

# Until It Sleeps: Interpreting Metallica's use of the Paintings of Hieronymus Bosch

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## **Abstract**

This article analyses the theological themes and images deployed in Metallica's 1996 music video for the song *Until It Sleeps*, which addresses the deeply personal topic of the struggle against an internal foe. This article argues that the conventional assessment of the latter as referring to the cancer that took the lives of the parents of James Hetfield—the frontman and main lyricist of the band—should also be viewed in light of the music video's use of imagery from the paintings of Renaissance artist Hieronymus Bosch, specifically *The Haywain Triptych*, *Ecce Homo*, and *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. When read in light of the Christian themes inspired by this imagery, the song's lyrics point instead to an internal struggle against temptation and the evil that inspires it—what in this article I define, in a manner consistent with Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox ascetical literature—as the “passions.” I argue that this reading of *Until It Sleeps* is confirmed by the diachronic references to similar themes in song lyrics throughout the band's forty-four year tenure, as they reflect the upbringing and meaningful personal struggles of Hetfield expressed in artistic form.

**Keywords:** Metallica, Heavy Metal, Until It Sleeps, Hieronymus Bosch, Renaissance, Temptation, Passions

## **Introduction: Metallica's Discography and Themes of Temptation**

On 1 March 2023, the internationally renowned heavy metal band Metallica, which has been active since 1981, dropped the third track from their upcoming album *72 Seasons*. It is entitled *If Darkness Had a Son* and so far has 11 million views on YouTube.<sup>1</sup> Here are the lyrics in full:

[Refrain]

Temptation! x 4

[Verse 1]

The beast still shouts for what it's yearning

He stokes the fire, desire burning

The never-ending quenchless craving

The unforgiven misbehaving

[Chorus]

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<sup>1</sup> Metallica, 'If Darkness Had a Son', *Youtube*, March 2 (2023). At: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x\\_t53a5Ons0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x_t53a5Ons0).

If darkness had a son, here I am,  
 Temptation is his father  
 If darkness had a son, here I am  
 I bathe in holy water  
 Temptation, leave me be!  
 [Refrain]

[Verse 2]  
 So paint your eyes as black as sorrow  
 Hide yourself behind tomorrow  
 The nightmares search for infiltration  
 In domination, captivity  
 [Chorus]

[Verse 3]  
 Return again to where it's darkest  
 Dragging home this heathen harvest  
 And all the children subjugated  
 Manipulated, propagated

[Chorus]

[Post-Chorus]  
 If darkness had a son (Here I am)  
 If darkness had a son (Here I am)  
 If darkness had a son (Here I am)  
 I bathe in holy water  
 Temptation, leave me be

The lead singer and rhythm guitarist of the band, James Hetfield, is accredited for writing this track alongside drummer and long-time creative collaborator Lars Ulrich and lead soloist Kirk Hammett. The lyrics, however, are characteristically Hetfield's. While present in the earlier records, the theme of struggling against temptation has been a staple of his songwriting since the mid-1990s. This is when his lyrics took on a more existential tone from the work on their previous albums. The latter dealt in their own way with despair, loss and angst—songs like *Fade to Black*, *Sanitarium*, *One*, and *Dyer's Eve*, are examples;<sup>2</sup> but they also addressed characteristically 'metal' themes like war (*For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *Disposable Heroes*, *Don't Tread On Me*),<sup>3</sup> and apocalyptic motifs (*The Four Horsemen*).<sup>4</sup> In short, anything that pertained to the genres of military, horror, and fantasy storytelling that could be discerned in the respective oeuvres of the band's predecessors like Black Sabbath, Iron Maiden and Diamond Head; the latter two belong to the famous New Wave of British Heavy Metal

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<sup>2</sup> Glenn T. Pillsbury, *Damage Incorporated: Metallica and the Production of Musical Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), pp. xxi, 44, 53-54.

<sup>3</sup> Pillsbury, *Damage Incorporated*, pp. 36, 75, 86.

<sup>4</sup> Pillsbury, *Damage Incorporated*, pp. 194.

(NWBHM) which so decisively influenced the genre pioneered by Metallica, namely thrash metal.<sup>5</sup>

Hetfield's life has been affected by two very tragic losses. The first was that of his mother Cynthia (née Bassett) in February 1980, several years after her divorce from Hetfield's father.<sup>6</sup> Both parents were strict Christian Scientists. In other words, they belonged to the Church of Christ, Scientist that was founded in the nineteenth century in New England, USA by Mary Baker Eddy, and whose beliefs can be characterised as opposition to any form of medical intervention to heal illnesses. As a result of their adherence to Christian Science, Hetfield's mother succumbed to cancer when James was only sixteen. He went on to form Metallica a year later with drummer Ulrich<sup>7</sup> and lead guitarist Dave Mustaine (who would later go on to form the band Megadeth);<sup>8</sup> eventually discovering the quintessential bass player in Cliff Burton. But Cliff perished in a bus accident during the band's tour for their third album released in 1986, *Master of Puppets*.<sup>9</sup> He was replaced by Jason Newstead in the late 1980s. Jason remained with the band through to the early 2000s (their current bass player is Rob Trujillo).

The death of Cliff took a terrible toll on the rest of the band, hitting James the hardest.<sup>10</sup> Their follow up to *Master of Puppets*, 1988's *...And Justice for All*, was their darkest and heaviest album. In 1991 it was followed by their commercially successful self-titled album—dubbed the 'Black' album because of its dark cover—that sold millions of copies worldwide (and even featured a romantic ballad, *Nothing Else Matters*).



Figure 1. The band members during the *Load* era (Image taken from the back cover of *Load*).

