeks to explain how Jesus could function as an atoning sacrifice for the world: “Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people” (Hebrews 2:17).

Biblically speaking, the process of redemption is traditionally enacted through a spiritual agent, those whose redemptive acts are infused with deeper spiritual meaning, thereby producing powerful incarnations of spiritual truth. In *Exodus* God's redemption is carried out by his prophet Moses, one who performs signs and functions as God's mouthpiece as he leads the people of Israel out of the bondage of Egypt. As God's agent, he establishes a spiritual identity for the people, giving them laws that are derived from God himself. What is significant is that Moses doesn't see himself as establishing something new, but is bringing a people back to truth which they had forgotten, establishing an identity that already exists. Similarly, in the New Testament God's redemptive plan is incarnated in the person of Jesus, thereby giving people, once again, a physical and spiritual expression of God's plan. In Jesus the line between the physical and spiritual begins to disappear as his words and actions bring to pass a new spiritual kingdom emerging upon the earth: "But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Luke 11:20). The work of Christ, similar to that of Moses before him, once again enacts the process of redefining the people of God, as he breaks down the wall between Jew and Gentile and moves them from living under the law to a new type of religious freedom. This sort of redemption, which utilizes a person that serves as God's agent has an obvious bearing on *Moby-Dick* a novel in which the physical often gives voice to the spiritual, and whose characters, formerly outcasts become powerful agents of God's redemptive purposes.

This idea of a person serving as God's agent first appears in Father Mapple's sermon, a story which centers around a prophet who is called to preach truth to a wicked people in order that they might repent of their evil and find salvation. What is unique about the sermon is that rather than focusing upon external details, it focuses primarily on the person of Jonah. Indeed, through the sermon we gain insight into the very mind of Jonah as Mapple walks his listeners

through the struggles, fears, and ultimately the triumph that occurs within Jonah, all in order that his audience might find the redemptive plan of God within this prophet, a point declared by Mapple at the outset: “What a pregnant lesson to us is this prophet!” (47). Mapple labors so that his listeners might experience the presence of Jonah, even as Mapple himself resembles the prophet, entering a pulpit which closely resembles a ship, and like Jonah “offered a prayer so deeply devout that he seemed kneeling and praying at the bottom of the sea” (46). In this way Mapple is enacting the role of God’s agent as a visible manifestation of God’s redemptive purpose: he too, a pilot of the living God is exhorting his immoral brethren to walk in obedience to God.

Although Jonah is certainly compelling, although more so as he is visibly personified in the person of Father Mapple, Ishmael leaves behind the prophet Jonah to encounter a more compelling lesson preached through the virtuous action of Queequeg, a pagan homily that stretches Ishmael’s conceptions as to what is true, and contrasts with the narrow religious systems that are typified in men like Mapple. In Queequeg Ishmael finds a genuine kinsmen-redeemer standing before him, an outcast like himself, yet one who offers the hope of redemption. In Queequeg, Ishmael first glimpses the hope of moving out of vague notions of religious belief and uniting with authentic faith. While Mapple resembles the prophet Jonah, Ishmael’s relationship with Queequeg is symbolic of another spiritual agent, that of the prophet Hosea, who like Jonah is given an unusual and difficult command: to embrace an idolatrous marriage in order to manifest the redemptive purposes of God as he takes an immoral people and gives them new religious life.

In many respects the prophet Hosea resembles Jonah as he too is given a word from the Lord, one which he must preach to an immoral people, those who have served false gods rather

than the true God. Instead of giving a verbal message, Hosea is given a task: God commands his prophet Hosea to go and take a wife out of whoredom, so that his marriage and subsequent children might serve as a tangible expression of how Israel has played the whore in following after false gods. Later on, Hosea is commanded to go and purchase his wife Gomer, who has presumably fallen back into prostitution. Like Jonah, Hosea's task would undoubtedly seem strange, even more so immoral, as marriage to one outside of the covenant people would mean going against the explicit laws of God. Like Jonah, Hosea would have to redefine his understanding of obedience in order to fulfill his task. This action is symbolic of God's relationship with Israel, who has continuously gone after false gods, and signifies that immorality is something that can and will be redeemed. This Hosea-Gomer relationship is reflected in the love between Ishmael and Queequeg, as Ishmael feels that it is his Christian duty to unite with this idolatrous pagan. Moreover, after the two are united as bedfellows they eat chowder prepared by a man named Hosea Hussey, a detail that gives further evidence to the Hosea imagery implicit in their relationship.

Furthermore, the Hosea-Gomer relationship is made more explicit as Melville settles upon the word bedfellows to describe Ishmael and Queequeg, a relationship that is meant to point towards the relationship between husband and wife. Certainly, the term bedfellows is used to bring about an intended comedic effect, adding levity to a story that without it would almost certainly bring derision from readers. Indeed, to treat the subject with comedy is probably the only way in which the subject could legitimately be treated without wholly offending his readership, as they were already incensed by his handling of overt sexuality in his earlier novel *Typee*. Yet, even though the subject is brought about through comedic means, it nevertheless demands a deeper reading as Melville is carefully using such imagery to highlight the spiritual

union that is taking place. We catch glimpses of this spiritual shift from the very beginning, as Peter Coffin first explains to him that he must share a bed with Queequeg, and mentions “I s’pose you are goin’ a whalin’, so you’d better get used to that sort of thing” (15). On the surface, Coffin is speaking of the practical necessity of sharing a bed, something that is highly probable given the limited space aboard a ship. Yet, Coffin’s phrase also carries an underscored spiritual meaning: by saying that Ishmael must get used to this sort of thing, he is prophetically telling of the spiritual identity that must be embraced, as sharing a bed with Queequeg prefigures the joining of Ahab’s crew, one consisting of “mongrel renegades, and castaways, and cannibals.” Later Ishmael will come to the realization that this crew “seemed specially picked and packed by some infernal fatality to help him to his monomaniac revenge” (203).

While sharing a bed prefigures Ishmael’s decision to ship aboard the Pequod, the agreement first bothers Ishmael because of the intimacy of such a relationship, one which he describes as “a sort of connection...which is an intimate and confidential one in the highest degree” (20). The words “intimate” and “confidential” reveal that there is more at stake than simply sharing a bed, but one in which something is shared that is reserved for only the most intimate of relationships: that of marriage. This explains why Ishmael is so horrified at the thought of becoming bedfellows with Queequeg, as it is important to note that Ishmael is not opposed to being bedfellows with someone as much as it is the fact of becoming bedfellows with someone like Queequeg, which for him would amount to be going to bed with cannibalism and idolatry. This once again mirrors the Hosea narrative, as his marriage is specifically meant for that with a woman of immorality: the sexual union typifies the union occurring at the spiritual level. Such sexual union is strongly hinted at in Ishmael’s relationship with Queequeg as the two are consistently described using marital imagery. For instance, after their first night

together, Ishmael wakes to find Queequeg's arm "thrown over me in the most loving and affectionate manner. You had almost thought I had been his wife" (28). The two remain in a state of physical embrace, as Queequeg has Ishmael firmly within "his bridegroom clasp—yet, sleeping as he was, he still hugged me tightly, as though naught but death should part us twain" (30). Such language reaches its peak when a marriage pronouncement is made: "and when our smoke was over, he pressed his forehead against mine, clasped me round the waist, and said that henceforth we were married; meaning, in his country's phrase, that we were bosom friends; he would gladly die for me, if need should be" (57). After this pronouncement Melville utilizes sexually suggestive language that is meant to highlight the intimacy that now exists between them:

We had lain thus in bed, chatting and napping at short intervals, and Queequeg now and then affectionately throwing his brown tattooed legs over mine, and then drawing them back; so entirely sociable and free and easy were we; when, at last, by reason of our confabulations, what little nappishness remained in us altogether departed, and we felt like getting up again, though day-break was yet some way down the future" (59).

