

# Living in the End Times: the Prophetic Language of Bob Dylan

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To say that religion – and the quest for cosmic revelation – is an integral part of rock 'n' roll may seem to some to be widely missing the point. To millions of devoted fans, rock doesn't simply deal with religion. Rock *is* religion ... For rock's true believers, church is a concert hall, a leather jacket the vestment ... Nihilist or optimist, epicurean or anarchist, demonic or divine; more often than not ... rock 'n' roll's prophets are the champions of causes lost and won long ago and many times before ... rock is music that embodies, celebrates, and mourns conditions of the human spirit – conditions familiar to saints and sinners throughout history.<sup>1</sup>

When Bob Dylan converted to Christianity in the late 1970's the sense of a new condition<sup>2</sup> resonated in the subsequent three albums he produced,<sup>3</sup> causing irritation to some of fans who resented his overtly evangelistic and eschatological lyrics and, in particular, the demarcation he drew between those who would be saved and those who would not.<sup>4</sup> Dylan's lyrics had, however, even more than a decade before his conversion, always reflected an eschatological consciousness which was expressed through more oblique allusions to the bible.<sup>5</sup> While a number of studies examine evidence for biblical

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<sup>1</sup> D Seay with M Neely: *Stairway to Heaven: The Spiritual Roots of Rock 'n Roll – From the King and Little Richard to Prince and Amy Grant*, New York, 1986, 7-8.

<sup>2</sup> Dylan referred to the experience as a rebirth, '... can you imagine being reborn, can you imagine turning into another person? It happens spiritually, it don't happen mentally [1981]' quoted in C Heylin: *Dylan the Biography: Behind the Shades*, London, 1991, 328.

<sup>3</sup> *Slow Train Coming* was released on 18 August 1979; *Saved* was released on 20 June 1980, and *Shot of Love* was released on 12 August 1981, from C Heylin (1996), *Bob Dylan: The Recording Sessions*, New York), 129, 131 and 137 respectively. Although the lyrics of every song on Dylan's next album, *Infidels*, which was released on 1 November 1983, contained overt allusions to the Bible, only two of them, 'Jokerman' and 'Man of Peace', drew on New Testament material. C Heylin: *Dylan the Biography*, op cit, 369.

<sup>4</sup> 'Don't matter how much money you got, there's only two kinds of people: there's saved people and there's lost people' spoken by Bob Dylan in 1979 and quoted by Heylin, *ibid*, 352.

<sup>5</sup> Bert Cartwright states that in some cases it is clear that Dylan cites a specific translation from either the King James Version or the Revised Standard Version but that 'It is clear, contrary too some critical analysts, that Dylan was not bound to the use

influence in Dylan's lyrics, most focus almost exclusively on the material he composed after his self-disclosed conversion, which rather easily presents itself. Gilmour, for example, uses links between Dylan's lyrics and biblical tracts to demonstrate 'christological' elements in Dylan's later writings; namely his identification with Jesus as an innocent martyr and rejected prophet. One exception, Ricks, surveys many of Dylan's songs from his entire writing history from the perspective of literary critic but assembles them into a biblical paradigm; the 'seven deadly sins' as a 'handle to take hold of the bundle' rather than to claim 'that most of Dylan's songs' are 'bent on sin.'<sup>6</sup> Cartwright, whose invaluable *The Bible in the Lyrics of Bob Dylan* (1990) has been termed 'the most complete study of the subject,'<sup>7</sup> encompasses Dylan's entire literary history as the 'songpoet of a generation,'<sup>8</sup> but nevertheless mainly focuses on the phases of Dylan's career after his near-fatal motorcycle accident in 1966. The first phase, which he terms Dylan's 'folk culture period' is covered in less than eight pages and comments on a very small selection of songs<sup>9</sup> from that most formative, yet least explored period. He comments, in extreme brevity, on two of Dylan's songs during this phase which he terms 'apocalyptic' in character, 'The Times they are a-Changin'' and 'It's all over Now, Baby Blue,' concluding that Dylan used apocalyptic myth in the former song 'to bring judgment upon the society which may read out its Bible but to no avail.'<sup>10</sup> In the case of the latter song, however, he was unable to

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of the King James Version.' However, he provides no source for his assertion. B Cartwright: *The Bible in the Lyrics of Bob Dylan*, revised and enlarged, Texas, 1992, 17. Gray, on the other hand, argues 'that Dylan's overwhelming preference . . . is for the Authorized Version.' M Gray: *Song & Dance Man III: The Art of Bob Dylan*, London, 2000, 7. Gilmour demonstrates that after his conversion Dylan quoted directly and exclusively from the King James Version and that version has been consulted for this essay on the basis that this version would definitely have been accessible in the US during the period covered in this analysis, that is between 1961 and 1968. M Gilmour: 'They Refused Jesus Too: A Biblical Paradigm in the Writing of Bob Dylan,' in *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, Vol 1, Spring 2002, <http://www.usask.ca/relst/rpc/preyprint.html>, accessed 15 August 2004.

