

Bob Dylan's "Ain't Talking" - The Old Testament revisited- an analysis by Kees de Graaf - Part 1.

Bob Dylan wrote *"Ain't Talking"* for the 2006 album "Modern Times". Some of the songs on this album prove that Dylan has entered a new phase in his artistic development. A phase of which Dylan said he had to go through. These songs had to come out. This phase can best be described as "The Old Testament Revisited". This is particularly apparent from lines which intend to send out a message with a high degree of physical violence, a violence which is so common in the Old Testament. Dylan wants to connect the Old Testament with the New, with the "Modern Times", he wants to show that although 'the times they are a changing', the battle is in essence still the same, only the weaponry has changed. In Modern Times it is, as Dylan wrote elsewhere, 'a spiritual warfare flesh and blood breaking down', but if Modern Times more and more slide back into the Dark Ages, and more and more people start to 'wonder what's the matter with this cruel world today', the old physical weaponry of the Old Testament comes back into use. This may sound a little 'mysterious and vague' but we hope to clarify this in the analysis of the verses of the song.

In some sort of a way "Ain't Talking" is reminiscent of "["Highlands"](#)", the final song of the album "Time out of Mind". In both songs a lone pilgrim is on his way to his destination. In "["Highlands"](#)" however, the pilgrim more or less reaches his destination – "I'm already there in my mind" – "Highlands" concludes, but in "Ain't Talking" no specific destination is defined, the narrator zooms out and slowly disappears, "in the last outback, at the world's end". At the same time it does not mean – like Chris Gregory in his analysis of this song claims – that the narrator has lost all hope of redemption. On the contrary, no matter how dark and desolate a landscape is portrayed in the song, there are indeed "no altars on this long and lonesome road", yet the poet throws himself in the merciful hands of God: "who says I can't get heavenly aid", he snarls at all those who think he has lost all rays of hope. Let's have a closer look at the verses to see how this is worked out.

"As I walked out tonight in the mystic garden, the wounded flowers were dangling from the vines". We have good reason to believe that when the narrator says in the first verse ***"the mystic garden"*** he has the Garden of Eden in mind which is described in the book of Genesis. The scene is reminiscent of what we read in Genesis 3:8, 9: *"When the cool evening breezes were blowing, the man and his wife heard the LORD God walking about in the garden. So they hid from the LORD God among the trees. 9 Then the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?"* (New Living Translation)

"The cool **evening** breezes were blowing", that's why the poet says: I walked out **'tonight'** in the mystic garden. The garden is a **'mystic'** garden. The garden, the scene baffles human understanding, it is obscure and mysterious, and you have to make a strong effort to unravel this scene. It was Hooker who said: "God has revealed a way, mystical and supernatural".

"The wounded flowers were dangling from the vines". This scene took place shortly after Adam and Eve fell into sin by eating of the forbidden fruit (Genesis 3:3). By falling into sin, man dragged down all mankind in his fall. Man did exactly what Dylan described in *"Workingman's Blues #2"*: *"I'll drag 'em all down to hell and I'll stand 'em at the wall I'll sell 'em to their enemies"*. In this case the enemy is the devil and man sold his soul to the devil. But not only that, the whole of creation was cursed. That is why Genesis 3:17 says: *"And to the man he said, "Since you listened to your wife and ate from the tree whose fruit I commanded you not to eat, the ground is cursed because of you. All your life you will*

struggle to scratch a living from it". The ground is cursed. This curse caused the flowers to be wounded, wounded to such an extent that the flowers broke loose from the vines and were now dangling from the vines on to the ground. It is true, from now on man will harvest what the earth brings forth, but *"It will grow thorns and thistles for you, though you will eat of its grains"* (Genesis 3:18), or like Psalm 78:47 says: *"He destroyed their grapevines with hail and shattered their sycamore-figs with sleet"*. However, through Jesus's restoring power the wounded flowers and branches are restored to their original position on the vine, like Jesus says in John 15:4: *"Remain in me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful unless you remain in me"*.

