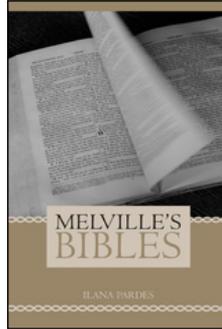


○ REVIEW OF ILANA PARDES, *MELVILLE'S BIBLES* (BERKELEY: UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS, 2008)

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Ilana Parades' slim *Melville's Bibles* is full to the margins with subtle pleasures. It is, firstly and perhaps most importantly, that rare serious academic book that is an unadulterated pleasure to read. Secondly, Parades offers a rigorous and far-reaching literary analysis that is at the same time a celebration of the possibilities of reading and writing as socially significant acts. Moreover, she manages to draw out new and surprising dimensions from a text that has been picked over by countless readers and critics for more than 150 years. However, despite the complexity of her layered, finely-crafted argument, Parades never allows her analysis to overcome the obvious pleasure she takes in reading the American novelist Herman Melville in light of the Bible. Through a detailed study of Melville's work, Parades presents the Bible as narrative, as cultural exemplar, and as a discursive object deeply embedded in popular American narrative:

Both the Bible and *Moby-Dick*, I should add, have acquired pivotal cultural positions even though few of their readers have read them from cover to cover ... But the grand impact of these two books does not depend on such thorough readings: it seems to lie in their astounding power to ignite the imagination, to generate new interpretations and new adaptations in every possible realm in each and every generation. They are the kind of big cultural narratives one knows and responds to even without having read them (154).

Though the book is called *Melville's Bibles*, Parades focuses almost exclusively on Melville's massive 1851 novel *Moby-Dick* – which is at one and the same time a 'grand embodiment of the Bible' (17), a 'dramatization of an immense exegetical encounter' (17), a 'vast aesthetic-hermeneutic project' (3), and 'a grand political vision' (122) – and the ways in which it draws on characters and events from the Hebrew Bible. Parades teases out the allegorical lines that connect the divine realm with the distinctly human realm of the *Pequod*, the whaling ship where much of *Moby-Dick*'s action takes place. Parades sets out an ambitious, innovative exegetical scheme for her five main chapters, setting 'five principle biblical texts/characters in *Moby-Dick* – Job,

Jonah, Ishmael, Ahab, and Rachel – against five modes of biblical exegesis in antebellum America: literary exegesis, biblical encyclopaedias, Holy Land travel narratives, political sermons, and women’s Bibles’ (4). She devotes much of her time to popular forms of exegesis and takes a broad view of what constitutes ‘biblical criticism’; indeed, Pardes argues that Melville himself consciously violated boundaries and challenged conventional categories: ‘Exegesis, for Melville, means above all to open up potentialities, to take typology beyond its limits, to experiment with the possibility of thinking that Ishmael (or any other crew member for that matter) could simultaneously be a Jonah, an Ahab, a Job, or a Rachel’ (10). In light of this, Pardes uses the novel’s characters to explore a number of different biblical exemplars; for example, the narrator Ishmael serves not only as an analogue for the biblical Ishmael, but also for King Ahab, for Job, and for others.

In what is perhaps the greatest strength in a book that moves from strength to strength, Pardes convincingly and coherently draws out the many subversive elements in Melville’s work. *Moby-Dick* emerged out of what historian John Butler calls ‘the antebellum spiritual hothouse,’ a time of profound religious, scientific, and political upheaval in which the Bible became a highly politicised object in the United States. In turn, biblical exegesis served as a powerful political tool on both sides of the arguments over slavery, women’s suffrage, and American expansionism. In such times, Pardes argues, Melville’s re-negotiation of biblical narrative and biblical criticism was nothing short of an act of *protest*, a private rebellion forever captured in a quintessentially American novel.