<sup>6</sup> C Ricks: *Dylan's Vision of Sin*, London, 2003, 2, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Gilmour, op cit.

<sup>8</sup> Cartwright, op cit, 11. Sarlin also refers to Dylan as a 'songpoet'. in B Sarlin: *Turn it up! I Can't Hear the Words*, London, 1975, 43.

<sup>9</sup> Cartwright's book does include a list of biblical annotations which list the lines/verses of lyrics in Dylan's songs and the corresponding biblical references. Cartwright only lists one entry for 'Blowin' in the Wind;' the deluge account in *Genesis*, but does not include any commentary or discussion on this reference anywhere in the book.

<sup>10</sup> Cartwright, op cit, 28.

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intuit Dylan's 'intention.'<sup>11</sup> This paper will provide a close examination of Dylan's early period to isolate the nascence of what was to become perhaps one of the most famous manifestations of religion in popular culture in the twentieth century; popular music.

Cartwright<sup>12</sup> is not alone in associating the lyrics of some of Dylan's early songs with apocalypticism. Heylin describes 'When the Ship Comes in' as a 'vengefully joyous paean to an apocalypse that will sweep away the fools the author does not suffer gladly ...'<sup>13</sup> and finds allusions 'to the apocalyptic tracts of the Old Testament abound in both it' and 'The Times they are a-Changin.'<sup>14</sup>

The designation 'apocalyptic' is probably imprecise in this case, particularly if associated with Old Testament literature. The 'apocalypses' (from the Greek meaning disclosures or revelations) were products of the Maccabæan struggle written in the inter-testamental period. The most prominent is the *Book of Daniel* (c 168 BCE). Of almost equal importance is the apocryphal *Book of Enoch* (c 170-100 BCE), which has been termed a 'Jewish prototype of the Catholic Dante.'<sup>15</sup> Apocalyptic literature was characterised by an artificial method; the authors issued their writings under the names of great persons of the past (such as Enoch) then proceeded to predict history up to their own time. With the combination of authority and self-authenticating 'prophecy,' predictions of impending events were seen as credible. Many of its features became typical in later Christian apocalyptic literature of the first two centuries of the Common Era.<sup>16</sup> It can be further differentiated from other Biblical literature by the ecstatic visions and the elaborate imagery, such as beasts and supernatural beings, and the symbolic language used to describe them.<sup>17</sup> The label 'apocalyptic,' is, therefore, problematic, given that these distinguishing features are not found in Dylan's

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<sup>11</sup> What is most relevant for the present analysis not to discover Dylan's intentions, but to assess the specific character of the biblical archetypes he draws upon and the way he uses imagery and metaphor in the lyrics of some of his early songs.

<sup>12</sup> Cartwright, op cit, 25-28.

<sup>13</sup> Heylin, *Dylan the Biography*, op cit, 76.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 75.

<sup>15</sup> B Baldensperger: *Das Selbstbewusstsein Jesu im Licht der messianischen Hoffnungen seiner Zeit*, 1892, 9, as cited in W Fairweather: *The Background of the Gospels: Judaism in the Period between the Old and New Testaments*, Edinburgh, 1961, 223.

<sup>16</sup> Fairweather, op cit, 402-403.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 247.

lyrics, and that none of the Biblical references he alludes to are from the appropriate period.

A precursor to apocalyptic literature was 'post-exilic prophesy,' which combined symbolic imagery and visions and viewed the future as an unalterable historical unfolding of divine providence. Prophetic writings are further characterised by a vocabulary of hope and, in contrast to the closely related wisdom literature, which disregarded eschatology and imminent expectation, post-exilic prophetic literature forecasts a last judgment. The most prominent examples of this *genre* are Zechariah, Joel and Isaiah.<sup>18</sup> It is further worth noting that the visionary forms modelled by Zechariah and Ezekiel were 'in nearly every instance' adopted by apocalypticists.<sup>19</sup> It will become apparent that Dylan also frequently used adaptations of tracts from both Ezekiel and Isaiah in the lyrics of songs examined in this paper. This may account for the tendency of some commentators to associate features of his lyrics with 'apocalyptic tracts' and, in turn, to label them so.

Perhaps then, for the present purposes the term 'eschatological' most adequately denotes any ideas, characteristics, motifs and so on, which constitute the matrix of distinctive elements of eschatology. Soulen defined eschatology as 'a radical turn or transformation of this world' and, to quote Schweitzer, as 'a future but imminent act [in which] God would bring the present evil age to a close and replace it with His own divine rule.'<sup>20</sup> Bearing in mind then, that eschatology is an inherent feature of prophetic literature, which articulates a theology of hope, the term prophetic may best describe the qualities of Bob Dylan's words which could 'mesmerize an audience.'<sup>21</sup> Indeed those 'who had never heard Dylan or his songs before' and who 'had come to take part in a movement, and ... discovered a prophet.'<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 402-403.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 247.