<sup>5</sup> Andrew O'Neill, *A History of Heavy Metal* (London: Headline, 2017), pp. 6, 86-87.

<sup>6</sup> Mick Wall, *Enter Night: Metallica* (London: Orion Books, 2010), p. 42.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Popoff, *Metallica: The Complete Illustrated History* (Minnesota: Voyageur Press, 2013), p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> Dave Mustaine and Joe Layden, *Mustaine: A Heavy Metal Memoir* (New York: It Books, 2010), p. 97.

<sup>9</sup> Wall, *Enter Night*, pp. 244-245.

<sup>10</sup> Popoff, *Metallica*, p. 70.

After years of touring, the band returned to the studio in the mid-90s to produce their heavy rock and blues album, *Load*<sup>11</sup> which, while not as commercially successful as their previous offering, still topped the charts and heralded the beginning of their more personal or existential phase.<sup>12</sup> Hetfield's lyrics have since then dealt with themes involving the pain and sorrow caused by giving in to one's desires—what we would call in Christian parlance the “passions”—and to the temptations that exacerbate these. As can be seen above, in the lyrics of *If Darkness Had a Son*, Hetfield exclaims “Temptation!” four times as if to underscore its unyielding presence. The first verse is self-referential. He describes himself as a “beast” shouting for what it “yearns.” He uses the language of “fire” and “burning” to describe his desire, which cannot be satiated as it is a “never-ending quenchless craving.” For the misbehaviour this ‘beast’ causes, he remains ‘unforgiven’—a title given to no less than three Metallica songs recorded over a twenty-year period of the band's forty-four year history: *The Unforgiven* in 1991, *Unforgiven II* in 1997, and *Unforgiven III* in 2008.

These are all essentially Christian themes, remnants of Hetfield's upbringing that he struggled to integrate because of the hardships Christian Scientism, which is rather fundamentalist, caused him; along with the death of his mother as a result of those hardships. Hetfield's references to positive aspects of Christianity, like forgiveness, are referred to yet they cannot be actualised. Only temptation, leading to burning desire, prevails. The chorus is telling: “If darkness had a son, here I am / Temptation is his father / If darkness had a son, here I am / I bathe in holy water / Temptation, leave me be!”

Here there is an identification of temptation (and the burning desire it incites) with darkness, with Hetfield construing himself as darkness' “son.” But this is not what he truly wants. His desire is *not to be* afflicted by the “quenchless craving,” but to “bathe in holy water.” Holy water is in fact blessed by clergy in traditional Christian Churches to drive away the demons that cause temptation and to become a repository of the presence of the grace of the Holy Spirit, of God himself. One usually dips their fingers into holy water before crossing themselves as they enter a Roman Catholic church or is blessed with this water by clergy during the Roman Catholic feast of Pentecost. In Orthodox Christian churches, on the feast of the Theophany on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January—which commemorates the baptism of Christ in the Jordan river—holy water is sprinkled on the congregation and subsequently in the homes of the faithful. It is precisely the grace offered by holy water that Christians believe helps assists in overcoming temptation. Hetfield seeks this so profoundly that he wishes to “bathe” in this water. Finally, he shouts at the end of the chorus, “Temptation, leave me be!”

Subsequent verses address similar themes, with temptation equated with ‘nightmares searching for infiltration’ and a return to a ‘heathen harvest’—an evocative image of the self-indulgence that temptation brings. This track was released just after Christians belonging to the Roman Catholic, Orthodox and High Anglican/Protestant Churches celebrated the first Sunday of Lent. This is a period marked by increased fasting from the objects of desire—the latter comprising various passions (hunger, etc.)—in order to overcome temptation—in imitation of Christ's resistance to the devil's temptations in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11) celebrated on that same first Sunday of Lent in the Catholic tradition. The seeming co-incidence of the period

<sup>11</sup> Pillsbury, *Damage Incorporated*, pp. xxiv, 94.

<sup>12</sup> Malcolm Dome and Jerry Ewing, *The Encyclopedia Metallica* (Suffolk: Chrome Dreams, 2007), pp. 111-112.

in which the song was released—namely during Lent—prompts one to ponder whether this was done deliberately. Indeed, Metallica had already released two other singles from their 72 *Seasons* album (*Lux Aeterna* and *Screaming Suicide* in November 2022 and February 2023, respectively), which was not scheduled for its debut in full until the 14 April, five days after Easter 2023. Neither of these other songs, however, can be considered thematically linked to Lent.

### Christian Approaches to Temptation, the Passions, and Sin

As mentioned, Christians believe they are called to put up a resistance against temptation during Lent so that the passions might be overcome. It is worth exploring the theological reasons for this undertaking. The Christian testimony, especially found in the ascetical literature of Western and Byzantine Christendom, is that all human beings struggle with their passions. The passions are the natural desires that can overwhelm people when they become attached to objects that stimulate these. This in turn inflates the ego and selfishness, to a person's own detriment and to the detriment of others. The passions, from the Greek word *pathē*, are thus something that people suffer or that causes others to suffer.<sup>13</sup> The patristic tradition—those writings by figures venerated as fathers or saints—interpreted these passions as exacerbated by demonic temptation and as leading to sin.<sup>14</sup> (It is important to note that the ascetical struggle against the passions, though interpreted differently, can also be found in the ascetical literature of the major world religions: Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam.)

