

## HERMAN MELVILLE, ILLUMINATED BY THE MESSAGE

### QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION AND GROUP DISCUSSION

#### GENERAL QUESTIONS

1. Read the Introduction. Share anything that strikes you or raises questions and discuss them with others.
2. What do you think of the idea of taking excerpts from famous literary authors and combining them with passages from the Bible?
3. How do you react—positively or negatively—to the contemporary translation of the Scriptures from *The Message* that is paired with each literary passage. Give specific examples.
4. Do you feel that prayer can be triggered in this way? Why or why not? What is your definition of prayer?
5. Who are other authors who have inspired you? Explain why and how.
6. Is art in general a portal to prayer for you? Explain your answer or give examples.
7. What else encourages or inspires you to pray? Name these inspirations.
8. Do you ever get “stuck” trying to pray? What happens when you do? If you are never “stuck,” why do you think that is so?
9. What is the difference for you (if any) between “religious” or “spiritual” writing and “secular” or “literary” writing? Explain your answer.
10. Can you learn how to pray from those who do not share your exact beliefs? Why or why not? Give examples if you can.

#### SPECIFIC QUESTIONS

1. On page 16 is the iconic opening line of *Moby Dick*. The name “Ishmael” is packed with meaning in the biblical story of Abraham and the identity of the Hebrew people. What do people call you? How do you discover the story of God and your own identity?
2. A life of virtue is often challenged by temptations to expediency and advantage. The quote on page 22 is from a sermon delivered in the whalers’ chapel before the ship departs. In what ways can you apply the passage from Psalm 37 on the facing page to your own voyage?
3. As *Moby Dick*’s narrator Ishmael gets to know his pagan bunkmate, Queequeg, his fear of the tattooed cannibal changes to admiration and even affection. The gospel command of love on page 29 and Ishmael’s experience on the facing page reflects the process. What experiences of love have challenged and changed your prejudices?
4. Melville is rather derisive of religion and the practices of “religionists” on page 32, as is the prophet Amos on the facing page. How do you see religion and the religious practices of your own faith tradition sometimes contributing to hypocrisy?
5. The New Testament epistle of James on page 39 identifies the source of all conflict as the personal desire to have things our own way. On the facing page, Melville compares the battlefield with the deck of a whaling ship, the conflict of war with the struggle of man against whale. Describe the last time “my will be done” ruined your day.
6. We are often our own worst enemies. On page 56 Captain Ahab projects all his interior conflicts onto the white whale, Moby Dick. It proves to be his undoing. How does the passage from the Book of Wisdom on the facing page address the experiences you’ve had?
7. Melville sees in the poem Art on page 76 that “unlike things must meet and mate” in order to form the stuff of life. Do you see irony and even humor in the juxtaposition of Nathanael and a “real Israelite” without a false bone in his body? Remember that “Jacob’s mystic heart” in the Genesis story was cunning and deceitful.
8. In his South Pacific novel *Typee*, Melville studies the impact of European visitors on primitive islander culture. Contrast the passage on page 106 with the facing passage from the Gospel of John. How does the influence of western culture contrast with the invitation of the gospel?
9. In Melville’s first novel, *Typee*, the protagonist Tom falls in love with the beautiful islander Fayaway. His description of her is quoted on page 110. Romantic love is the image of God’s love for people expressed in the biblical Song of Songs on page 111. How do the romantic experiences of your life awaken you to the love of God within you?

10. On page 114, Melville's title character *Billy Budd*, in the sequel to *Moby Dick*, possesses a presence reminiscent of a Catholic priest. The facing page presents the prophetic vision of the Messiah from Isaiah. What is your impression of the pope? The president? A movie star? A baby? Your pastor? Your favorite singer? How does your impression of other affect you?