<sup>20</sup> R N Soulen: *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, Second Edition (Revised and Augmented), Atlanta, 1981, 64; and A Schweitzer: *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, translated by W Montgomery, New York, 1948.

<sup>21</sup> Sarlin, op cit, 36.

<sup>22</sup> A Scaduto: *Bob Dylan*, Great Britain, 1972, 148.

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He didn't have much of a voice, but people listened anyway; the words he was singing required it ... Dylan used prophecy, parable, accusation, doggerel, metaphor and confession to force popular music back to its roots as folk poetry and commentary ... From protest to psychedelics to back-to-the country to faith to selfishness, he pulled a generation along like a VW drafting in the wake of a semi. 'You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows,' but Dylan knew things before the rest of us did.<sup>23</sup>

Bob Dylan was born Robert Allen Zimmerman on 24 May 1941 in Duluth, Minnesota to Abraham and Beatty Stone Zimmerman.<sup>24</sup> In 1946 the Jewish family moved to Hibbing, whose religious and cultural infrastructure was predominantly Catholic, and where the anti-Semitic sentiments of its residents was acutely palpable. With no rabbi in the town, the Jewish citizens looked to nearby Duluth for spiritual guidance, which magnified the sense of dislocation for that close-knit community on the social periphery. Abe Zimmerman attended B'Nai B'Rith<sup>25</sup> lodges and, from 1954, the young Bob Zimmerman regularly attended a Hadassah Club's quarterly Zionist camps at which he 'didn't seem to mind speaking Hebrew.'<sup>26</sup> At about the time Robert's bar-mitzvah was due in 1954,<sup>27</sup> a rabbi and his wife came to live in Hibbing for about a year. The visitors were accommodated above a rock and roll café which the young Robert liked to frequent:

He showed up just in time for me to learn this stuff. I used to go up there every day to learn this stuff, either after school or after dinner. After studying with him an hour or so, I'd come down and boogie.<sup>28</sup>

Dylan had, therefore, well before the time he recorded his debut album *Bob Dylan* in November 1961, developed an historical and psychological consciousness which was informed by his awareness of the extermination large numbers of Jews under the Nazi regime; the conversion of many Jews to Christianity after World War II;

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<sup>23</sup> An abridgement of a passage Cartwright quotes from page 7 of *Life Magazine's* Fall 1990 edition, in which Dylan was listed among the '100 most important Americans of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.' In Cartwright, op cit, 9-10.

<sup>24</sup> W McKeen: *Bob Dylan: A Bio-Bibliography*, Westport, 1993, 4.

<sup>25</sup> A Jewish fraternal order. R Shelton: *No Direction Home: The Life and Music of Bob Dylan*, New York, 1986, 25.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>27</sup> Cartwright, op cit, 119.

<sup>28</sup> Heylin, *Dylan the Biography*, op cit, 5.

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growing up in an anti-Semitic town, and his study with the rabbi in Hibbing. In addition, as he searched to reconstitute a displaced identity, Dylan would also have been exposed to a variety of literary treatments, terminologies and schemas which dealt with all manner of concerns associated with violent conflict, subjugation and oppression as he devoured 'everything he could lay his eyes on':<sup>29</sup>

His lyrics reveal more than a nodding acquaintance with literary figures such as William Blake, Shakespeare, T S Eliot, F Scott Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound, John Steinbeck, Allen Ginsberg, British balladeers, the English Romantic poets and the French symbolists. His philosophical insights are derived from Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus and especially Gabriel Marcel. His lyrics are studded with references to scientists and movie stars, singers of the blues and desperadoes of the West. And there was always his ever-present allusions and echoes relating to the Bible.<sup>30</sup>

Shelton tells of a large bible which he kept open on a reading stand in his home in the late 1960s.<sup>31</sup> In 1968 Dylan's mother, Beatty Zimmerman, discussed the pre-eminence of that Bible:

In his house in Woodstock today, there's a huge Bible on a stand in the middle of his study. Of all the books that crowd his house, overflow from his house, that Bible gets the most attention. He's continuously getting up and going over to refer to something [1968].<sup>32</sup>

These diverse interests came to inform and influence his lyrics more and more as his career developed. His music, on the other hand, reflects his other long-term passion, American folk music, which seemed to resonate from the very soul and political subconscious of post-war America. By February 1962, Dylan had embarked on what was to be a two-year course of writing protest songs. Of that time he reflects that he 'was still learning language then' and 'was still too scared to sing' what he was writing.<sup>33</sup> He consciously set the popular concerns and sentiments of his generation to an anthemic, 'hand-clapping, foot-stomping form of gospel' music for maximum effect,

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<sup>29</sup> Shelton, op cit, 4.