According to this patristic tradition, the paradox is that the passions are part of the body-soul make-up that, when properly oriented, assist the human being's progress on the journey towards God. For example, anger against sin is a good thing, and properly oriented lust can be tempered as love that leads to desire for God. But the corruption of the passions by the fall (see Genesis chapters 2-3, which is explored below) means that, without God's help, the passions are almost always directed by our fallen will to be self-seeking and oriented. This leads to idolatry of the creature—i.e. the “me,” the “I”—over and against the creator and other people: for when the “I” indiscriminately indulges its passions at the expense of neighbour, the person cannot possibly accommodate in a loving and self-sacrificial way those for whom Jesus also died on the cross (namely, everyone); to say nothing of God himself.

To reiterate: the passions are natural and are part of God's design. The problem is not with the experience of pleasure that they afford: but with their indiscriminate and selfish abuse. Part of the Christian journey, then, involves actively struggling against the passions with God's help so as to conform to the image and likeness of his Son, Jesus Christ. By carrying the cross

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<sup>13</sup> “In Greek, the word [πάθος] signifies literally that which happens to a person or thing, an experience undergone passively; hence an appetite or impulse such as anger, desire or jealousy, that violently dominates the soul. Many Greek Fathers [i.e. saints of the Church] regard the passions as something intrinsically evil, a ‘disease’ of the soul: thus St John Klimakos affirms that God is not the creator of the passions and that they are ‘unnatural,’ alien to man's true self ... Other Greek Fathers, however, look on the passions as impulses originally placed in man by God, and so fundamentally good, although at present distorted by sin ... On this second view, then, the passions are to be educated, not eradicated; to be transfigured, not suppressed; to be used positively, not negatively.” G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware, *The Philokalia: The Complete Text Compiled by St Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St Makarios of Corinth*, vol. 1 (New York: Faber and Faber, 1979), pp. 363-364.

<sup>14</sup> Palmer, Sherrard, and Ware, *The Philokalia*, p. 359.

(of the passions), in imitation of Jesus carrying his literal cross to Calvary (for according to some Church Fathers, as the divine Son of God the Father Jesus' passions—that belong to his human nature—were always properly oriented and he was thus without sin), this struggle is meant to lead people away from selfishness towards selflessness, from love of self to love of God and neighbour, for, as stated by Christ in Matthew's Gospel: "on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (22:40).

There are those within Christianity who face the passions, and there are those who don't. There are those outside Christianity who don't face the passions, and there are those that do. It does not the goal of this article to lionise the Christian faith as a solution to the problem of 'ego.' But it is striking to find in Metallica's lyrics attempts to address these issues by using language that is emphatically Christian. Given what we have already said about Hetfield's teenage trauma at losing his mother, and later his friend Cliff, it makes sense that his first explicit engagement with these themes began around the time of the *Load* era, when the songwriter reached his mid-30s. And there has been no dearth of such content since then. The first single from Metallica's 2016 album *Hardwired ...to Self-Destruct* was entitled *Halo on Fire*. The image of the halo was appropriated by the earliest Christians from pagan representations of the sun god to signify that, in the first instance, Jesus Christ, and in the second, his saints, are holy—and thereby to shift the emphasis away from solar worship to Jesus and his saints. But here Hetfield inverts its significance with the chorus: "Halo on fire / The midnight knows it well / Fast is desire / Creates another hell / I fear to turn out the light / For the darkness won't go away / Fast is desire / Turn out the light / Halo on fire."

That we are weakest at night, that this is the time when desire can quickly overwhelm us to 'create another hell,' resonates with patristic approaches towards the passions that we are more susceptible to in the evenings when the body and mind are weak; in other words, when we can put up less of a fight. That insatiable desire, when not properly directed but misdirected by passionate attachment, engenders 'hell' is a very astute spiritual and psychological observation by Hetfield. He relates this hell to a burning halo, but a nuance that is missed here is that fire also has positive connotations in the Christian tradition. According to the mystical traditions of Catholicism and Orthodoxy, the charism of the burning heart<sup>15</sup> is said to be experienced by those within whom the Holy Spirit<sup>16</sup> dwells emphatically, leading—in the case of the saints—to an experience of God as transcendent fire and light.<sup>17</sup> This is described as the beatific vision in Catholicism or the Taboric light in Orthodoxy. (This warmth is not limited to the two so-called "lungs of the Church," Catholicism and Orthodoxy; John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, is famously said to have experienced it also.)<sup>18</sup> The halos of the saints are on

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<sup>15</sup> For references to the experience of the Holy Spirit as fire, see St Diadochos of Photiki, *On Spiritual Knowledge and Discrimination: 100 Texts* 74, in *The Philokalia*, trans. Palmer, Sherrard, and Ware, p. 278. See also Joseph of Panephris 7, in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, trans. Benedicta Ward (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1975), p. 103.

<sup>16</sup> See the descent of the Holy Spirit as 'tongues of fire' upon the disciples at Pentecost in Acts 2:3 and the burning of the hearts of Cleopas and an unnamed disciple when the incognito Jesus was explaining the scriptures to them in Luke 24:32.

<sup>17</sup> A New Testament example of the experience of God as light includes the vision of the apostles Peter, James, and John on Tabor (Mt 17:1–9, Mk 9:2–8, Lk 9:28–36).

<sup>18</sup> In Wesley's own words: "In the evening, I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing

fire indeed, but this is a positive experience of salvation, of eternal life. Hell, in these mystical strands of Church tradition, is that same fire only experienced differently. Inducing pain and torment, it is the result of not overcoming the passions in this life, in other words without God's assistance.

### ***Until It Sleeps* and Hieronymus Bosch**



Figure 2. One of the opening scenes of the *Until It Sleeps* music video (All screenshots taken from music video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eRV9uPr4Dz4>).

