

Marquand Chapel
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 Job 40:1, 41:1-11

Call Me Ishmael
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And God said to Job: “Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook, or press down its tongue with a cord? Can you put a rope in its nose, or pierce its jaw with a hook? Will it make many supplications to you? Will it speak soft words to you? Will it make a covenant with you to be taken as your servant forever? Will you play with it as with a bird, or will you put it on leash for your girls? Will traders bargain over it? Will they divide it up among the merchants? Can you fill its skin with harpoons, or its head with fishing spears? Lay hands on it; think of the battle; you will not do it again! Any hope of capturing it will be disappointed; were not even the gods overwhelmed at the sight of it? No one is so fierce as to dare to stir it up. Who can stand before it? Who can confront it and be safe?—under the whole heaven, who? (Job 40:1, 41:1-11)”

“Call me Ishmael. Some years ago—never mind how long precisely—having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world” (1). So begins *Moby Dick*, the story of Ishmael, a young sailor who joins a whaling voyage and narrates the nautical events. Herman Melville’s novel revolves around Ahab, the novel’s chief character and captain of the Pequod, a whaling ship out of New Bedford, Massachusetts.

Ishmael first sees Ahab as Ahab stands on the deck of the Pequod, looking out at sea, and notes that “There was an infinity of firmest fortitude, a determinate unsunderable willfulness, in the fixed, forward dedication of that glance (95).” Shortly after Ahab is introduced, the reason for his fortitude and fixed, forward dedication become clear: Ahab is out not to hunt whales, but to hunt one particular white whale, whose name is Moby Dick. Ahab grasps a gruesome grudge against Moby Dick for the whale’s crimes against Ahab, the latest of which is stripping the captain of the lower length of his leg, which has now been replaced by an ivory peg.

Through the weeks and months of the voyage, Ahab’s vim and vigor for vengeance become venom for his crew. As wisps of the white whale are seen in the wild waters, Ahab’s anger swells to a boiling point. Moby Dick maddens Ahab, and in ever-closer encounters the whale proves evermore elusive, even shattering Ahab’s ivory leg. Ahab will stop at nothing, and stop for nothing—even when the captain of another whaling ship, the Rachel, asks Ahab to join their search for the captain’s son, who has been lost at sea. Ahab refuses to search for the lost lad until he locates the looming Leviathan. Ishmael witnesses with wonder and worry Ahab’s increasing madness. In one scene, Ahab challenges the god of fire in a prayer, whispering, “Oh, thou clear spirit, of thy fire thou madest me, and like a true child of fire, I breathe it back to thee... I own thy speechless, placeless power... Leap! leap up, and lick the sky! I leap with thee; I burn with thee; would fain be welded with thee; defyingly I worship thee! (405-406)”

The novel’s climax is the Pequod’s three-day chase of Moby Dick. The whale has evaded and escaped Ahab’s pursuit, and with remarkably anthropomorphic actions has destroyed the whaling ship. Ahab, in his fury from his boat, yells his final challenge to the whale:

“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. Sink all coffins and 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! (460)”

In the aftermath, all are sunk and slaughtered by Ahab’s hubris. Only Ishmael, floating on a wooden coffin, survives to tell the tale. The book closes as Ishmael describes how he was saved: “On the second day, a sail drew near, nearer, and picked me up at last. It was the devious-cruising Rachel, that in her retracing search after her missing children, only found another orphan (462).”

Dearest God, God of the whale and the mite, God of the storm and the sea, stay with us. In our Ahab-like aspirations, in our obsessive endeavors, in our strivings to become gods, stay with us, for we know not what we do.

“Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook, or press down its tongue with a cord? Can you put a rope in its nose, or pierce its jaw with a hook? (Job 41:1-2)”

Call me Ishmael. Whether we think of the Ishmael of Genesis as the half-brother of Isaac or the patriarch of a proud religion, the story of Ishmael is, at its beginning, the story of a rejected mother and son. Sarai, wife of Abram, concerned for the continuance of the clan, asks Abram first to take her slave-woman Hagar as a wife and then, after he has done so, orders him to send both Hagar and her child, Ishmael, away. Abraham, who has consistently coordinated things in order that God’s promise of countless offspring might be fulfilled, sees the cunning of Sarah’s demand and consents, banishing Hagar and Ishmael. Genesis tells us that when Hagar’s water was gone, “she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went away and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, ‘Do not let me look upon the death of the child.’ And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar and said, ‘What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.’ Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink” (Genesis 21:15-19). From rejection, God brings hope. From the plans of those who would banish and plot and destroy, God brings abundant life. Ishmael grows to become a laudable leader, whose sons are called princes by Genesis (25:16). He is the ancestor whom one of the world’s greatest religions venerates, the person the Qur’an describes as “true of his promise, and a messenger, a prophet (19:54).” The infant weeping in the wilderness, the rejected son, has become a servant of God.