<sup>30</sup> B. Cartwright, op cit, 10-11.

<sup>31</sup> Shelton, op cit, 4.

<sup>32</sup> Heylin, *Dylan the Biography*, op cit, 185.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 47.

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with promises of an egalitarian future,<sup>34</sup> expressed in epigrammatic terms. When he performed at the Lincoln Memorial during the Civil Rights March on Washington on 28 August 1963, Dylan's 'Blowin' in the Wind' was the anthem of the middle-class white youth of America.<sup>35</sup> Intrinsically much of his music expressed moral outrage and the particular transgressions which incensed him most were the brutality of racial and social injustice and war. The grievances and laments in his lyrics of this period almost exclusively reflect these two concerns.

On 27 May 1963 *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* album was released by Columbia Records.<sup>36</sup> Included on that album was 'Blowin' in the Wind' which Dylan had recorded on 9 July 1962<sup>37</sup> and which was subsequently released as a single in July 1963. The song was recorded during the period of tension leading to the commencement of the Vietnam War. The first verse of the song deals overtly with the issue of war, and appeals in the name of pacifism, for a terminal point or 'end time' to warring:

How many roads must a man walk down  
Before you call him a man?  
Yes, 'n' how many seas must a white dove sail  
Before she sleeps in the sand?  
Yes, 'n' how many times must the cannon balls fly  
Before they're forever banned?  
The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind,  
The answer is blowin' in the wind.<sup>38</sup>

The dove, the symbol of peace, is juxtaposed here with cannonballs, a reference to armed conflict. The second question appears to be a direct reference to the plight of Noah's dove, released three times to survey the earth:

Also he [Noah] sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters were abated from off the face of the ground. The dove found no rest for the soles of her foot and she returned to him in the ark, for the waters were on the face of the whole earth ...

**(Genesis 8:8-9)**

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 67.

<sup>35</sup> D Seay with M Neely, op cit, 324.

<sup>36</sup> C Heylin: *Bob Dylan: The Recording Sessions*, New York, 1996, 13-14.

<sup>37</sup> C Heylin, *Dylan the Biography*, op cit, 13-14.

<sup>38</sup> B Dylan, *Bob Dylan: Writings and Drawings*, St. Albans, 1974, 57.

The dove is also and metaphor for peacemaker, found 'no rest for the soles of her foot' because the land was still submerged by floodwaters, a common purging agent or symbol for purification. When sent out again, the dove returned with an olive leaf, another symbol of peace. Finally, after seven more days, she 'returned not again unto him any more,'<sup>39</sup> presumably having found a place to rest or, as Dylan terms it, 'sleep in the sand:'

The second verse addresses the question of racial and social injustice and oppression, appealing for divine intervention:

How many years can a mountain exist  
Before it's washed to the sea?  
Yes, 'n' how many years can some people exist  
Before they're allowed to be free?  
Yes, 'n' how many times can a man turn his head,  
Pretending he just doesn't see?  
The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind,  
The answer is blowin' in the wind.<sup>40</sup>

Given the dove imagery in the previous verse, the most obvious analogue to the first question appears in *Genesis 7:20*<sup>41</sup> where the mountains become submerged. *Ezekiel 6,2-3* is also told to 'prophesy' against the mountains that God 'will bring a sword upon you, and I will destroy your high places'<sup>42</sup> and in *Habakkuk 3,6* He 'shakes the nations, scattering the everlasting mountains and levelling the hills.'<sup>43</sup> However, the most striking parallel can be found in *Revelation 8:8*, 'And the second angel sounded, and as it were a great mountain burning with fire was cast into the sea.'<sup>44</sup> That paradigm of immovability, the mountain, eventually yields to God's wrath and is cast into the sea. Dylan strikes directly at oppression and his charge is against the intentional oversight of man who 'pretends that he just doesn't see.'

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<sup>39</sup> *The Holy Bible*, containing the *Old and New Testaments* in the King James Version, Nashville, 1997, Old Testament, *Genesis* 8,8-12, 5.

<sup>40</sup> B. Dylan, op cit, 57.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, Old Testament, *Genesis* 7,20, 4.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, Old Testament, *Ezekiel* 6,2-3, 483.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, Old Testament, *Habakkuk* 3,6, 541.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, New Testament, *Revelation* 8,8, 163; and Cartwright, op cit.



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The visual theme is carried over to the next verse but in this case, combined with the auditory to denote perception:

How many times must a man look up  
Before he can see the sky?  
Yes, 'n' how many ears must one man have  
Before he can hear people cry?  
Yes, 'n' how many deaths will it take till he knows  
That too many people have died?  
The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind,  
The answer is blowin' in the wind.<sup>45</sup>

These rhetorical lyrics are reminiscent of the prophetic writings of *Isaiah*<sup>46</sup> and *Ezekiel*:

Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes: lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed.