The most stunning engagement with these themes—reflecting Hetfield's own inner struggle—is *Until It Sleeps*, the lead single from Metallica's *Load* album.<sup>19</sup> I include the lyrics here in full:

[Intro]

Where do I take this pain of mine?  
I run but it stays right by my side

[Chorus]

So tear me open, pour me out  
There's things inside that scream and shout  
And the pain still hates me  
So hold me, until it sleeps

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which God works through the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed." John Wesley, *The Aldersgate Experience*, in *John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 66.

<sup>19</sup> Metallica, 'Until It Sleeps', *Load* (Elektra Records, 1996).

[Verse 1]

Just like the curse, just like the stray  
You feed it once and now it stays  
Now it stays

[Chorus]

So tear me open but beware  
There's things inside without a care  
And the dirt still stains me  
So wash me, until I'm clean

[Post-Chorus]

It grips you so hold me  
It stains you so hold me (yeah)  
It hates you so hold me (yeah)  
It holds you so hold me  
Until it sleeps (until it sleeps)  
Until it sleeps

[Verse 2]

So tell me why you've chosen me?  
Don't want your grip, don't want your greed  
Don't want it

[Chorus]

I'll tear me open make you gone  
No more can you hurt anyone  
And the fear still shakes me  
So hold me, until it sleeps

[Post-Chorus]

It grips you so hold me  
It stains you so hold me  
It hates you so hold me (yeah)  
It holds  
Holds you, Holds you  
Until it sleeps (until it sleeps)  
Until it sleeps (until it sleeps, until it sleeps)

[Bridge]

I don't want it, I don't want it  
Want it, want it, want it, no woah-oh

[Chorus]

So tear me open but beware  
There's things inside without a care  
And the dirt still stains me  
So wash me, 'til I'm clean

I'll tear me open make you gone  
No more can you hurt anyone  
And the fear still shakes me  
So hold me, until it sleeps

[Outro]  
Until it sleeps, until it sleeps  
Until it sleeps, until it sleeps

These powerful lyrics are made even more emphatic in the context of the music video for the song. The video was produced by Samuel Bayer,<sup>20</sup> an award-winning cinematographer and commercial and video director whose credits include Nirvana's *Smells Like Teen Spirit*, Ozzy Osbourne's *Mama I'm Coming Home*, as well as music videos for Michael Jackson, The Rolling Stones, The Cranberries, Green Day, David Bowie, and Iron Maiden, to name only a few. Utilising yellow lighting and dark tones, his videos are marked by a particular style typical of the melancholic aesthetic of the music of the 1990s, influenced as it was by the grunge movement that came out of Seattle, Washington State in the late 1980s. The video for *Until It Sleeps*, which premiered on MTV on the 21 May 1996, won the best Hard Rock Video award at the 1996 MTV Music Awards.



Figure 3: The Haywain Triptych (Wikimedia commons).

What is striking about the video for *Until It Sleeps* is that it integrates the band members into dramatisations inspired by the paintings of the Dutch/Netherlandish painter Hieronymus Bosch. Born in Brabant in the middle of Renaissance (c. 1450), little is known of Bosch's life except that he came from a family of painters; that he was married to one Aleyt Goyaerts van den

<sup>20</sup> Dome and Ewing, *The Encyclopedia Metallica*, p. 279.

Meervren c. 1480, and that he died in 1516. A Roman Catholic funeral mass was held for him in a church dedicated to St John on the 9 August that year. Obviously, Bayer saw something in the lyrical composition of *Until It Sleeps* that he felt could be overlayed with imagery taken from and inspired by Bosch's paintings, that are in turn inspired by scenes from the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. The three paintings that influenced the video include the fall of Adam and Eve from paradisaal Eden which is depicted on the left panel of *The Haywain Triptych*, completed c. 1516.<sup>21</sup>

The second is *Ecce Homo*, "Behold the man," which refers to the words uttered by the governor of Judea Pontius Pilate as he exhibited the semi-naked and scourged Christ to the people of Israel. In the painting these words appear next to Pilate's face (he is to the right of Christ) as a sort of speech bubble, to which the crowd responds with "Crucify him," or *Crucifige Eum*.<sup>22</sup> In the image below, one can see that this is actually written in the space between the crowd and the elevated figures, i.e. Jesus, and Pilate who wears the triangular red hat, along with the latter's coterie.



Figure 4: Ecce Homo (Wikimedia Commons).

The third is from *The Garden of Earthly Delights* triptych, specifically the human eating

<sup>21</sup> Virginia Pitts Rembert, *Bosch: Hieronymus Bosch and the Lisbon Temptation: A View from the Third Millennium* (New York: Parkstone Press, 2004), p. 40.

<sup>22</sup> Walter Bosing, *Hieronymus Bosch c. 1450-1516: Between Heaven and Hell* (London: Taschen, 1973), p.18.

monster from the third panel which depicts Hell.<sup>23</sup> As in the panel, the monster is seen in the music video consuming humans whole—but in the painting it excretes the people it devours into a bowl at the base of its golden throne. This creature has often been referred to as the “Prince of Hell” by Bosch’s interpreters.<sup>24</sup> All three are oil paintings using various pigments on oak wooden panels.