Ishmael and Queequeg interact as those who would be lovers, even engaging in what would today be described as "pillow-talk." Queequeg amorously throws his legs over Ishmael's and then pulls it back, as Ishmael significantly reminds us that the legs are both brown and tattooed, a reminder to the reader that Ishmael is entering into the Christian sacrament of marriage with one clearly outside of God's covenant people.

Ishmael is using symbolism inherent within this Christian sacrament to illustrate the religious transformation that is occurring inside of Ishmael who has finally found someone he is

willing to unite with. Ishmael's marital imagery intentionally mirrors the type used in the account of the creation of Adam and Eve, as God's pronouncement "It is not good that the man should be alone" could just as readily apply to Ishmael as to Adam. This is especially true of Ishmael in his isolation at the beginning of the narrative, the sort that leads him towards thoughts of suicide as the cares of the world around him drive him to despair. Similar to Adam, Ishmael is provided with a "helper" fit for him, one who is meant to rescue him from his loneliness and alienation, and whose pagan roots present the potential for a return to an Edenic-like existence far-removed from the ills of society. The two are becoming one, and in doing so Queequeg is seeking to redeem Ishmael out of the alienation that typified him in "Loomings." In uniting with Queequeg, Ishmael hopes to inherit the contentment of the pagan, who is completely at peace with his alienation:

He made no advances whatever; appeared to have no desire to enlarge the circle of his acquaintances. All this struck me as mighty singular; yet, upon second thoughts there was something almost sublime in it. Here was a man some twenty thousand miles from home, by the way of Cape Horn, that is—which was the only way he could get there—thrown among people as strange to him as though he were in the planet Jupiter; and yet he seemed entirely at his ease; preserving the utmost serenity; content with his own companionship; always equal to himself" (56).

What is most apparent in this description is how it mirrors Ishmael's own experience: he too feels alienated from home, and his growing religious faith places him at odds with those he left on shore. Yet, what attracts Ishmael most is the peace and contentment that Queequeg exudes: "always equal to himself." While Ishmael will later learn that Queequeg too is in need of

expiation, it is this peace that draws Ishmael to the faith of his pagan bedfellow, yielding the hope that he might attain the same.

It is significant that Queequeg makes the pronouncement of marriage as it signals his role within the relationship: that of redeemer. This is a striking reversal from what would be assumed by the reader, because it inverts the “Christian” reading of Hosea’s story, as one would naturally assume that Ishmael is meant to be redeemer and that Queequeg the unrepentant cannibal is in need of salvation, the one to be purchased out of his rampant idolatry. However, in looking back over the details it becomes clear that Queequeg is the spiritual agent, and as such initiates the marital relationship, a clear sign that he is filling the role of Hosea.⁹ In this pronouncement, Ishmael is redeemed by immorality, a point he later yields when he says of Queequeg: “He no doubt thought he knew a good deal more about true religion than I did. He looked at me with a sort of condescending concern and compassion, as though he thought it a great pity that such a sensible young man should be so hopelessly lost to evangelical pagan piety (95).” This is a startling moment of self-realization, as Queequeg becomes religious teacher and Ishmael the true pagan.

Moreover, in making the pronouncement Queequeg is also functioning in the role of priest within the marriage ceremony, infusing the physical union with spiritual meaning. As someone who functions as both priest and bridegroom, Queequeg denotes a subtle allusion to the figure of Christ. As such, he is able to go about the work of redemption in Ishmael's heart, taking his heart of stone and replacing it with a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26). As priest Queequeg begins the process of spiritual rebirth as Ishmael begins to find his own faith.

Describing the process of redemption Ishmael says, “I began to be sensible of strange feelings. I

⁹ Fensham maintains that the initiative was the responsibility of the husband, hence the command from God: “Go, take a wife for you” (72).

felt a melting in me. No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world. This soothing savage had redeemed it” (57).

Ishmael’s pronouncement of redemption signals the change taking place within his heart, one that is supported by the physical intimacy that exists between the two. In his article “Homosexuality and Spiritual Aspiration in *Moby-Dick*,” T. Walter Herbert, Jr. explains how from the Calvinist perspective the sins of homosexuality and idolatry are linked: “Calvinist believers interpreted homosexuality as a result and sign of the tendency toward idolatrous worship that the fallen human race everywhere displays” (51). Therefore, in emphasizing the physical intimacy between Ishmael and Queequeg, Melville is highlighting the transformation that Ishmael has undergone, moving from his Presbyterian roots to fellow idolater alongside of Queequeg. Unlike the Calvinist perspective, Ishmael views this transformation as a positive one as his alienation no longer pushes him towards thoughts of suicide but to a new type of faith. Ishmael can now fully affirm alongside of Queequeg that “it’s a wicked world in all meridians; I’ll die a pagan” (62).

Just as Ishmael and Queequeg’s relationship, Hosea’s act in marrying Gomer typifies the larger plan of redemption at work, one in which immorality is not something that disqualifies a person (or people) from entering into a relationship with God, but something that can and will be redeemed. This is made clear in the way that Hosea names the children born by Gomer: his daughter he will name “No Mercy” and his son he will name “Not My People.” These are children born of a prophet of God and a wife of whoredom, and are named specifically to demonstrate to the people that although they were once without mercy they will receive mercy: “Call her name No Mercy for I will no more have mercy on the house of Israel, to forgive them at all. But I will have mercy on the house of Judah, and I will save them by the LORD their God”

(Hosea 1:7). Hosea follows a similar practice for his son: “Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or numbered. And in the place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ it shall be said to them, ‘Children of the living God’” (Hosea 1:10). This understanding of God’s relation to those who are immoral aligns with Jonah’s understanding of God, as one who shows grace and mercy towards a wayward people.

However, Queequeg is unable in the end to bring about a complete work of redemption. Regardless, he serves to prepare Ishmael for Ahab, as Herbert rightly points out: “The redemption that Ishmael experiences in his encounter with Queequeg does not work against his attraction for Ahab, but strengthens that attraction and gives it meaning” (“Spiritual Aspiration” 54). Several reasons present themselves as to why Queequeg is unable to bring about complete redemption for Ishmael, the first being that Queequeg himself is in search of redemption, a reality that comes across in the chapter titled “Biographical.” Similar to Ishmael and his “everlasting itch for things remote,” Queequeg follows “his wild desire to visit Christendom” (62). Unfortunately, he comes to the realization that Christians can be just as evil as “his father’s heathens” and decides to remain pagan. In the process, Queequeg believes himself to be ruined by Christianity, which “unfitted him for ascending the pure and undefiled throne of thirty pagan Kings before him” (62). Therefore, Queequeg will not return until he feels “baptized” again. The irony here is that both Queequeg and Ishmael find themselves similarly ruined by Christianity and in search of redemption, a position that enables them to willingly follow Ahab, who promises a way to rid them of their guilt.