**(Isaiah 6:9)**

Seeing many things, but thou observest not; opening the ears, but he heareth not.

**(Isaiah 42:20)**

Son of man, though dwellest in the midst of a rebellious house, which have eyes to see, and see not; they have ears to hear, and hear not ...'

**(Ezekiel 12:2)**

Burris cites a parallel in 13:13 of the Gospel of *Matthew* which states: '... they seeing see not, and hearing they hear not,'<sup>47</sup> An account which accords with *Luke* 10:24 '... many prophets have desired to

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<sup>45</sup> B Dylan, op cit, 57.

<sup>46</sup> Some disagreement exists between Robinson, Knight and Skinner, over whether chapters 24-27 of *Isaiah* are apocalyptic in character and deserve (like the book of *Daniel*) to be characterised as such. Morris concurs with Skinner that whilst *Isaiah* can be identified as eschatological, the apocalyptic features it possesses are insufficient to warrant those chapters being termed apocalyptic. *Isaiah*, rather possesses evidence of 'thinking that was capable of developing and in due course did develop into apocalyptic.' L Morris, *Apocalyptic*, London, 1972, 81-82.

<sup>47</sup> Skylar H Burris, Freelance Writer and Editor, <http://www.literatureclassics.com/ancientpaths/dylan2.html> accessed 10 June 2004, 1:00pm; *The Holy Bible*, op cit, New Testament, *Matthew* 13:13, 9.

see those things which ye see, and have not seen **them**; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them.<sup>48</sup> However, these New Testament examples no doubt draw some of their terminology and form from the familiar, formulaic tracts of Old Testament prophetic literature already cited above. In the same way Dylan drew from these literary precedents which were embedded in his consciousness; songs which were 'there before I came along. I just sort of came and just sort of took it down with a pencil, but it was all there before I came around.'<sup>49</sup> Dylan used these metaphors<sup>50</sup> to reinforce humanity's failure to apprehend or tendency to ignore the horror and intrinsic immorality of war.

Throughout the song the desperate appeal for an 'end time' to suffering is posed by the recurring question 'how many ...' This is also a recurring question in prophetic literature such as Isaiah, who asks: 'Lord, how long?' in 6.10; in *Numbers* 14.11 where God asks Moses 'How long will this people provoke me?';<sup>51</sup> and *Numbers* 14:27 where He again asks 'How long shall I bear with this evil congregation.' It is interesting that prophetic literature is again implicated in this instance.<sup>52</sup>

Finally, every verse of 'Blowin' in the Wind' is punctuated with the refrain which declares that the 'answer is blowin' in the wind,' a location in which *Nahum* 1.3 suggests God is domiciled: 'the Lord hath his way in the whirlwind and the storm, and the clouds are the dust of His feet,'<sup>53</sup> and which is reinforced by *Ecclesiastes* 5.15-16: 'As he came forth of his mother's womb, naked shall he return to go as he came ... and what profit hath he that hath laboured for the wind?';<sup>54</sup> *Ecclesiastes* 3 in fact sets the tone for an ambience of patience in which every event or change will occur in accordance with a preordained agenda, 'To every **thing there** is a season, and a time ...'<sup>55</sup> This tends to eliminate the sense of imminence that typically

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<sup>48</sup> *The Holy Bible*, op cit, New Testament, *Luke* 10:24, 47.

<sup>49</sup> Scaduto, op cit, 120.

<sup>50</sup> In 1959 Dylan equated Woody Guthrie, his inspirational hero, to 'the biblical prophets who sang the news,' Shelton, op cit, 81. Dylan later told interviewers that meeting Guthrie, however, 'cured him of his belief in idols,' Sarlin, op cit, 43.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, Old Testament, *Numbers* 14,11, 97.

<sup>52</sup> Morris, op cit, 36-37.

<sup>53</sup> *The Holy Bible*, op cit, Old Testament, *Nahum*, 1,3, 540.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, Old Testament, *Ecclesiastes* 5,15, 400.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, Old Testament, *Ecclesiastes* 3, 399.

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characterises apocalyptic exhortations, which are 'grounded in the expectation of imminent judgment and redemption.'<sup>56</sup> It is only fair to qualify here, as was observed by von Rad, that 'the concept of absolute time ... was unknown to Israel';<sup>57</sup> that the periodisation of time was configured within a framework of past events, recurrent events (ritualised celebrations) and the prophesied future. Even though nothing more precise than 'some time in the near future' could be attempted, there was a sense of imminence and the expectation was couched in their own lifetimes.