"I was passing by yon cool and crystal fountain, someone hit me from behind". That clear crystal fountain is the river that flowed out of the Garden of Eden to water the garden (Genesis 2:10). Also *this* river will one day be restored to its original crystal clear quality as we read in Revelation 22:1: *"Then the angel showed me a river with the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb"*. Here in the Garden of Eden the narrator passes that cool and clear crystal fountain. In fact he is driven away from the Garden and the crystal fountain because of the fact that he is hit by someone: ***"someone hit me from behind"***. That 'someone' is God. God hit him from behind. Again Genesis 3: 8, 9: *"When the cool evening breezes were blowing, the man and his wife heard the LORD God walking about in the garden. So they hid from the LORD God among the trees. 9 Then the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?"* Although man hid among the trees man was called to account for his eating of the forbidden fruit. God hit him hard with His judgment: *"Where are you" – "You wounded me with your words"*. Man was not allowed to see God's face. *"No man sees my face and lives"* Dylan wrote in "I and I" quoting from Exodus 33: 20: *"But you may not look directly at my face, for no one may see me and live."* Because he is not allowed to see God's face, he was hit from behind. He was hit in the same way as once Jacob was hit by the hand of God – his hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with God (Genesis 32:25).

"Ain't talkin', just walkin', through this weary world of woe, Heart burnin', still yearnin', No one on earth would ever know" The chorus lines *...Ain't talkin', just walkin'...* and *....Heart burnin'/ still yearnin'...* are taken from the Stanley Brothers' bluegrass gospel song *"Highway Of Regret"*. Driven away from the mystic Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:24), man indeed enters the untrodden path of the Highway of Regret and remorse. From now on man has to walk that lonesome valley: so lonely that ***"no one on earth would ever know"*** God's judgment is relentless: ***"Ain't talking"***, no time for idle conversation, excuses won't help: ***"there'll be no mercy for you once you have lost"***. Expelled from the Garden of Eden, man has to keep on walking – ***"just walking"***, no more talking, all communication lines cut - and has to deal with the 'thorns and thistles' the earth brings forth and 'in the sweat of his face, he shall eat bread' (Genesis 3:18,19). Such a world is indeed a ***"weary world of woe"***. But yet there is hope for man. There is a promise from God that in the end – if man keeps on walking through the fires of time- the seed of the woman shall bruise the head of the serpent. (Genesis 3:15). ***"Heart burnin', still yearnin'"***, redemption is promised, the Spirit of the Lord is not entirely withdrawn from man, his heart still burns, still longs and reaches out to the future day of salvation, it keeps him going: ***"just walking"***.

"They say prayer has the power to heal, so pray from the mother" James 5:15 says that *"the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up"*. Prayer has indeed a

healing power. Why does the poet say: **“so pray from the mother”**? Some hear the lyrics as: **“So pray for me mother”**, but that does not make much difference. The poet requests a sort of mediator to pray for him. 1 Timothy 2:5 calls Jesus Christ the only mediator between God and man. The Roman Catholic Church however, sees Mother Mary, Mary the Virgin, the mother of Christ, as mediator between man and Christ. **“Pray from the mother”** would then mean: “pray for me to Mother Mary, that she may plead my case to Jesus”. However, somehow I have a feeling that this is not what the poet intends to say. It does not fit in the Old Testamentary atmosphere of the song. More likely is the interpretation which says that the lyrics read: **“pray for mother”**. Somewhere I read that Jewish tradition ordains that whenever the Torah is read we are granted a special and uniquely opportune moment to invoke blessing for those in need of divine intervention. From time immemorial it has therefore been the custom to recite a "Mi Sheberach" (prayer for the sick) on behalf of people who are ill. During the Torah reading, a special **"Mi Sheberach"** blessing is said. The blessing begins with a prayer for the **mother's** health.

“In the human heart an evil spirit can dwell”. King Saul was once terrorized by an evil spirit from the Lord (1 Samuel 16:14). Jesus had to fight a lot of evil spirits when he was on earth. Jesus says in Mark 9:29 that an evil spirit can only be driven out by prayer. Although in every human heart an evil spirit may dwell, the healing power of prayer is so strong that an evil spirit is no match for a faithful prayer.

“I'm trying to love my neighbor and do good unto others, but oh, mother, things ain't going well”. “To love my neighbor and do good to others” is obviously taken from the teachings of Jesus who talks in Matthew 22:36-40 about the greatest commandment in the law of God: *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets”*. This commandment refers back to the Torah. The poet is honest about himself. He tries to love his neighbor and do good to others but he finds out that he fails. When he looks in the mirror of the law of God, in the broken mirror of innocence, he finds out that he is in a desperate state; he is in need of redemption. He needs the guidance and the Spirit from above to keep him going.