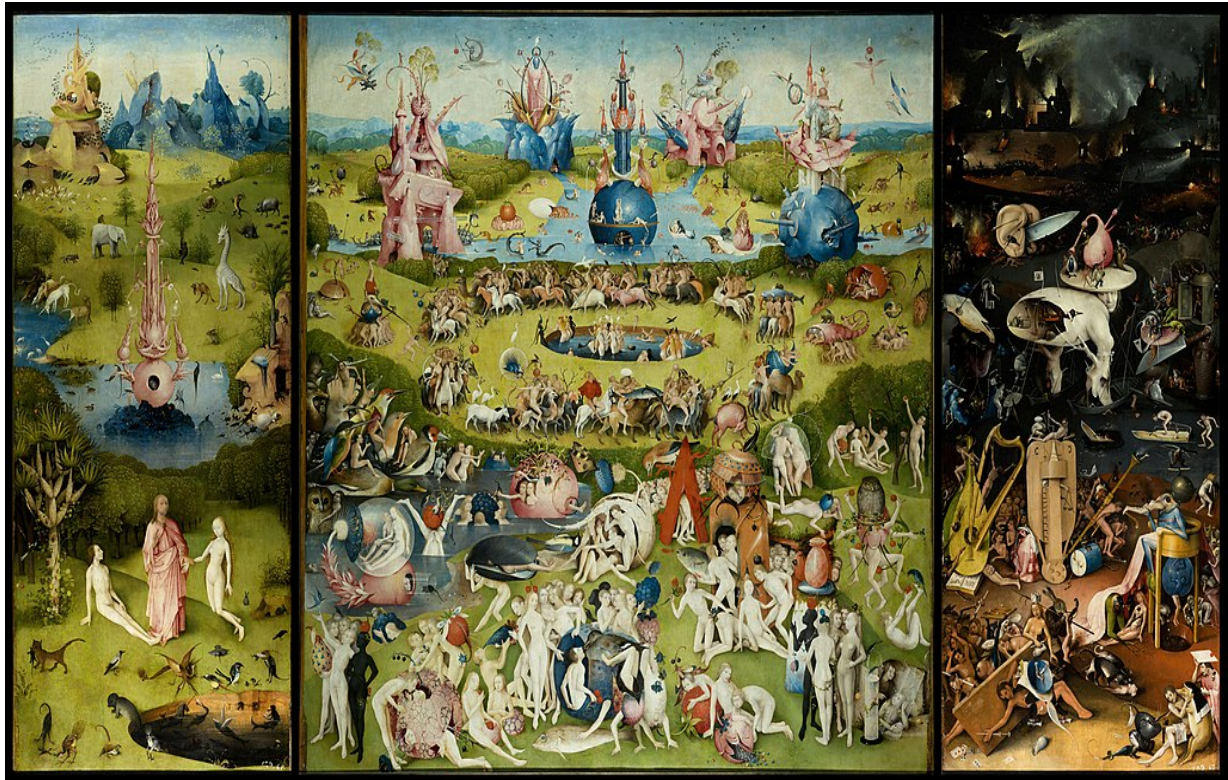


Figure 5. The Garden of Earthly Delights (Wikimedia Commons).

The very first scene of the music video shows a bright red apple from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil with a serpent curling around its branch. In Genesis chapter 2, when Adam was created by God and placed in the garden of Eden, the only ordinance given to him was not to partake of the fruit of this tree, “for when you eat from it you will certainly die” (Gen 2:17). Eve is created after Adam and presumably the ordinance applied to her also. This image is of course inspired by the left panel of *The Haywain Triptych*. The video moves between the image of the tree of knowledge, which has the face of a woman (an actress is playing the tree), and characters inspired by the crowd that jeers at Christ in *Ecce Homo*. These include a man with a crown, a bearded individual that looks like Pilate, and a hooded man with one eye.

A large fish drops into a sumptuous fruit-laden bowl held by the hooded man, indicating decadence. Flashing between these scenes and the band’s drummer, who is also dressed pompously with a feathered scarf—yet obviously in a state of suffering—the song’s intro begins with Hetfield, his eyes closed and head raised, singing, “Where do I take this pain of mine?” A crucifix is clearly shown above his head, which is emblematic of pain. It is embedded

<sup>23</sup> Justin Lewis-Anthony, *Circles of Thorns: Hieronymus Bosch and Being Human* (London and New York: Continuum, 2008), pp. 170-172.

<sup>24</sup> Kurt Falk, *The Unknown Hieronymus Bosch* (Benson, North Carolina: Goldenstone Press, 2008), pp. 32-33.

into a large back panel with a curved middle section. On the squared sides on the left and right of the panel are two lit candles and, beneath them, two human skulls, symbolising death.

More figures from *Ecce Homo* are shown as the lead singer continues, “I run but it stays right by my side,” and drummer Ulrich and lead guitarist Hammett are shown in states of pain and agitation. As the heavy chorus begins, bass player Newstead is shown thrashing about in the dirt at the base of the panel marked with the crucifix as Hetfield uses dramatic hand gestures to push away that which haunts him: “So tear me open, pour me out / There’s things inside that scream and shout / And the pain still hates me / So hold me, until it sleeps.”

The lyrics intimate possession by entities that scream and shout within—demons—causing a pain that “hates” the vocalist whose desire is nevertheless to be held, “until *it* sleeps.” The “it” here has been interpreted as the cancer that tragically took not only Hetfield’s mother’s life—but also his father’s in 1996, the same year *Load* was released—but a literal interpretation of the music video which features the snake from the garden of Eden, a golden serpent-woman, and girls dressed as red devils (not to mention the “Prince of Hell” from *The Garden of Earthly Delights*) yields a far more sinister result: that it is the devil and his demons that are causing this hate-induced-pain. This is amenable with the Christian teaching that the devil or Satan—originally an archangel—fell from his place in heaven because of his jealousy and hatred of human beings; he is the one who tempts people to sin via the passions and misdirected will.



Figure 6. The “Prince of Hell” from the third panel of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (Wikimedia Commons).