If 'Blowin' in the Wind' lacked a sense of imminent, Divine intervention, the same could not be said for 'A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall,' a treatise which was released on the same album and which centres on a cataclysmic event:

... I heard the sound of a thunder, it roared out a warnin',  
Heard the roar of a wave that could drown the whole world ...<sup>58</sup>

Recorded on 6 December 1962, 'A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall'<sup>59</sup> had been composed in September of the same year in the Gaslight Café<sup>60</sup> and performed for the first time 'within a matter of days'<sup>61</sup> at Carnegie Hall. Once again Dylan uses water as the expurgatory medium and more specifically flooding as a metaphor for collective expurgation. The title of the song was thought to be a euphemism for acid rain or 'nuclear fall-out' inspired by the looming Cuban missile crisis, however, Dylan denied this. He had an external, cosmic agency in mind:

It's not atomic rain, it's not fall-out rain ... I mean some sort of end that's just got to happen [1963] ... I wrote it at the time of the Cuban crisis. People sat around wondering if it was the end, and so did I ... It was a song of desperation.<sup>62</sup>

That sense of desperation and of an imminent and inevitable 'end;' the sense that 'God [would intervene] in the last days,' and the sense

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<sup>56</sup> E E Johnson: *The Function of Apocalyptic and Wisdom Traditions in Romans 9-11*, Atlanta, 1989, 68-69.

<sup>57</sup> G Von Rad: *The Message of the Prophets*, New York, 1968, 77.

<sup>58</sup> Dylan, op cit, 66.

<sup>59</sup> Heylin, *Dylan the Biography*, op cit, 14.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 56-58.

<sup>62</sup> Bob Dylan in 1965, cited in Ibid, 57.

of 'living in the last times' were all conveyed in literature termed apocalyptic<sup>63</sup> which, according to Freedman, is 'born of crisis.'<sup>64</sup> It must be remembered though that these are generic features of both apocalyptic and prophetic literature, and that the former was modelled on the latter. Once again classifying Dylan's lyrics, Heylin surmises that Dylan deliberately attempted 'to write a song which would fuse the anthemic nature of 'Blowin' in the Wind' with the apocalyptic conceit of 'Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall' when he composed "The Times they are a-Changin."<sup>65</sup>

On 13 January 1964 Dylan released 'The Times they are a-Changin'<sup>66</sup> on an album by the same title. Recorded on 24 October 1963,<sup>67</sup> the song, 'The Times they are a-Changin'" (see Appendix 1) reads like a nexus to 'Blowin' in the Wind,' with the answers to those questions posed in the latter song encapsulated in the heralding of an impending, abrupt change in the order of things.

Cartwright believes the title of the song was inspired by *Daniel 2:21* which states that God 'changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings.' His only comment on the first verse is that the change in the times will be 'apocalyptic,' along the lines of 'Noah's flood,'<sup>68</sup> but in his biblical annotations at the end of the book he draws a direct parallel with the lines 3-10 of this verse and references to the deluge in *Genesis 6-7* and *Matthew 24:36-39*. Cartwright makes a logical association, however, lines 9 and 10, 'Then you'd better start swimmin' or you'll sink like a stone'<sup>69</sup> are clearly a reference to the song of Moses in *Exodus 15:5* which rejoices the drowning of the Egyptians in the Red Sea:<sup>70</sup> 'The depths have covered them: they sank into the bottom as a stone.'<sup>71</sup> There can be no uncertainty on this point as Dylan refers explicitly to the *Exodus* passage in the self-consciously biblical lyrics of 'When the Ship Comes In' (recorded on

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<sup>63</sup> Morris, op cit, 40.

<sup>64</sup> D N Freedman: 'The Flowering of Apocalyptic,' in *Journal for Theology and the Church*, No. 6, 173, 1969, as cited by Morris, op cit, 39.

<sup>65</sup> Heylin, *Dylan the Biography*, op cit, 75.

<sup>66</sup> The lyrics, from Dylan, op cit, 131-132 are reproduced in full in Appendix 1.

<sup>67</sup> Heylin, *Bob Dylan*, op cit, 23-24.

<sup>68</sup> B Cartwright, op cit, 27.

<sup>69</sup> Dylan, op cit, 131.

<sup>70</sup> Ricks, op cit, 265-266.

<sup>71</sup> *The Holy Bible*, op cit, Old Testament, *Exodus 15:5*, 45.