In Part one of our analysis of “Ain’t Talking” we saw that man fell into sin, he sold his soul to the devil and dragged all mankind and the whole of creation into a terrible downfall. All of this caused man to be driven away from the mystic Garden of Eden, to wander about in a weary world of woe. For the first time evil gained access to the human heart: **“In the human heart an evil spirit can dwell”**, and although God did not entirely pull back his Spirit from man: **“I'm trying to love my neighbor and do good unto others”**, man is still “trying”, the intention to love and to do good is still there, but at the same time man has to confess that he has lost the capacity to fulfill this commandment: **“things ain't going well”**, is an understatement. The reality is that through his infidelity man was thrown back on himself. He opened up his mind to the Evil one. It became true what Dylan wrote of man in “Jokerman”: “The law of the jungle and the sea were your teachers”. It also became true what Paul wrote in Romans 3:9-18 that outside the gates of Eden all men became under the power of sin: *“None is righteous, no, not one, no one does good, not even one. Their throat is an open grave, they use their tongues to deceive, their feet are swift to shed blood, in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they do not know”*. Outside the gates of Eden, out in the wilderness and left to himself on his lonely pilgrimage, the poet finds out

that he too is subject to these destructive powers when he says: "Ain't talkin', just walkin', ***I'll burn that bridge before you can cross***". He expresses the depravity of the human condition as he once grieved about in "Don't Fall Apart on Me Tonight" where he accused himself of *'burning every bridge I crossed'* instead of doing some good in the world. There is something tragic in the expression "***I'll burn that bridge before you can cross***". If you burn every bridge you cross, eventually you'll be running from the fires you set, and you are stuck on the other side!. It just shows how deeply man has fallen. Man begrudges his neighbor everything. Man is so proud that he is rather stuck on the other side than allowing his neighbor free passage. Just like Dylan wrote in "Cold Irons Bound": "The walls of pride are high and wide, can't see over to the other side".

However, in the context of the song – the Old Testamentary road, on which the poet had been walking for so long, is relived – there is another way to look at these verses. At first glance, seen through our modern eyes, these lines: ***'burn a bridge before you can cross', 'no mercy for you once you've lost', I'll slaughter them where they lie', I'll avenge my father's death'***, seem harsh and inhumane, ancient and modern battle-cries from the mouth of a cruel warrior where the only law is the law of the jungle, the expression of the same moral attitude and atmosphere you may find in Dylan's anti-war songs 'Masters of War' and ['With God on Our Side'](#). Here, in this song, in the landscape of the Old Testament there is a huge difference. Ever since man fell into sin and was expelled from the Garden of Eden, God set out a plan for salvation. We read of this in Genesis 3:15: "*I (God) will put enmity between you (the serpent, the devil) and the woman and between your seed and her seed, he (the serpent, the devil) shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel*". God built a new road of salvation and redemption, created a history through which the chosen people of Israel would in the end bring forward the Messiah, Jesus Christ. The devil did everything he could to prevent the realization of this plan. He applied brutal force in his attempts to stir up all nations to wage war against Israel, with only one purpose: to eliminate and wipe out the nation of Israel so that the Messiah would not be born and the road to salvation blocked. God had no other alternative left but to wage a war against these nations of his own, so that He could stick to his plans for peace and salvation, not only for Israel but also for the whole wide world. This was the only war in history of which one can truly say that God is on the side of Israel, on the side that's winning. As I outlined in my analysis of ['With God on Our Side'](#), one could also say that after the victory of Jesus the Messiah, after His Resurrection and Ascension and the subsequent descent of the Holy Spirit **no** violence, let alone an aggressive war, is justified to spread the gospel. Zechariah 4: 6 says that the realization of the Kingdom will come: *'not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of Hosts'*.

But here in the early days of the Old Testament the setting is different. It is either kill or get killed. That's why the poet says: "Heart burnin', still yearnin', ***there'll be no mercy for you once you've lost***". As if he says: "I cannot show you any mercy, otherwise I will get killed myself" Deuteronomy 7:16 confirms this when it says: "*And you shall destroy all the peoples that the LORD, your God will give over to you, your eye shall not pity them; neither shall you serve their Gods, for that would be a snare to you*". Deuteronomy 7:2: "*When the LORD your God hands these nations over to you and you conquer them, you must completely destroy them. Make no treaties with them and show them **no mercy***".

"Now I'm all worn down by weeping, my eyes are filled with tears, my lips are dry, If I catch my opponents ever sleeping, I'll just slaughter them where they lie". This verse is

