



## THE BIBLE IN *MOBY DICK*

One of the themes of major importance that makes the reader appreciate *Moby Dick*'s complexity is the names that Melville gives to its characters (both men and vessels), many of which are from the **Bible**.

In the very first line of the novel, the narrator says: "Call me **Ishmael**". Ishmael was Abraham's illegitimate son and was cast away into the desert after Isaac (the legitimate son) was born. By contrast with his biblical namesake<sup>1</sup>, Melville's Ishmael wanders upon the sea – in the end, he's a castaway<sup>2</sup>. Each Ishmael experiences a miraculous rescue – in the Bible from thirst, in the novel from drowning.

The biblical **Ahab** was an evil king who led the Israelites into a life of idolatry. Melville's Ahab (the protagonist of the novel) is obsessed with Moby Dick (the antagonist), an idol that causes the death of his crew.

**Elijah** was a prophet who predicted the death of King Ahab. Melville's Elijah predicts the tragic end of the tyrannical Captain Ahab.

Father Mapple uses **Jonah**'s story to preach<sup>3</sup> about man's disobedience of God's commandments. The prophet Jonah had disobeyed the orders of God, who roused a storm to punish him. Only when his ship's crew threw Jonah overboard, did the storm die down. Jonah was swallowed by "a great fish" (a whale). When he managed to escape from the sea creature, he made sure he followed God's wishes.

The **Jeroboam** (the ship met by the *Pequod*) derives her name from the first king of the northern Kingdom of Israel. He didn't obey God's orders nor did he care about the warnings of prophets. The biblical **Gabriel** was not only the angel of death and punishment, but also of revelation and annunciation. Melville's crazy Gabriel, instead, is only a bearer of bad news and the crew is afraid of his prophecies.

The ship that saves Ishmael, the **Rachel**, is named after Joseph and Benjamin's mother, who cried with pain for her lost children. Also the captain of the *Rachel* is desperately looking for his lost child, but he will only find an orphan, Ishmael.

---

<sup>1</sup> *namesake*: a person or thing having the same name as another person or thing.

<sup>2</sup> *castaway*: a person who has escaped from a ship that has sunk.

<sup>3</sup> *preach*: to give a religious speech in a church during a service.



*Jonah and the Whale*  
(P. Lastman, 1621)