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23 October 1963 and also released on *The Times they are A-Changin'* album):

And like Pharaoh's tribe  
They'll be drowned [sic] in the tide,  
And like Goliath, they'll be conquered.<sup>72</sup>

In those lyrics Dylan reveals an identification with God's 'chosen people' in an 'us' and 'them' dichotomy which characterises 'The Times they are a'Changin';' confronting the intended audience ('you' or, more precisely, '**them**',<sup>73</sup>) to act, with the instruction that they 'admit' and 'accept' what they can no longer ignore. They are immersed in the evidence and only two options remain; sink or swim. Here the lyrics seem to coalesce with the conventions of 'eschatology' which:

... furnishes, therefore, a special revelation about the imminent ending of that evil world, about the liberation and exaltation of *us* and the conversion, punishment, or annihilation of *them*, and about a new situation in which *we* are taken up to heaven or heaven descends to embrace *us*.<sup>74</sup>

In the following two verses of 'The Times they are A-Changin'', the lyrics continue to deliver warnings to 'writers and critics' that they are facing their last chance, and to 'senators and congressmen' that if they continue to obstruct and to 'stall' they will get hurt. The other obvious dichotomy in these lyrics is that between who will and who will not, be saved. The inherent theme, of the dire consequences of ignoring the word of God, is expressed through metaphors and imagery which again reflect a fusion of both Old and New Testament literary conventions.

Dylan's warnings to writers and critics, just as those to the scribes and Pharisees so scathingly condemned in *Matthew 23,1-29*, 'who prophesize ...'<sup>75</sup> to keep their 'eyes wide' echoes *Mark 13,37* ('The Little Apocalypse'), 'Watch.'<sup>76</sup> In it's context though, it seems to echo the message of *Ezekiel* who is instructed by God to:

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<sup>72</sup> Dylan, op cit, 148. Complete transcript in Annexure 1.

<sup>73</sup> Emphasising Dylan's 'us' and 'them' perspective.

<sup>74</sup> Italicised by the author, J D Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, New York, 1994, 53.

<sup>75</sup> *The Holy Bible*, op cit, New Testament, *Matthew 23,1-29*, 17.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, New Testament, *Mark 13,37*, 34.

... prophesy against the prophets of Isreal that prophesy, and say thou unto them that prophesy out of their own hearts, hear ye the word of the Lord; thus saith the Lord God; Woe unto the foolish prophets, that follow their own spirit, and have seen nothing!

(Ezekiel 13:1-3)

The penultimate verse targets 'mothers and fathers,' challenging their authority over their children. The words attributed to God, recorded by *Ezekiel* in 18.4 'Behold all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine,'<sup>77</sup> and of Jesus in *Matthew* 23.9 'And call no **man** your father upon the earth; for one is your Father, which is in heaven,'<sup>78</sup> resonate again in the message to 'mothers and fathers' that they hold no authority over their children and who are also instructed to 'get out of the new one [road] if you can't lend your hand.' Peace is presumably the cause they would be lending a hand to, and their sons and daughters are the peacemakers who, according to *The Beatitudes*, in *Matthew* 5.9, 'shall be called the children of God.'<sup>79</sup>

These final warnings precede the notion of inescapability which characterises the final verse, and summarises the imminent onset of a pattern of reversals. The reversal of first and last is most obviously found in *Mathew* 19,30 'But many that are first shall be last.'<sup>80</sup> The lyrics of this song are in fact peppered with the sorts of opposite polarities or reversals which dominate *The Beatitudes*: 'the slow one now will later be fast;' 'the present now will later be past,' 'the first one now will later be last' and 'the loser now will be later to win,' the latter of which strikes the same chord as the quote from *Luke* 17,33, 'Whoever seeks to gain his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will preserve it.'<sup>81</sup>

It is this pattern of reversals which distinguishes the characteristic features of 'The Times they are a-Changin'' from those found in both prophetic literature and that which is termed apocalyptic. Another analogue is found in millenarists in the First World who, despite the

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid, Old Testament, *Exekiel* 18,4, 490.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, New Testament, *Matthew* 23,9, 17.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, New Testament, *Matthew* 5,9, 3.

<sup>80</sup> *The Holy Bible*, op cit, New Testament, *Matthew* 19,30, 14 as noted in Burris, op cit.

<sup>81</sup> *The Holy Bible*, op cit, New Testament, *Luke* 17,33, 53.

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fact that they enjoy a sense of material security, are troubled by an impression that 'the world has 'gone off the rails.'<sup>82</sup> The term millenarism<sup>83</sup> denotes the expectation of 'a 'spirit-originated' intervention to bring about the end of the known order of things, along with a welcome transformation or great reversal of fortunes for the oppressed,<sup>84</sup> who hold no hope for the human potential to effect such changes. The millenarist hopes for 'powerful, suprahuman acts of requital and reversal will be enacted – against the insuperable forces of opposition in the immediate present.'<sup>85</sup> Conversely though, the crucial message in which those predictions of reversals are embedded in the final verse of 'The Times they are A-Changin'' is actually that of irreversibility. It is now too late to appeal for redemption as the 'line' is 'drawn' and the 'curse' is 'cast'. Similarly, the lyrics of the song 'When the Ship Comes In'<sup>86</sup> in which Dylan again uses water and flood metaphors, offer no opportunity for reform or remission for the uninitiated:

Then they'll raise their hands  
Sayin' we'll meet all your demands,  
But we'll shout from the bow your days are numbered.  
And like Pharaoh's tribe  
They'll be drowned [sic] in the tide,  
And like Goliath, they'll be conquered.<sup>87</sup>

Like that account of the 'Pharaoh's tribe' who 'sank into the bottom as a stone' in *Exodus* 15:5, and the traditional Afro-American Gospel Song, 'Oh Mary, Don't you Weep:'

Moses stood on the Red Sea shore, smiting that water with a two-by-four Pharaoh's army got drowned [sic]. Oh Mary don't you weep.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> G W Trompf, in *Cargo Cults and Millenarian Movements: Transoceanic Comparisons of New Religious Movements*, edited by G W Trompf, Berlin, 1990, 6.

<sup>83</sup> Which incorporates the 'cognate abstractions ... millenarianism, millennialism, chiliasm, etc' as defined by Trompf, *Ibid*, 1.

<sup>84</sup> C Loeliger and G Trompf, in *New Religious Movements in Melanesia*, edited by C Loeliger and G Trompf, Suva, 1985, xiii.

<sup>85</sup> Trompf, *op cit*, 7.

<sup>86</sup> Dylan, *op cit*, 147-148. Complete transcript annexed.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, 148.

<sup>88</sup> <http://alumni.media.mit.edu/~kristin/songbook/GospelTunes/OhMaryDontYouWeep>, accessed 15 August 2005. With special thanks to Carole Cusack for this reference.

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when the ship comes in the 'foes' will be absolutely, irredeemably, relentlessly and emphatically 'drowned' in that cataclysmic 'end time.' 'Oh Mary, Don't you Weep' has been re-recorded by numerous artists including Sam Cooke in 1964, variously as a protest or inspirational song bemoaning oppression. Although Dylan recorded *When the Ship Comes In* during the previous year, the variation 'drowned' pre-existed in the lyrics of previous artists.<sup>89</sup>

Dylan's songs find their way into the repertoire of other singers, however, those from this early period are linked eternally with the singer's own voice. He retrieves and reinvigorates major themes in Jewish post-exilic prophetic literature, particularly that of expurgation by water and eschatology. The songs seek out a time when all disorder and iniquity will come to an end and all will be renewed. Part of that renewal lays in Dylan's own search for a new, more socially central self, a self he eventually believed he found in his conversion to Christianity in 1978. What was amazing, and possibly surprised Dylan himself, was the impact these early songs had on western civilisation in the 1960's. The lyrics seemed to capture within tight, concise aphorisms the broader concerns of a whole new generation of souls who were calling out for their sentiments to be expressed. Throughout Dylan's own creative and musical search for self, the white counter-culture also found themselves engaged in a secular manner in a relationship between people and prophet; prophecy and hope, which was founded in ancient scripture. Bob Dylan, Robert Zimmerman's reinvention of the prophets of old, reinvented the relationship between art and religion in the modern secular genre of popular music.

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<sup>89</sup> <http://musicscout.piranha.de/html/en/tracks/851>, accessed 15 August 2005. Special thank you to Steve Bauducco for sharing his insight; email communication.



## APPENDIX 1

### **The Times They Are A-Changin'**

Released on 13 January 1964 on album entitled

### **The Times They are A-Changin'**

Lyrics reproduced from

Dylan, B. (1974), *Bob Dylan: Writings and Drawings*, (Panther Books, St. Albans), 131-132.

Come gather 'round people  
Wherever you roam  
And admit that the waters  
Around you have grown  
And accept it that soon  
You'll be drenched to the bone.  
If your time to you  
Is worth savin'  
Then you'd better start swimmin'  
Or you'll sink like a stone  
For the times they are a-changin'.

Come writers and critics  
Who prophesize with your pen  
And keep your eyes wide  
The chance won't come again  
And don't speak too soon  
For the wheel's still in spin  
And there's no tellin' who  
That it's namin'.  
For the loser now  
Will be later to win  
For the times they are a-changin'.

Come senators, congressmen  
Please heed the call  
Don't stand in the doorway  
Don't block up the hall  
For he that gets hurt  
Will be who has stalled

There's a battle outside  
And it is ragin'.  
It'll soon shake your windows  
And rattle your walls  
For the times they are a-changin'.

Come mothers and fathers  
Throughout the land  
And don't criticise  
What you can't understand  
Your sons and your daughters  
Are beyond your command  
Your old road is  
Rapidly agin'.  
Please get out of the new one  
If you can't lend your hand  
For the times they are a-changin'.

The line it is drawn  
The curse it is cast  
The slow one now  
Will later be fast  
As the present now  
Will later be past  
The order is rapidly fadin'.  
And the first one now  
Will later be last  
For the times they are a-changin'.