A second reason for Queequeg’s failure to bring about redemption is his silence, a theme helpfully explored by Dirk Vanderbeke in “Queequeg’s Voice: Or, Can Melville’s Savages

Speak?” Citing evidence such as Queequeg’s limited vocabulary and the violence connected with those which he does utter, Vanderbeke argues: “The image of Queequeg as a natural philosopher and redeemer is distinctly at odds with the few remarks he speaks directly, in his own words” (60). He further observes that even the moments in which Queequeg does speak, we only receive his words through the narration of Ishmael. What moves Ishmael is not the word of Queequeg but the action, as it is the little things which transform Ishmael’s perception of the pagan:

In silence he is magnificent. Watching his new bosom friend, Ishmael rushes from the recognition of ‘traces of a simple honest heart’ (NN MD 49-50) first to a comparison with George Washington and then to a vision of the savage as an embodiment of Socratic wisdom, a sublime and true philosopher. And yet Queequeg is merely counting the pages of a book he cannot read. (62)

While such actions move Ishmael and begin within him the process of redemption, they offer no explanation as to how to imitate such sublimity, nor do they offer a complete spiritual vision. Like the numerous objects which Ishmael spiritualizes, Queequeg becomes an object whose nature Ishmael seeks to understand, yet without the ability to speak Ishmael is left without the ability to see beyond Queequeg’s virtuous acts. What will ultimately complete Ishmael’s spiritual redemption is the lofty rhetoric of Ahab, who offers a plan to reach spiritual enlightenment, leading Ishmael believe that he can punch through these “pasteboard masks” to find the true substance of faith.

While Ishmael finds a bosom friend in Queequeg, he finds a true spiritual home aboard the Pequod, a major departure from his Christian background and identity rooted in the materialism of the land, as Ishmael comes to quickly realize: “in the port is safety, comfort, hearthstone,

supper, warm blankets, friends, all that's kind to our mortalities" (116). What the sea promises is independence of such materialism: "Glimpses do you seem to see of that mortally intolerable truth; that all deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore?" (116-117). Ishmael even goes as far to say "in landlessness alone resides the highest truth" (117). Therefore, with the promise of sea and its hope of redemption requires more than a pagan harpooner: it calls for an open sea and skilled captain to navigate its endless waves. This process of redemption begins as Ishmael negotiates his lay with the owners of the Pequod. There is of course a discussion regarding compensation, yet there is evoked an intentional spiritual metaphor as Bildad continues to interject spiritual meaning within the discussion, reminding Ishmael "for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (86). While he may be simply trying to put one over on Ishmael, the religious terminology also serves to remind the reader of the spiritual ramifications of this decision. As narrator, Ishmael is able to see the spiritual meaning behind situations that he missed the first time. This is certainly one in which weighty spiritual decisions are involved, and thus the repetition of the spiritual nature of the deal, coupled with the Elijah's warnings as they board the ship, are meant to signal that Ishmael and Queequeg have entered into an agreement that has spiritual ramifications as well as physical.¹⁰ That is, the crew is being purchased from the confines of the land, not for the common vocation of whaling as they initially think, but are being redeemed by Ahab in order to join in his hunt of the white whale.

¹⁰ The spiritual nature of their commitment comes across through Elijah's question: "Anything down there about your souls?" While he fails to elaborate on his meaning, the reader is meant to gather that in agreeing to ship aboard the Pequod, Ishmael is agreeing to a contract that carries with it more than financial terms.

That they have been purchased is made more explicit when Ahab offers a gold doubloon for the first member to raise the white whale. This offer comes from Ahab, who then hammers the doubloon to the main-mast, a reminder to the crew of the task at hand, but even more that it becomes proof that the true owner of the ship is not Peleg or Bildad, but is Ahab. This becomes clear from the immediate context, but is also revisited much later in the narrative as the doubloon comes into focus once more and we are told more about its spiritual significance, as it “was of purest, virgin gold, raked somewhere out of the heart of gorgeous hills... And though now nailed amidst the rustiness of iron bolts and the verdigris of copper spikes, yet, untouchable and immaculate to any foulness, it still preserved its Quito glow” (470-471). In many respects this doubloon reflects the majesty of Ahab as both stand apart from the crew and ship, and as the doubloon is of the purest virgin gold, so Ahab is purged of all thought save his one religious quest. The costliness of the doubloon matches the rarity of Ahab, whose very tears, according to Ishmael, are beyond price: “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” (590). Ahab’s relation to the coin is further evidenced by how he views the spiritual nature of it: “There’s something ever egotistical in mountain-tops and towers, and all other grand and lofty things; look here, --three peaks as proud as Lucifer. The firm tower, that is Ahab; the volcano, that is Ahab; the courageous, the undaunted, and victorious fowl, that, too, is Ahab; all are Ahab” (471). The offer of the doubloon represents a purchasing of the “mongrel renegades, and castaways, and cannibals” that make up the crew, in order to unite Ahab in his spiritual quest, thereby attaining a spiritual rebirth and purpose. We further begin to see Ahab emerge as a Christ figure, whose pagan crew resembles the followers of Jesus. If questioned regarding his selection of such a morally degenerate crew,

Ahab might reply in a similar manner as Christ: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2:17).

This spiritual union between Ahab and his crew is made even more explicit as Ishmael and the crew enter into an oath in which their wills are securely attached to Ahab’s mad purpose, one which Ahab explains as the purpose for their voyage: “And this is what ye have shipped for, men! to chase that white whale on both sides of land, and over all sides of earth, till he spouts black blood and rolls fin out” (177). Although shipping for various reasons, Ahab speaks as if some divine agent has brought them together for a specific purpose, one which connects back to Ishmael’s understanding of the role of fate in his decision to ship aboard the Pequod. Furthermore, in explaining the nature of their voyage, he likewise explains the true nature of the whale and what it represents: “How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there is naught beyond. But ‘tis enough” (178). Ahab quickly defines the purpose of hunting Moby Dick as mainly spiritual in nature, which is a hunt to find the truth behind mere appearances and in doing so, ridding themselves of spiritual guilt. This is the true purpose that unifies the crew in the hunt, as they get behind Ahab who guides them on a quest, not simply of revenge, but to strike behind the wall. Ahab’s understanding of this spiritual unity is demonstrated when he asks: “The crew, man, the crew! Are they not one and all with Ahab, in the matter of the whale?” (178). This statement expresses more than unity in hunting a physical whale: they are united in Ahab’s vision in understanding what the whale represents, and therefore unite with him along his spiritual quest. Whereas before the crew suffered no spiritual purpose, they now join Ahab in his own.