There is brief respite as the chorus ends and Newstead is now shown laying prone on the ground, with Hammett tied to a cross inscribed on its inverse bar with the Latin words *Vexo Crucio*,

*Sui Iactantia* or *Lactantia*, which has no suitable translation into English (something to do with ‘vexing of the cross’ and ‘boasting’). As the next verse begins, Hetfield is seated on a throne encircled by thorned vines. A woman in the form of a golden serpent is shown who will later gesticulate, and demonstrate affliction, during the next chorus. The serpent is of course associated by Christians with the devil. It appears at the beginning of the music video slithering on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Genesis 3:1-7 depicts the serpent tempting Eve to disobey the commandment not to eat from the tree’s fruit, beguiling her by insinuating that God had lied, for “God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:5). This imagery will later be taken up by the video, but it will depict Eve tempted by a zoo-anthropomorphic devil which has a human body and the head of a donkey, symbolising the folly of Satan because of the donkey’s ancient association with stubbornness.<sup>25</sup>

At this juncture Hetfield sings, “Just like the curse, just like the stray / You feed it once and now it stays.” This can be interpreted in the light of the Christian teaching on the passions. When the objects of desire are fed by passionate attachment, which can involve either thinking about them or acting them out, they become reality, they *stay*. According to patristic interpreters, there are varying degrees of severity here: but when one enters into a ‘dalliance’ with a thought that will inevitably cause pain to the self and to others, we have the beginnings of what Christians describe as sinful behaviour that can become an addiction if acted out.

The serpent-woman in the video is herself writhing in the dirt—which stains, like sin—and which in Genesis 3:14 is the proper place for the devil, since, as God says after he discovers his beguiling of Adam and Eve,

Cursed are you above all livestock  
and all wild animals!  
You will crawl on your belly  
and you will eat dust  
all the days of your life.

This is obviously not to be interpreted as God literally cursing snakes, but the former archangel who is made earthbound by his insidious behaviour, cf. St Paul’s reference to Satan’s kingdom as ‘in the air’ which causes people to gratify “the cravings of our flesh and following ... desires and thoughts” (Ephesians 2:3). As the second chorus unfolds in Bayer’s video, Hetfield suffers on his vine-laden or thorned throne—a symbol of pride—while a reddish ‘tree-woman’ leaves marks on the body of the pompously-decked Ulrich, and Newstead, now out of the dirt, wipes mud all over his arms, face, and torso. These are very powerful images that, when considered in conjunction with the lyrics, become poignant: “So tear me open but beware / There’s things inside without a care / And the dirt still stains me / So wash me, until I’m clean.”

Hetfield acknowledges the inner passions, exacerbated in the video by devils and demons, and that he is still stained (see Newstead’s muddy body) and trapped by pride (see the thorny throne). His desire is to be “washed clean” as he acknowledges that the passions also affect his neighbour: “It grips *you* so hold me / It stains *you* so hold me (yeah) / It hates *you* so

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<sup>25</sup> Tova L. Forti, *Animal Imagery in the Book of Proverbs* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 71-72.

hold me (yeah) / It holds *you* so hold me / Until it sleeps (until it sleeps) / Until it sleeps.” Another problem with the passions is that they cause a domino effect that can only be overcome by a genuine change of heart—in other words, repentance—asceticism and love of neighbour. Otherwise, the cycle of the passions—from pleasure, to pain, and back again, causing even more pain—will inevitably continue; all that can hoped for is to be held ‘until it/they sleep.’



Figure 7. Hetfield trapped in a vined or thorned throne

The second verse initiates the most potent biblical imagery in the song:

[Verse 2]  
 So tell me why you've chosen me?  
 Don't want your grip, don't want your greed  
 Don't want it!

[Chorus]  
 I'll tear me open make you gone  
 No more can you hurt anyone  
 And the fear still shakes me  
 So hold me, until it sleeps

As the end of the second post-chorus fades, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil raises its arms, the right one above Eve who covers her breasts with her right arm and her groin with her left, thereby indicating the shame of nakedness which, according to Genesis 3:7, both Adam and Eve experienced after they partook of the fruit. (Before this, they “were both naked, and they felt no shame” (Gen 2:25)). There is a dark medieval town in the background, and Hetfield's reflection—with the crucifix-background from earlier in the video—appears in a mirror stained with incomprehensible writing. Adam then appears to the right of the tree of knowledge wearing a loin cloth and with his right arm signalling the tree, around the upper

trunk of which the serpent is coiled. Hetfield, crouching in the mirror's reflection, looks up and sings, "So tell me why you've chosen me?" after which Eve is shown. She is swallowed by darkness, but dim yellow flashes of light reveal her to be holding the forbidden fruit while the donkey headed Satan stands behind her with his arms resting on her shoulders. The scene then changes to show both Adam and Eve, who were heretofore motionless, turning their heads and directing their gaze towards the tree as Eve reaches up to take the forbidden fruit. It is important to note that, like the other figures from Bosch's paintings in the video—with the exception of Jesus who appears in its latter half—Adam and Eve are pale as death; signifying the state of death they are about to introduce into the world through sin. (See Romans 6:23, "For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.")



Figure 8. Adam and Eve on either side of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

This is a very potent dramatisation of the early verses of Genesis, without of course including the discourse between God and Adam from the text. In the scriptural passage, the devil, in the form of a serpent, tricks Eve into disobeying God's commandment against partaking of the fruit of the tree of knowledge by beguiling her with the promise that it will give her a certain kind of knowledge that will 'make her like God' (Gen 3:4-5). That this 'knowledge' relates to the passions, specifically sexual intimacy or lust, is picked up by biblical commentators such as Victor P. Hamilton who point out that Adam and Eve's realisation of their nakedness implies as much.<sup>26</sup> But the way the forbidden fruit is itself described also points to the inducement of passionate desire at the behest of the devil's temptation:

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave

<sup>26</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1–17* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), p. 164.

some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realised they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. (Gen 3:6-7).