Dearest God, God of the wanderer and the recluse, God of the desert and the wind, stay with us. In our Sarah-like slyness and Abraham-like orchestrating, in our dreaming and scheming, in our strivings to become queens and kings, stay with us, for we know not what we do.

“Will it make many supplications to you? Will it speak soft words to you? Will it make a covenant with you to be taken as your servant forever? Will you play with it as with a bird, or will you put it on leash for your girls? Will traders bargain over it? Will they divide it up among the merchants? (Job 41:3-6)”

Call me Ishmael. In a book by Daniel Quinn, Ishmael is a gorilla who, in a series of philosophical dialogues modeled on Plato’s *Republic*, explains to a man—the narrator of the book—how people are plundering the planet of its natural resources at an unsustainable rate. Ishmael explains that we live under a particular mythology that began about 10,000 years ago, a

mythology that claims—as the first chapter of Genesis does—that humans are the apex and final act of creation. Now that humans are here, Ishmael the gorilla explains, they believe it is both their right and their calling to conquer creation and all the creatures within it. Only a few groups of people persevere, Ishmael explains, who know how to live in symbiotic relationship with the earth—and these are the people that we label “primitive.” In Ishmael’s words, we are the Takers, and they are the Leavers.

Rooted in this reading of the world, Ishmael offers an exegesis of the story of Cain and Abel. In Ishmael’s telling, Abel is a shepherd—someone we would call a primitive person, or in Ishmael’s parlance, a Leaver—whereas Cain is a hunter-gatherer, or a Taker. The murder of Abel by Cain therefore becomes a metaphor for the conquering of Leavers by Takers, the beginning of a new worldview in which humans believe they are entitled to ravish and rape God’s created order. Such is the state of the world now, Ishmael teaches, and ends with a warning: if we do not change our course quickly and become stewards of the creation, the last life left to lose will be our own.

Although the author’s argument does not ring completely true, Quinn’s Ishmael offers a much-needed reminder in a world of petroleum, plastics, and pesticides: we are put on this earth not to destroy, but to preserve; and any person, corporation or government who would tell us otherwise is acting contrary to God’s will. We cannot capture Leviathan. We may not capture Leviathan.

Dearest God, God of the stream and the stars, God of the mouse and the mammoth, stay with us. In our Cain-like plundering, in our waste and our excess, in our strivings to become masters of the earth, stay with us, for we know not what we do.

“Can you fill its skin with harpoons, or its head with fishing spears? Lay hands on it; think of the battle; you will not do it again! Any hope of capturing it will be disappointed; were not even the gods overwhelmed at the sight of it?” (Job 41:7-9)

Call me Ishmael. Leviathan, as understood by biblical scholars, does not refer specifically to a whale, as Melville had it in *Moby Dick*, but is some combination of fire-breathing multi-headed dragon-like sea monster. More importantly, of course, Leviathan is a metaphor—a metaphor that neither Ahab, nor Abraham, neither Sarah nor any of us have understood. When we listen to the stories of three Ishmaels, we hear that there is an innate human instinct to conquer the unconquerable, to master that which would not be mastered, to take what is not ours for the taking. We often strive to capture Leviathan, to possess it and know it and make it ours, even when such striving is against God’s plan, against Jesus’ gospel, against the work of the Holy Spirit in the world. This is what God explained to Job, and Job got it. Job became an Ishmael.

Let us be called Ishmael. Let us be the ones who innocently answer the call of the sea, let us be the ones who find hope in rejection, let us be the ones who teach others that the world is not meant for our consumption. Let us be called Ishmael, ever in awe of Leviathan’s power and majesty rather than hunting with harpoons, ever bowed in praise to our God rather than trying to stand atop the world. Call me Ishmael. Call each one of us Ishmael.

Dearest God, God of Leviathan and each of us, God of the simple and the unknowable, stay with us. In our Job-like fear, in our boasting and our grasping, in our strivings to hook Leviathan, stay with us, for we know not what we do.

“No one is so fierce as to dare to stir it up. Who can stand before it? Who can confront it and be safe?—under the whole heaven, who?” (Job 41:10-11)

Stay with us, dearest God, stay with us when we reject you and defy you. Do not leave us, for it is then that we need you most. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.