This spiritual unity is memorialized in religious ceremony as Ahab leads his crew in swearing an oath to hunt Moby Dick. Gathering close the three harpooners, while the rest of the crew circle around them, he then has his harpooners, along with his three mates, drink and swear an oath to hunt the whale: “Drink, ye harpooneers! drink (sic) and swear, ye men that man the deathful whaleboat’s bow—Death to Moby Dick! God hunt us all, if we do not hunt Moby Dick to his death!” (181). By invoking God, Ahab makes the oath spiritual in nature; by invoking death, he makes it binding. Drinking and swearing, Ahab informs them: “Commend the murderous chalices! Bestow them, ye who are now made parties to this indissoluble league” (181). Clearly, Ishmael and the crew have united with Ahab in his spiritual mission, an “indissoluble league.” The language used by Ahab is reminiscent of that which was used during the Last Supper, in which Jesus too made a covenant with his disciples, one sealed with cup and drink: “And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’” (Matthew 26:27-28).¹¹ Like the figure of Christ, Ahab presents his followers with a ritual signifying a new covenant, one which unites the crew in a shared spiritual vision: “The long, barbed, steel goblets were lifted; and to cries and maledictions against the white whale, the spirits were simultaneously quaffed down with a hiss. Starbuck paled, and turned, and shivered. Once more, and finally, the replenished pewter went the rounds among the frantic crew; when, waving his free hand to them, they all dispersed; and Ahab retired within his cabin” (181).

Afterward, Ishmael attempts to explain the significance of what has happened: “I, Ishmael, was one of that crew; my shouts had gone up with the rest; my oath had been welded

¹¹ Furthermore, Ahab describes this ritual as “a noble custom of my fisherman fathers before me” (180). This language brings to mind the Last Supper, which also begins as a custom, that of the Passover feast which commemorates when God rescued Israel from the land of Egypt. Ahab, like Christ, takes a traditional custom and infuses it with new spiritual meaning as he too seeks to lead his crew on an exodus of their own.

with theirs, and stronger I shouted, and more did I hammer and clinch my oath, because of the dread in my soul. A wild, mystical, sympathetic feeling was in me; Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine" (194). His first point of explanation is one involving a newfound sense of belonging: no longer an outcast or wanderer, he confidently asserts himself to be "one of that crew." His subsequent shouts and oath confirm this reality, as he feels a special connection with Ahab, a "wild, mystical, sympathetic feeling" that causes him to unite with Ahab's "quenchless feud." This is the moment of true spiritual awakening for Ishmael: all of the spiritual movement of the narrative before this has been a precursor to this moment of redemption where Ishmael becomes united with Ahab: the Ishmael aboard the Pequod is vastly removed from the Ishmael in "Loomings" who was "growing grim about the mouth" or found himself in the midst of a "damp, drizzly November" in his soul (3). He has been redeemed by immorality, a "godless god-like man" has completed the work that Queequeg began and given voice to Ishmael's own desire for spiritual truth. Ishmael is now ready for expiation, to follow Ahab in his quest to rid them of the spiritual guilt that resides and so haunts Ishmael in the form of the whiteness of the whale. Furthermore, now that the crew has been united with Ahab in a Last Supper of sorts, he is now able to fully embrace his role as Christ, and in doing so fulfill his mission of ridding them of the spiritual guilt that still clings to them. This newfound spiritual unity is summed up by Ishmael, who describes the unity aboard the Pequod as they come to the end of their fiery hunt of Moby Dick:

They were one man, not thirty. For as the one ship that held them all; though it was put together of all contrasting things –oak, and maple, and pine wood; iron, and pitch, and hemp –yet all these ran into each other in the one concrete hull, which shot on its way, both balanced and directed by the long central keel; even

so, all the individualities of the crew, this man's valor, that man's fear; guilt and guiltlessness, all varieties were welded into oneness, and were all directed to that fatal goal which Ahab their one lord and keel did point to. (606)

Ishmael and the crew have been redeemed and united with their "one lord" Ahab, who will now seek to expiate their guilt as he takes on the white whale.

CHAPTER V

EXPIATING IMMORALITY: AHAB AS CHRIST FIGURE

The path of redemption naturally leads to the need for atonement, as purchasing someone or something naturally entails a cost, a point the Apostle Paul had in mind when he wrote that “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 3:23). When the people of God engaged in acts of immorality they would find themselves in need of atonement in order to remove the guilt that they have accrued from their unrighteous actions. For the people of Israel, atonement took the form of offering animal sacrifices in order to appease the wrath of God against their unrighteousness and to cleanse their own guilty consciences, thus allowing them to resume participation in their religious practices. For this reason, the Levitical law outlines specific reasons as to why someone might need atonement, especially in regards to those who have become unclean:

Now if a person sins after he hears a public adjuration to testify when he is a witness, whether he has seen or otherwise known, if he does not tell it, then he will bear his guilt...Or if he touches human uncleanness, of whatever sort his uncleanness may be with which he becomes unclean, and it is hidden from him, and then he comes to know it, he will be guilty. Or if a person swears thoughtlessly with his lips to do evil or to do good, in whatever matter a man may speak thoughtlessly with an oath, and it is hidden from him, and then he comes to know it, he will be guilty in one of these. (Lev 5:1,3-4)

These types of regulations were put in place to show a clear differentiation between the people of God and those outside of the covenant. Significantly, Ishmael breaks each regulation. First, he is exhorted by Father Mapple to fulfill his Christian duty and “preach the Truth in the face of falsehood” (54). Mapple clearly has Christian “Truth” in mind here, which Ishmael trades for a more universal truth that embraces Queequeg. Furthermore, Ishmael’s intimate contact with Queequeg would certainly qualify as a second infraction, having moved beyond touching to intimations of sexual immorality. Last of all, Ishmael commits the third infraction when he delivers up a hasty oath along with Ahab and the crew to hunt the white whale.

While Ishmael’s breaking of such infractions is intentional and demonstrates that he is moving away from his old faith to embrace a new one, such a spiritual change would certainly entail lingering guilt due to his Christian past.¹² Moreover, at times Ishmael seems almost regretful about his decision to unite with Ahab, as doubts begin to surface about Ahab’s quest. One example of this is in “The Try-Works” when Ishmael, gazing into the “emblazonings of the works” compares them to Ahab, saying they “seemed the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander’s soul” (463). In choosing to use the word soul, Ishmael appears to find something frightening and even damning in the soul of his captain. He later exclaims “Give not thyself up, then, to fire, lest it invert thee, deaden thee, as for the time it did me. There is a wisdom that is woe; but there is a woe that is madness” (465). Ishmael is likely speaking figuratively, referencing how he has given himself over to Ahab’s fiery hunt just as he for a time has given himself to the fire of the try-works. He further alludes to Ahab when he says there is a

¹² As mentioned earlier, this is a position similar to those aboard the Pequod, especially Queequeg who has been ruined by Christianity and won’t return home until he finds himself baptized. Ahab too exists in a sort of limbo, as his dismemberment at the hand of whale causes him to remain in a religious exile of sorts, as he has been at sea for forty years, an intentional allusion to Israel’s time spent wandering in the wilderness, unable to enter into the promised land.

woe that is madness, a woe that he contrasts with Solomon's "fine hammered steel of woe" (465). Significantly, Ishmael refers to Solomon as "unchristian," and in doing so gives further evidence of the blurred lines between what is Christian and pagan, a struggle he is trying to sort out with Ahab. This brief chapter illustrates the lingering doubt and spiritual guilt that Ishmael cannot allude, as he doubts his quest, the very same doubt and guilt that makes the whiteness so maddening to him. In the midst of doubt, however, his only way forward is to follow his current course with unchristian Ahab.