Eve and Adam are together culpable for this act of disobedience, since her husband was “with her”—the point is that the fruit was “good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom.” Desirability and pleasure are, as we have seen, motivating factors and goals in the cultivation of passionate attachment: but before one jumps to the presumption that here scripture teaches against sexual intimacy, it is best to remember the interpretations of certain patristic writers (Gregory of Nazianzus)<sup>27</sup> who affirmed that Adam and Eve would have been permitted this intimacy by God once they had become spiritually mature enough to not let their attachment to pleasure completely obscure their awareness of presence of God—and each another—in each other’s lives. That they became selfish and prideful after being discovered by God in the garden is made clear when Adam accuses Eve of giving him the fruit instead of accepting the blame for his own actions (Gen 3:12). Here is the beginning of scapegoating which is an outcome of unregulated passionate attachment to the objects of desire and which Christ—as the new Adam—came to overturn with his obedience to God the Father in self-sacrificially and compassionately dying for all on the cross, through which he defeats death.

Hetfield continues: “Don’t want your grip, don’t want your greed.” And as he sings this verse there is a close-up of the lead singer gripping his own throat and of Eve being gripped by Satan. The message is clear: Eve, and the singer as her spiritual descendent, is in the grip of Satan’s greed; a greed manifested in the devil’s temptation of Adam and Eve to satiate his jealousy, and of their own greed manifested in their desire for the apple. Hetfield then exclaims “Don’t want it!” as a violent wind sweeps through the garden of Eden. Adam and Eve stand still as the latter holds and gazes at the apple while Satan, in the grips of fear, runs past the screen in terror. God, who has not yet appeared in the music video, has nevertheless come to pass judgment on the scene. At this stage Hetfield tears his singlet and defiantly sings, “I’ll tear me open make you gone / No more can you hurt anyone / And the fear still shakes me / So hold me, until it sleeps.” Ulrich, until now tortured by the red tree woman—and at this juncture it clearly makes sense that she is a manifestation of the tree of knowledge—stands courageously with his head held high but, as Hetfield reminds, fear still shakes him, and he still desires to be held.

The next post-chorus begins with depictions of the *Ecce Homo*, showing Jesus wearing a crown of thorns and held by Pilate and his coterie as the former is jeered at by the menacing crowd. The video then cuts to the tree in the garden and its branches falling as Eve sways and Adam recoils: they try to protect themselves from the rushing wind Jesus continues to be mocked. Hetfield here becomes emphatic: “It grips you so hold me / It stains you so hold me / It hates you so hold me (yeah)/ It holds you / Holds you, Holds you / Until it sleeps (until it sleeps) / Until it sleeps (until it sleeps, until it sleeps).” Here the intensity of the passion of anger leading to violence is demonstrated by showing it directed against Jesus, whom we said

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<sup>27</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 38: On the Nativity of Christ* 12, in *Festal Orations*, trans. Nonna Verna Harrison (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2008), p. 69.

above has properly oriented passions and is thus without sin. But nevertheless the Christian testimony is that he truly suffered for the world via his “passion.” The intersection of the Genesis 2-3 scenes inspired by *The Haywain Triptych* with *Ecce Homo* here is remarkable. This is because Adam’s just suffering on account of his disobedience is a scriptural antitype of the unjust suffering of the obedient Son of Man (*ben Adam* in Hebrew), whom Jesus identifies himself as in the Gospels.<sup>28</sup> Christ is therefore the New Adam who is here voluntarily suffering the passion—the external blows levelled against him—as a consequence of the internal passions that Adam, the spiritual progenitor of humankind, succumbed to, thus unleashing sin and death upon the world; the sin now being committed against Jesus and the death reflected in the pale faces of the aggressors. St Paul makes this connection clear:

For if, by the trespass of the one man [Adam], death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God’s abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ! (Romans 5:17)



Figure 9. The “Prince of Hell” devouring demons.

As the song’s title repeats at the end of the post-chorus, the “Prince of Hell” from the third panel of Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights* is shown surrounded by indifferent, pale-faced humans. Presumably they are all in Hell as the “Prince” devours demons, two of which dance at its feet. Three more are shown dancing behind the writhing golden serpent, and the red-tree woman returns to assail Ulrich once more, painting marks on his flesh as Hetfield is again shown seated on his thorny throne. This all occurs as Hammett’s guitar solo, which is playing as these scenes flicker back and forth, reaches its crescendo as Hetfield implores: “I don’t want it / I don’t want it / Want it, want it, want it, no woah-oh!”

<sup>28</sup> In Greek it is “Son of Man” (ὁ Υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου) for example in Luke 19:10.

Figure 10. *Ecce Homo*.

The final chorus then enters into full swing with a heavier, faster tempo, showing the band neatly dressed and playing their instruments in the reflection of the stained mirror: “So tear me open but beware / There’s things inside without a care / And the dirt still stains me / So wash me, ‘til I’m clean!” As they play, the jeering crowd begins to throw fruit at Jesus, and the video moves back and forth between the band playing the chorus to Jesus’ suffering. As Hetfield sings the last verses of the chorus “I’ll tear me open make you gone / No more can you hurt anyone”—with the latter verse lengthened in the form of an entreaty—Jesus’ feet are shown on the cross, with two hands caressing them. The video continues with “And the fear still shakes me / So hold me, until it sleeps,” as the scenes oscillate between Jesus having fruit thrown at him, the band playing, and again to Jesus’ feet. The video then ends with the band members back in their places of torment (the throne, the tree woman, etc), Adam and Eve in a state of fallenness, various figures from Bosch’s *Ecce Homo*, and finally, the Virgin Mary weeping and caressing Jesus’ feet. Over these images can be heard, repeatedly and growing ever more faint, “Until it sleeps, until it sleeps / Until it sleeps, until it sleeps.”