This rebellion is visible even in the most basic choices that Melville made when constructing *Moby-Dick*, down to and including the name he gives his narrator (and often his own proxy in the text): ‘As the name of a biblical outcast and one that became part and parcel of the definition of the Islamic Orient, “Ishmael” could not be used – as “Abraham” and “Moses” could – to corroborate the image of America as a New Israel’ (83-84). Time and again, Melville chooses to read against the grain rather than attempting to harmonise or redeem the text: ‘Melville’s critique... is bound up with his challenge to the all too common tendency to mitigate the radicality of the biblical text. He foregrounds the anomalies and oddities of the Hebrew canon, countertraditions such as Job, Jonah, and Ecclesiastes that challenge predominant presuppositions of biblical belief’ (2). Not only was Melville part of a larger effort to ‘rejuvenate the Bible and transform it from a book justified by theology to one justified by culture’ (6), Pardes argues that his subversion carries over also to questions of interpretation: ‘In *Moby-Dick* he not only ventured to fashion a grand new, inverted Bible, in which biblical rebels and outcasts assume central stage, but also aspired at the same time to comment on every imaginable mode of biblical interpretation, calling for a radical reconsideration of the politics of biblical reception ... Melville opens up the question of what counts as Bible and what counts as interpretation’ (1).

Having concisely laid her groundwork, Pardes, in her first chapter, reads *Moby-Dick* alongside both this aesthetic turn in biblical studies and the book of Job. Here, Ishmael ‘continues the momentous, mythical quarrel of the biblical rebel with God’ (26-27) begun in Job; however, in Pardes’ reading, there is more than one Job aboard the *Pequod*, including the doomed Captain Ahab, who ‘towers above all the other *Pequod* mariners in his tragic Joban grandeur... It is in his blasphemous and scarred language that Job’s cry breaks forth with unique force’ (35). In the following chapter, Pardes likewise pairs the story of Jonah with John Kitto’s popular and highly influential 1845 *Cyclopedia of Biblical Literature*. ‘What new interpretations would emerge,’ she asks, ‘once Jonah is set in a context where intimate encounters with the bodies of great fish

are a daily experience?’ (47). In the third chapter, one of the book’s most intriguing sections, Pardes considers the biblical Ishmael in relation with popular Holy Land travel narratives: ‘for many Americans in the nineteenth century the only way to capture the “true” Oriental significance of biblical figures and biblical scenes was to tour the Holy Land and observe the customs of the contemporary Easterners’ (75). Against such works, *Moby-Dick* stands as ‘a counterpilgrimage that calls for a voyage whose purpose is not to visit the well-known sacred sites of Palestine, Sinai, and Arabia Petra but to seek revelation in what remains uncharted in Holy Land travel narratives’ (77). Melville uses this pilgrimage to what Pardes calls ‘the Holy Sea’ to critique the foundational American concept of Manifest Destiny, which envisioned America as a land and a people chosen by God:

Melville’s exegetical voyage sets out to lay bare what American travelers failed to chart in their readings of Genesis: the fragile distinctions between Isaac and Ishmael, the interconnectedness of their lives ... The boundaries between the chosen and the nonchosen in the biblical text are never as stable and decisive as the discourse of Manifest Destiny would have it ... However central, chosenness remains one of the most obscure and fragile of all biblical concepts (95–96).

In the next chapter, ‘Ahab, Idolatry, and the Question of Possession,’ Pardes further explores the political ramifications of biblical narratives for an expansionist America. Her fifth and final chapter stakes out very different territory in examining the biblical Rachel in light of an incident late in *Moby-Dick* when the *Pequod* happens across a whaling ship named *Rachel*. After refusing to help the stricken vessel, Ahab sails off to his fateful, fatal encounter with the titular white whale. As *Moby-Dick* draws to a close, Ishmael is left stranded alone on the expanse of the sea, floating on a piece of flotsam left by the sinking *Pequod* – which falls victim to Ahab’s madness much as America would soon fall victim to the Civil War – only to be rescued by the *Rachel*. Filtering her reading of this moment by way of a fascinating tour through popular illustrated women’s Bibles of the day, Pardes gives Rachel an important, even salvific, role in the narrative: ‘She seems to call upon Ishmael to bear witness, to tell the tale, against the overwhelming whirlpool of disaster’ (147).

If, upon finishing *Melville’s Bibles*, one suspects that Pardes occasionally engages in too wild a flight of fancy, she can perhaps be forgiven this because of the sheer audacity of her reading, especially given how difficult it is to say anything new about a classic text like *Moby-Dick*. If she never explains explicitly just how politically relevant such an analysis is for us in the early twenty-first century, she must certainly be forgiven because the book is so challenging and clearly written that she simply doesn’t have to. Perhaps the highest praise I can offer Ilana Pardes’ persuasive, coherent study is to note that, upon finishing it, I felt compelled to revisit Melville’s masterwork for myself, venturing into its pages for the first time in almost two decades.