Furthermore, here is another spiritual inversion, as the Levitical Law becomes a guide that leads away from ritual cleanliness and towards immorality. Thus, Ishmael still finds himself in need of atonement as a means to remove his Christian guilt, which according to the law would take the form of a guilt offering: "So shall it be when he becomes guilty in one of these, that he shall confess that in which he has sinned. He shall also bring his guilt offering to the LORD for his sin which he has committed, a female from the flock, a lamb or a goat as a sin offering. So the priest shall make atonement on his behalf for his sin" (Lev 5:5-6). Such requirement called for the people of Israel to bring the choicest from among their flock to sacrifice in order to atone for their sins. This process finds resonance in *Moby-Dick* as Ahab is brought forward as an atoning sacrifice for Ishmael and Melville, one who takes upon himself their guilt and subsequent punishment. This process of expiation also brings back the imagery from Melville's letter to Hawthorne, one in which a wicked book becomes the means of removing guilt and leaving its writer spotless as the lamb, as Melville's book is wicked in large part because of the audacious claims of Ahab.

In the New Testament, atonement transitions from ritual sacrifice to the sacrifice of an individual person, as the writers of the New Testament regard Jesus as the fulfillment of the law

and ultimate sacrifice, one who once for all takes the sins of the world upon himself. In *Moby-Dick*, Ahab takes on the role of the Christ figure, as he takes upon himself the role of atonement in seeking to expiate the religious guilt of himself and his crew. Like Jonah, he embraces punishment and removes guilt by speaking the truth. William Braswell, in *Melville's Religious Thought* says this about him: "Ahab, one might say, has taken upon himself the suffering of mankind. In a way to remind one of Jesus Christ, he is pictured as standing before his men 'with a crucifixion in his face; in all the nameless regal overbearing dignity of some mighty woe'" (66). In this way, Ahab becomes the fulfillment of the prophetic imagery that went before him, as the imagery involving Jonah and Hosea find their fullest expression in Ahab.

The allusion to Ahab as Christ figure is certainly not the consensus, nor even a thought that is often entertained by critics, as even Braswell fails to pursue this connection and draw out its implications. To be sure, the amount of criticism devoted to Ahab is as vast and varied as the character himself, as critics seek to grasp the complexities and contradictions that exist within him. Peleg too finds himself at a loss to put into words the immensity of Ahab who is himself full of contradictions: he is a queer man, but also a good one, "a grand, ungodly, god-like man" (88). In regards to his spiritual nature, many critics seem him in direct opposition to Christianity. Herbert describes him "as a figure of theocentric piety run mad," one who "has suffered an implosion, like a collapsing star, so that fantastic energies are concentrated at the center" (141). Thompson argues, I believe rightly, that Melville projects himself into both Ishmael and Ahab, as both come to incarnate differing aspects of Melville's religious thought: Ishmael "a self-acknowledged coward, fugitive, outcast, escapist" while Ahab the "brave and heroic pursuer, outspoken in his hatreds" (151). While this may certainly contain validity, one aspect of Ahab that has been seldom, if ever explored, is the way in which his character mirrors the figure of

Jesus Christ, both in how he resembles the Biblical material, but also how he matches Melville's unique understanding of Jesus. As a Christ figure, Ahab embodies the hope of expiation by serving as both sacrifice and speaker of truth.

One objection that will undoubtedly be raised is explaining how Ahab's propensity towards madness fits in with this perspective, as it would seem to contradict his serving as a Christ figure. While Ahab is certainly accused of madness, it is important to note that his madness places him in context with a host of other Biblical characters who either experience madness or are accused of it. One example is Saul, who like Ahab bears the name of a rejected king of Israel, an image that in one sense prefigures Christ, the ultimate rejected king. Saul's madness is brought on by a spirit sent from God that torments him. Ahab's chase of the white whale mirrors Saul's obsession with David. Moreover, Saul's famous scene of madness, captured in First Samuel, functions to clearly link the two: while David plays the lyre an evil spirit comes upon Saul. In his rage Saul throws his spear at David seeking to pin him against the wall. This image forms a connection with the death of Ahab at the end of *Moby-Dick*. Seeing his rage through to the end, he engages in a final assault, thrusting his spear at the great whale. In both cases, their rage-fueled madness leads to their untimely deaths.

One of the more positive characters that Ahab's madness places him alongside of, one being the Apostle Paul, who is accused by Festus¹³ of madness: "Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind" (Acts 26:24). Yet, what is seen as madness is true spiritual wisdom that the world can't grasp, since "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is

¹³ Melville himself alludes to Festus in a letter to Hawthorne, one in which he aligns himself with the Apostle Paul: "But, believe me, I am not mad, most noble Festus! But truth is ever incoherent, and when the big hearts strike together, the concussion is a little stunning" (*Correspondence* 213). This statement supports my proposition that Ahab's madness is more likely a signal of his proximity to the truth.

low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are” (1 Corinthians 1:27-28). This type of madness exemplifies great spiritual wisdom though it be unrecognized by others. Significantly, Paul came to this knowledge through repentance: on his way to Damascus Paul had a vision of Christ that blinded him and ultimately lead to his conversion, as he underwent a radical change in which he become one who preached the truth to the face of falsehood.

Most significantly, Ahab’s madness places him alongside of Jesus, whose words were continually misunderstood and debated, with some Jews even convinced that he was possessed by a demon: “There was again a division among the Jews because of these words. Many of them said, “He has a demon, and is insane; why listen to him?” (John 10:19-20). Like Paul, Jesus is accused of insanity because his teachings are misunderstood. Like Ahab, Jesus is accused as being both mad and evil because of the breadth of his claims, daring even to declare himself equal to God. Yet, there is also a recognition that the magnitude of his actions contradict the insanity argument: “Others said, ‘These are not the words of one who is oppressed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?’” (John 10:21). His ability to bring sight to the blind counteracts the argument that he is insane. And yet, this reasoning is not too far from the works of Ahab, who in a different manner seeks to impart spiritual vision to his crew. His attributes place him highly above the rest: “Ahab’s above the common; Ahab’s been in colleges, as well as ‘mong the cannibals; been used to deeper wonders than the waves; fixed his fiery lance in mightier, stranger foes than whale” (88). Ahab’s true power resides in his words, persuading even a pragmatist like Starbuck to join in the hunt for Moby Dick. This is due in large part to the authority of his words: he speaks as if he has an authority that is almost divine and nature, and a mission that places him above the rest. This same sort of authority was heard

within the teachings of Jesus: “And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes” (Matthew 7:28-29). The sheer force of his teachings were able to break down the barriers of Jew and Gentile, piercing the religious and non-religious alike as they point to a greater reality beyond narrow religious systems. Such movement from long-held religious norms would certainly be seen by contemporaries as madness. Yet, what appears as madness is really truth, a realization that critic Alonzo Myers comes to: “And so the madness of Ahab on the voyage was the madness of a man whose reason and imagination were keyed to their highest pitch, and the end of the chase was at one and the same time the foredoomed defeat of Ahab and the moment of his great discovery. In losing his life Ahab discovered its meaning” (16).

Besides madness, there are other subtle connections between Ahab and the Christ of the Bible, one being the accusation of blasphemy. It is this accusation that causes the Jews to move beyond declaring him mad to seeking to kill him, explaining “It is not for a good work we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God” (John 10:33). As stated earlier, it was the audacity of Jesus that so infuriated the Jews, not unlike the audacity of Ahab who would boldly assert: “Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I’d strike the sun if it insulted me” (178). The accusations of blasphemy against Jesus mirror Starbuck’s accusation that Ahab too commits blasphemy in attributing to the whale characteristics that only rational creatures have (178). Both Jesus and Ahab are accused of blasphemy because of the truth that they try and propound: Jesus his own divinity, and Ahab the agency of the whale.