The scriptures, both the Old and New Testaments, explore the type-antitype relationship between Jesus Christ and many Old Testament figures (Abel, Isaac, Moses). But the best example is that between Adam and Christ insofar as Adam, considered in a multivalent manner as the first literal human being, the first to experience God directly, or as symbolising all human beings, is redeemed on all of these levels by Christ, the Son of Man (Adam) and Son of God. It is because he is the latter that has taken on flesh—or humanity—that Jesus, the new Adam, can succeed where the first Adam failed. If the first Adam failed by passionate disobedience which introduced sin and death into the world, the latter succeeds through obedience to God the Father even unto death via his “passion.” Entering willingly and self-sacrificially into the consequences of the first Adam’s sin—the fallen state of the world leading to death—the new Adam cannot be held by death but is victorious over it with his resurrection on the third day. Within this new Adam, therefore, and on account of his properly oriented will—which is both divine and human and thus orients the passions properly in the light of God’s intention for them in an utterly loving and self-sacrificial way—death and sin have been annihilated. The

Christian testimony is that while we still physically die at the end of our lives, this is of no consequence: for if we are “in Christ,” while we are alive, we continue to live eternally “with Christ” in the next life. In other words, Christ’s love for us, and our love for him, conquers death.



Figure 11. Mary weeping at the feet of Jesus.

There is additional symmetry between the wood of the tree of knowledge that vexed the first Adam and led him to passionate and sinful pride, and the wood of the tree of the cross of the new Adam that is the means through which he selflessly and lovingly conquers death. It is absolutely striking to find this imagery represented in Metallica’s *Until It Sleeps*, especially in the final scenes of the music video that splices the Bosch-inspired images of Adam and Eve in paradise and Jesus being mocked—together with an extension of the latter that shows Jesus fixed to the cross, with his mother Mary—interpreted by the Church as the new Eve for her obedience to God’s will—weeping at his feet. Here, as we have seen, the passions that Hetfield sings about, that afflict him and that he desperately wishes to tear out of himself, are inaugurated by Adam and Eve in paradise at the temptation of the devil. But they are also inflicted upon Jesus during his own “passion,” as well as to his mother who agonises for him. These passions, therefore, lead to a real experience of the demonic; of the oppressive and consuming Hell that afflicts the band members and is magnified by the presence of Hell’s “Prince.”

What the music video doesn’t explicitly show, but merely hints at, is that the new Adam is the agent that overthrows the kingdom of the devil and the negative hold of the passions via his own willing passion and crucifixion. This is exemplified in his resurrection, which we don’t see in *Until It Sleeps*. Neither is it depicted explicitly in the Bosch paintings chosen by Bayer for the video. Thus, despite the striving of the band—especially its lead singer—to be released from the passions, the best they can do—and this is no small feat—is to go through this struggle and to arrive at the foot of the cross, where Jesus, the new Adam, has given up his life to overthrow evil and to reorient us towards God. His mother, the new Eve, weeps for him—experiencing her own passion in a sense—but *Until It Sleeps* closes this story with tragedy,

making the entire narrative depicted therein a catastrophe, which is not the Christian testimony. On the other hand, the Christian story is, as J. R. R. Tolkien termed it, an *eu-catastrophe*,<sup>29</sup> for the protagonist of the story—the Son of God, Jesus Christ—undoes everything shown so powerfully in the *Until It Sleeps* music video—the fall of Adam and Eve, the reign of the devil and his minions, and the torment visited upon humans as a consequence of the fall—with what comes next, his resurrection.

## Conclusion

Metallica's 1996 song *Until It Sleeps* remains a crowd favourite whenever it is played live. While often associated with a controversial 'turn' in the band's musical career which witnessed a temporary transition from their thrash and heavy metal roots to a more blues-oriented sound, the heavy riffs and sombre tone on this track usually appeal to allcomers to the band's diverse musical *ouvré*. And the music video, coming from a time when MTV dominated the loungerooms of alternative young people, has generated fifty-two million views on YouTube since being uploaded onto the platform ten years ago. It is my hope that this article provides a hermeneutical key to understanding the profound insights into temptation and the passions, usually the province of theologians and scholars, deployed in this video principally through the association of its lyrics with the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch.

The one thing missing is that the lyrics do not take one beyond the struggle against the passions to their ultimate victory, achieved—as hinted at on the left-hand side of Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*—by Christ who here is depicted together with Adam and Eve before the triptych moves to the fall and punishment in hell: the implication being that just as the proper place for humans was close proximity to God in paradise, so too does Christ's sacrifice open the doors to paradise once more. While Hetfield has shared with the public and his fans his own struggles against temptation (something that all people share), he is notoriously private about his personal religious (and political) views. Yet in recent years, the lead singer of the world's biggest heavy metal band has made references to God—reflected also by the appearance of tattoos on his chest, neck and arms that contains explicitly Christian images—which indicates that he might have hope in this same paradise too.

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<sup>29</sup> David Lyle Jeffrey, 'Tolkien as Philologist,' in *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth: A Reader*, ed. Jane Chance (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2004), p. 74.