The most compelling evidence that supports this proposal is how Ahab fits with Melville's own conception of Jesus, one which views him largely as an alienated prophet. Melville’s conception of Jesus is gleaned from the notations within Melville’s Bibles, along

with the inscriptions within that relate to Jesus. Mark Heidmann, in “The Markings in Herman Melville’s Bibles,” supports the proposition that Melville conceived of Jesus primarily as prophet: “The Jesus who emerges from these markings is neither a Calvinistic redeemer and judge nor a Unitarian teacher. He is Melville’s own Jesus, yet a Jesus not without precedent. The evidence suggests that the Jesus of Melville’s marginalia is a prophet” (358). Scholar Brian Yothers concurs: “The Jesus who emerges through the lens of Melville’s annotation is the heroic outsider who dares to speak the truth and expresses bitterness over the ways in which the truth is frequently betrayed” (“One’s Own Faith” 40). For Yothers too, Melville’s Jesus is primarily concerned with truth, but he also posits Jesus as “the heroic outsider.” He stands outside of society, and as such is able to see it as it truly exists. Melville’s Jesus is heroic in that he speaks truth, all the while knowing it will not be received well. This depiction of Jesus matches the inscription copied into the front cover of Melville’s New Testament, which I quote at length because of its centrality to Melville’s construction of Jesus, and because of its striking similarities with Ahab:

In life he appears as true Philosopher--a wise man in the highest sense. He stands firm to his point; he goes on his way inflexibly; and while he exalts the lower to himself, while he makes the ignorant, the poor, the rich, partakers of his wisdom, of his riches, of his strength, he, on the other hand, in no sense conceals his divine origin; he dares to equal himself with God; nay to declare that he himself is God. In this manner is he wont from youth upwards to astound his familiar friends; of these he gains a part to his own cause; irritates the rest against him, and shows to all men, who are aiming at a certain elevation in doctrine and life, what they have to look for from the world. And thus, for the nobler portion of mankind, his walk

and conversation are even more instructive and profitable than his death; for to those trials everyone is called, to this trial but a few. (Heidmann 358)

While the source of this quotation is unknown, it nevertheless demonstrates the kind of Jesus Melville was concerned with, a bold, prophetic teacher who is inflexible in his resolve and “dares to equal himself with God.”¹⁴ Melville’s Jesus stands resolute in his purpose to elevate those around him because of his spiritual vision, and win those to his cause, a description which relates directly to Ahab as he persuades his crew to hunt Moby Dick. His teachings will be divisive, as some will land among the “nobler portion of mankind” yet also “irritates the rest against him.” Most significant of all is the lessons that he teaches, as “his walk and conversation are even more instructive and profitable than his death.” This statement could certainly apply to Ahab, whose spiritual vision and equally powerful claims support his role as true prophet, one whose words push listeners beyond the physical to the spiritual. What is most compelling regarding Ahab is not his death, but his madness, his seemingly outrageous claims about truth and the nature of things. This is what profits Ishmael, making him a disciple and fellow voyager, but also to the readers of the narrative who are likewise drawn the spiritual teachings of Ahab.

Furthermore, the teaching style of Ahab (and Melville) connects with Jesus’ use of parable, a style which Yothers sees as most attractive to Melville as author: “Melville seems attracted to Jesus as a fellow teller of stories. He scores the parables frequently, and even more frequently focuses on Jesus’ discussion of his method of telling parables” (“One’s Own Faith” 40). With such a keen interest, Yothers observes that the sections involving parables are among

¹⁴ In many respects this version of Jesus aligns with Emerson’s conception of Jesus, who in his famous address to Harvard Divinity School said of him “Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul. Drawn by its severe harmony, ravished with its beauty, he lived in it, and had his being there. Alone in all history he estimated the greatness of man. One man was true to what is in you and me. He saw that God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his World” (113).

the most heavily marked sections within Melville's Bible: "Melville marks the Gospels far more heavily than any other portion of the New Testament. Of the synoptic Gospels, he demonstrates a strong preference for Matthew, which contains the longest renditions of most of the parables and the fullest statement of Jesus' social ethics as expounded in the Sermon on the Mount" (40). One can see the connections between parables and Melville's own art, as the chapters of *Moby-Dick* often serve as self-contained commentaries on truth. As Jesus used common experiences and turned them into religious stories, so Melville turns whaling experiences into moments of spiritual insight. Although Yothers applies this ability to Melville, it could certainly apply to Ahab (and later Ishmael), as one who likewise often bewilders his audience by his extreme statements regarding truth, turning what is assumed or taken for granted into objects with a seemingly divine message.

As Christ-figure, Ahab takes on the sin and guilt of others, a role which alludes to the suffering servant in *Isaiah*, which New Testament writers regard as a prophecy regarding the coming Christ in which these sufferings are fulfilled in the crucifixion of Christ¹⁵. One familiar with *Moby-Dick* can see the similarities between Ahab and the servant:

He was despised and rejected by men;
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Surely he has borne our grief's
and carried our sorrows;

¹⁵ This figure is often called the suffering servant, or man of sorrows. Ishmael might be alluding to this figure when he says "The truest of all men was the Man of Sorrows, and the truest of all books is Solomon's, and Ecclesiastes is the fine hammered steel of woe" (465). It is also significant to note that Melville marked this passage in *Isaiah* was marked in his Bible, showing that he saw it as significant.

yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted (Isaiah 53:3-4).

Ahab too is rejected by men, a man of sorrows who has spent forty years at sea away from his family. Much of the grief and suffering of Ahab is terribly present in his physical appearance, as he wears the affliction he has received at sea. The “slender rod-like mark (134)” that runs down the side of his face would surely be something from which men hide their faces. Indeed, Ahab’s physical appearance leaves a startling impression upon Ishmael in their first encounter, so much that he describes Ahab as one whose humanity has been consumed by fire, and leaving behind only charred remains: “He looked like a man cut away from the stake, when the fire has overrunningly wasted all the limbs without consuming them, or taking away one particle from their compacted aged robustness” (134). Even Ahab’s name is synonymous with immorality, one which Ishmael reveals his own disdain for when he calls the name “a very vile one. When that wicked king was slain, the dogs, did they not lick his blood?” (88).

Yet, it is this name and accompanying alienation that enables him to act as suffering servant, to carry burdens and give voice to the grief of those around him. All of the rage of mankind finds its voice in Ahab: “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” (200). He willingly vents and directs such rage at the whale, contented to be the spokesman for Adam’s race and their general rage: “He piled upon the whale’s white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart’s shell upon it” (200). Ahab’s ability to serve as representative of mankind owes to his unique ability to at once

align himself with all of mankind, while at the same time rise above them. He is like Adam in that he shares in common humanity: his rage is theirs. Yet, like Adam he too shares in an elevated position as representative, possessing qualities that uniquely situate him at the same time, as Peleg explains: ““Ahab’s above the common; Ahab’s been in colleges, as well as ‘mong the cannibals; been used to deeper wonders than the waves; fixed his fiery lance in mightier, stranger foes than whales”” (88). Peleg’s description demonstrates Ahab’s universal appeal as he represents colleges and cannibals, and as he takes on the physical as well as spiritual realms. It is this dual ability that again places him among the person of Jesus who is both divine and fully man.¹⁶

As representative of mankind, Ahab takes this rage and hate and directing it towards a symbolic object, piling upon the whale not only his own rage, but that of the entire race of Adam all the way down. While Ahab may view the whale as a physical manifestation of all that “most maddens and torments,” and therefore the proper object of such rage, in the end it is Ahab himself who becomes the target of Adam’s race, a reality that he boldly asserts when exclaiming: “I’m demoniac, I am madness maddened!” (183). Such exclamation proclaims that Ahab no longer vents madness, he is madness maddened. Such rage is meant to be unleashed upon the whale, but in the end it is his own heart, like a mortar, which bursts. When utilizing such statements, Ahab is ironically reiterating that he functions as both prophet and

¹⁶ Matthiessen describes the shift in the perception of Jesus during Melville’s time, where the focus shifts towards the divinity that is within man, and therefore man’s elevation to the level of God:

By Melville’s time, and especially in protestant, democratic America, the emphasis was no longer on God become Man, on the unique birth and Divinity of Christ, who was killed and died back into eternal life; but on the rebel killed by an unworthy society, on Man become the Messiah, become God. That celebration of Man’s triumph involved also the loss of several important attitudes: that there was anything more important than the individual; that he might find his completion in something greater than himself; that the real basis for human brotherhood was not in humanitarianism but in men’s common aspiration and fallibility, in their humility before God (446)

fulfillment.¹⁷ That is, the rage and grief which he directs so powerfully at the whale is in the end reserved from himself: like Jonah, Ahab will receive swift punishment at the hand of a whale.

In this manner, Ahab is uniquely situated to serve as an atoning sacrifice and thereby offer expiation of guilt, both through his death and ability to speak truth. This is a task that the narrative has been moving towards since Mapple first preached his sermon on Jonah. As we have seen, Mapple puts forward Jonah as a model of repentance, noting that true repentance is “not clamorous for pardon, but grateful for punishment” (52). In this way, the true prophet, the true Christ figure is not one who avoids his punishment, but willingly embraces it. Ahab, like Jonah and Jesus before him, must not run from his fate, even in the face of death. Indeed, Biblically the punishment for sin is death, one which Christ accepts once for all and takes away the sins of the world (1 Peter 3:18). In his influential *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin affirms this and discusses the significance of the death of Christ in relation to expiation: “God was the enemy of men until they were restored to favor by the death of Christ (Rom 5:10); that they were cursed until their iniquity was expiated by the sacrifice of Christ (Gal 3:10,13); that they were separated from God, until by means of Christ's body they were received into union (325).” Calvin begins by discussing alienation: man is not only separated from God but is seen as his enemy, with the only hope of escaping such alienation being through expiation, the removal of sin and the guilt that remains because of it. The act of restoration and expiation only comes through the work of Christ. It is also important to note that the word “union” is used, alluding to the intimate relationship between Christ and his bride (Ephesians 5:25) which is

¹⁷ This assertion is made when Ahab says: “I now prophesy that I dismember my dismemberer. Now, then, be the prophet and fulfiller one. That’s more than yet, yet great gods, ever were” (183). This phrase is reminiscent of Christ, who serves as both prophet and fulfillment, the word become flesh. The irony of such a statement is that although directed at the whale, Ahab becomes the true fulfillment as he becomes that which is completely dismembered.

brought about through expiation, a union that is beautifully illustrated through the union of Ishmael and Queequeg, and finally in Ishmael and Ahab.

Death has been a recurring theme in the novel, even from the very first pages as Ishmael describes how he finds himself “involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses” or bringing up the rear of every funeral he encounters (3). He further encounters various images of death in the Whalemens’ Chapel, observes the near-death experience of Pip, describes Queequeg in his coffin, and joins in on Ahab’s obsession to bring death to the white whale. In a novel that is driven by the tension between spiritual aspiration and spiritual anxiety, it is understandable why death features so prominently for Ishmael, as it is tied directly to his quest for truth and serves as a lingering fear as he wonders if the truth is attainable, as the whiteness of the whale “stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation” (212). What Ishmael ultimately places upon Ahab is the hope of overcoming death through removing his guilt that strikes such fear within his heart, and like the Apostle Paul to boldly declare: “Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” (1 Corinthians 15: 54-55). Victory comes through Christ taking the sin of others upon himself and through death putting an end to that which so entangles mankind.

Moreover, this theme of death leading to expiation fits with the description of the suffering servant as presented in *Isaiah*, as one who not only represents Adam’s race but who bears their punishment upon his own shoulders, thus leading to the possibility of removing their guilt:

But he was wounded for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,

and with his stripes we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:5-6)

This passage describes how the servant takes upon himself the sins of Israel, willing take upon himself their transgressions and their iniquity, from their common idolatry to their inability to obey the precepts of God. Moreover, this passage also explains how the servant is crushed according to the will of God, as it is his sovereign purpose to lay upon the servant the sins of Israel, crushing them so that they might find peace. This theme finds resonance in *Moby-Dick* as Ahab slowly comes to a similar conclusion, understanding that his “quenchless feud” does not originate in himself but has divine origins. Therefore, Ahab seeks to come to terms with the idea that his course is a determined one:

Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm? But if the great sun move not of himself; but is as an errand-boy in heaven; nor one single star can resolve, but by some invisible power; how then can this one small heart beat; this one small brain think thoughts; unless God does that beating, does that thinking, does that living, and not I. By heaven, man, we are turned round and round in this world, like yonder windlass, and Fate is the handspike. (592)

In pondering the role of fate this “godless god-like man” has lost the ability to distinguish between himself and the divine will, coming to the conclusion that he cannot act apart from the hand of fate. This brings the realization that there is a force that is propelling him towards the whale and cannot be changed: “This whole act’s immutably decreed. ‘Twas rehearsed by thee

and me a billion years before this ocean rolled. Fool! I am the Fates' lieutenant; I act under orders" (61). Ahab is having an experience similar to Jonah in which he realizes that he cannot outrun the almighty, and disobedience to his fate is futile. This understanding causes Ahab to embrace his fate, not run from it. One can almost hear Ahab exclaim "It is finished" as the waves come crashing over him, fighting the whale to the very end.

Furthermore, Ahab's understanding of the hand of fate emboldens him to speak. Like Jonah, Ahab is able to speak truth because he embraces his fate with the whale, and in so doing embraces death. Since he is willing to die, Ahab serves as a sacrificial offering, the perfect platform to express spiritual anxieties and doubts, to question religious tradition, to make bold assertions that can only come from the mouth of Ahab. Finding such a platform was a lingering problem for Melville as he felt restrained from writing as he so desired: "What I feel most moved to write, that is banned, -it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the other way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches" (*Correspondence* 191). Melville desires to express himself in a way that doesn't fit with current market practices, and yet at the same time he finds himself unable to write apart from what he deems as truth. He describes a feeling of compulsion, to write that which he feels "most moved to write," possibly a similar expression to that "strange feeling" which results from composing his "wicked book," the one which left him in a state of contentment. This peace arises out of the fact that he has composed a book that enables him to express much of what he desires to say as an artist. One way in which to express truth is through those characters deemed as wicked, a method employed by one of the great truth-tellers, Shakespeare:

But it is those deep far-away things in him; those occasional flashings-forth of the intuitive Truth in him; those short, quick probings at the very axis of reality;--

these are the things that make Shakespeare, Shakespeare. Through the mouths of the dark characters of Hamlet, Timon, Lear, and Iago, he craftily says, or sometimes insinuates the things, which we feel to be so terrifically true, that it were all but madness for any good man, in his own proper character, to utter, or even hint of them. Tormented into desperation, Lear the frantic King tears off the mask, and speaks the sane madness of vital truth. (“Mosses” 244)

It is through the mouths of dark characters that Shakespeare speaks his truth, and not simply dark heroes like Hamlet, but even wicked ones like Iago, who are able to speak such truths without fear of incurring punishment. Such truth is madness for any sane character to speak: they will be misunderstood or persecuted, a punishment that will just as likely fall back on the author. Yet, it is through immoral characters, those mad enough to speak “the sane madness of vital truth” that an artist may take liberty to speak truly and in so doing, cleanse one’s conscience, as the immoral words expiate the spiritual guilt which lingers from a largely Christianized society.

In this manner, Ahab can voice what is deemed by the outside world as immoral, since he has “plenty of sea-room to tell the Truth in” (“Mosses” 246). Ahab has none of the encumbrances of land, no obligation to society or to family, no church and no state. With none of these hindrances, Ahab is free to speak truth while at the same time leaving Melville free of any guilt of conscience. Or, to say this in Biblical terms, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). As artist, Melville can follow in what Mapple describes as Christian obedience by “speaking the truth to the face of falsehood.” This also brings us to the connection between expiation and confession, as confessing one’s sins leads to the removal of guilt: “If we confess

our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:8). This is what Mapple describes as true Christian obedience, and also how Melville views the role of the true artist. Speaking the truth comes at a great cost. Melville saw the ways in which Hawthorne was misunderstood at the cost of truth. Yet, this is the experience of all who willingly preach the truth, as he told Hawthorne in a letter:

But Truth is the silliest thing under the sun. Try to get a living by the Truth –and go to the Soup Societies. Heavens! Let any clergyman try to preach the Truth from its very stronghold, the pulpit, and they would ride him out of his church on his own pulpit bannister. It can hardly be doubted that all Reformers are bottomed upon the truth, more or less; and to the world at large are not reformers almost universally laughing-stocks? Why so? Truth is ridiculous to men.

(Correspondence 191)

While the truth comes at great cost, causing even clergymen to get run out of their own churches, it alone holds the potential of providing true peace. This is what leads Mapple to preach, propels Ahab on his fiery hunt, causes Ishmael to embrace a pagan identity, and Melville to write a wicked book. This individual is what Melville said in describing his friend Hawthorne: “that lasting temper of all true, candid men—a seeker, not a finder yet” (“Mosses” 250).

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION: THE WORD BECAME FLESH

Whether Ahab is successful in his religious quest is a question left open by the narrative. While unable to kill the whale, Ahab and his crew nonetheless find themselves beyond the pasteboard mask and to the true reality behind it, but at the cost of their lives. One way to measure Ahab's success is in looking at Ishmael, the sole member of his crew left to survive and to carry on the spiritual quest started by Ahab. In looking at Ishmael as narrator one can see the pervasive influence that Ahab has exerted over Ishmael such as his propensity towards spiritualizing objects and his unique understanding of the role of fate. There even exists the possibility that it is Ahab's influence that leads Ishmael to embrace his pagan name and from the opening line embrace the identity of outsider: "Call me Ishmael." This simple phrase contains the same spiritual elements explored in this thesis, as he inverts yet another religious allusion: the re-naming of Abraham by God. In receiving a new name Abraham is given a new identity and new covenant: God promises to be the God of his descendants, gives him the land of Canaan, and tells Abraham that he is to be the father of many nations (Genesis 17). The narrator of *Moby-Dick* inverts this event by taking the name of Abraham's pagan child Ishmael. Significantly, he names himself, and bids the reader to call him this name. He is given no promise of land but has the sea. By inverting this allusion his meaning is clear: Ishmael is finding his own faith and bidding others to join him on this quest for truth.

Such a quest for truth is difficult, and may in the end be untenable. Although influenced by Ahab, Ishmael appears skeptical that definite belief is in the end attainable outside of death. This is a perspective that manifests itself most clearly in “The Gilder”:

There is no steady unretracing progress in this life; we do not advance through fixed gradations, and at the last one pause: –through infancy’s unconscious spell, boyhood’s thoughtless faith, adolescence’ doubt (the common doom), then skepticism, then disbelief, resting at last in manhood’s pondering repose of If. But once gone through, we trace the round again; and are infants, boys, and men, and Ifs eternally. Where lies the final harbor, whence we unmoor no more? In what rapt ether sails the world, of which the weariest will never weary? Where is the foundling’s father hidden? Our souls are like those orphans whose unwedded mothers die in bearing them: the secret of our paternity lies in their grave, and we must there to learn it. (535)

Ishmael describes a constant cycle of religious faith, one which only ends at the point of death. Significantly, he uses the image of paternity to describe the end of this spiritual quest, as if the quest for religious truth and hope for a fully coherent spiritual identity can only be the result of a true understanding of one’s spiritual parent, one who can’t be seen without passing through death. In positing spiritual enlightenment as a paternal relationship, Ishmael demonstrates and embracing of his own spiritual identity as religious outsider, one who comes from his father Abraham and at the same time desperately striving to prove himself to be his true spiritual son.

This is the same spiritual conflict in which Melville finds himself engaged, one that was not solved through the composition of *Moby-Dick* regardless of what he said to Hawthorne about feeling spotless as the lamb. Melville continued to osculate between belief and unbelief, unable

to find true faith and therefore rest for his conflicted conscience. This is how his Hawthorne described him in one of his last encounters with Melville:

Melville, as he always does, began to reason of Providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken, and informed me that he had "pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated"; but still he does not seem to rest in that anticipation; and, I think, will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief. It is strange how he persists -- and has persisted ever since I knew him, and probably long before -- in wondering to-and-fro over these deserts, as dismal and monotonous as the sand hills amid which we were sitting. He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other. If he were a religious man, he would be one of the most truly religious and reverential; he has a very high and noble nature, and better worth immortality than most of us. (*Journals* 628-629).

Hawthorne's analysis of his friend aligns well with the faith cycles presented in "The Gilder" as Melville is seen as continually striving for rest, hoping to find at last his final harbor. Like Ahab he persists, he is unflinching in his resolve to punch through the wall pushed close to him: his "very high and noble nature" echoes his own descriptions of his most powerful artistic creation, his "godless god-like man." Although not yet finding true faith Hawthorne's description of Melville is not wholly discouraging, however, because it presents an artist still striving to reach beyond the seeming religious contradictions to find truth, one who dares to raise lofty questions and voice his truths to the face of falsehood, one who in many ways reflects his greatest and most powerful creative effort, Ahab. Furthermore, the unconquering whale is not the end for Ahab, as death cannot hold him. As messiah Ahab experiences a resurrection of sorts with

each new reader and each new generation, calling readers to pursue truth and genuine faith. In this manner, Ahab fulfills his ultimate role as messiah as the Apostle John describes: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

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