very reminiscent of King David who was on the run for his opponent King Saul. We read of this in I Samuel 26. Saul's continuous persecution of David brought David to bitter tears, despair and lamentation. We read of this in the Psalms, e.g. Psalm 18:6: *"In my distress I called upon the LORD, and cried to my God for help; He heard my voice out of His temple, and my cry for help before Him came into His ears"*. In I Samuel 26 we read that David went to Saul's army by night, and he found Saul fast asleep in his encampment, with his spear stuck in the ground at his head, and his army all around him. Abishai, David's assistant, suggested to slaughter Saul where he lay, saying to David, *"Today God has delivered your enemy into your hand; now therefore, please let me strike him with the spear to the ground with one stroke, and I will not strike him the second time."* (I Samuel 26:8). Now there is a difference here. The poet says *"I'll slaughter them where they lie"* (Plural). He actually meant: *"slaughter him where he (Saul) lies"*, but for rhyming purposes with "dry" Dylan wrote in the plural: *"slaughter them where they lie"*. The poet now puts himself in the place of David's assistant Abishai and says: *"I'll just slaughter them where they lie"*. What strikes us now, as we read on in I Samuel 26 is the fact that David strongly rejects Abishai's suggestion to slaughter King Saul: *But David said to Abishai, "Do not destroy him, for who can stretch out his hand against the LORD'S anointed and be without guilt?" David also said, "As the LORD lives, surely the LORD will strike him, or his day will come that he dies, or he will go down into battle and perish. "The LORD forbid that I should stretch out my hand against the LORD'S anointed; but now please take the spear that is at his head and the jug of water, and let us go." So David took the spear and the jug of water from beside Saul's head, and they went away, but no one saw or knew it, nor did any awake, for they were all asleep, because a sound sleep from the LORD had fallen on them"*. The fact that the poet now speaks through the mouth of Abishai and says: *"I'll just slaughter them where they lie"* and not through the mouth of David who rejects this slaughtering, may be an illustration to his earlier saying: *"I'm trying to love my neighbor and do good unto others, but oh, mother, things ain't going well"*. As a private person you should love and protect your neighbor, as a private person you do not have the right to kill your neighbor and take the law into your own hands. But the poet has to confess that at this point *"things ain't going well"*, he is full of wrath, a thing which he has to deplore when he compares his feelings with the law of God. At the same time he seems to hint that any act of personal revenge is can never be morally justified, unless such an act is not personal and explicitly sanctioned from heaven.

"Ain't talkin', just walkin', through the world mysterious and vague, heart burnin', still yearnin', walking through the cities of the plague". The narrator continues his journey through the Old-Testamentary landscape and now passes through the kingdom of King David, in a world mysterious and vague. Elsewhere in the Bible this period is called *"the shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ"* (Colossians 2:17). King David is the foreshadow and in some sort of a way the image of the great King Jesus Christ, but at the time this was by no means clear. In an ongoing journey, through the light of the New Testament we learned to understand what it all meant but here at the time of the great kings of Israel it all appears to be so mysterious and vague and sometimes even spooky. The narrator walks *'through the cities of the plague'*. This may refer to what it says in II Samuel 24. King David had sinned greatly against the LORD by giving orders to number the people of Israel. The LORD punished him for that by sending a three days' pestilence in the land. (II Samuel 24: 15). From the city of Dan in the North to Beer-sheba in the South, seventy thousand people died because of the plague. The poet now walks through these cities while

this plague is still going on; this aggravates the mysterious, uncanny and spooky atmosphere.

“The whole world is filled with speculation; the whole wide world which people say is round. They will tear your mind away from contemplation; they will jump on your misfortune when you're down”. Some parts of this verse seem directly taken from Paul’s letter to Timothy. I Timothy 1:4-7 says: *“nor to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to mere **speculation** rather than furthering the administration of God which is by faith. But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. For some men, straying from these things, have turned aside to fruitless discussion, wanting to be teachers of the Law, even though they do not understand either what they are saying or the matters about which they make confident assertions”*.

“The whole world is filled with speculation the whole wide world which people say is round” seems to express a somewhat ambiguous, reserved and skeptical attitude towards science and philosophy. We find this more often in Dylan’s work. In the song “High Water” Dylan says: *“You can’t open up your mind boys to every conceivable point of view, they got Charles Darwin trapped out there on Highway Five, Judge says to the High Sheriff, “I want him dead or alive”*. Obviously this “Judge” must be God. It sounds as if God is very angry with Charles Darwin, as if Darwin is some kind of a criminal, a wanted man, to be captured dead or alive. The poet seems to suggest that Darwinism must be at the root of God’s anger, maybe not because of the theory of Darwinism in itself, but because of the fact that Darwinism caused so many people to abandon their faith in God. Another example of skepticism towards science, we find in “License to kill”: *“Man has invented his doom, first step was touching the moon”*.

The poet makes an ironical remark when he says: ***“the whole wide world which people say is round”***. He whimsically suggests that it is in some sort of a way ***“speculation”*** when people say that the world is round and not flat. He may say this for two reasons. Not that he does have any doubt whether the world is in fact round, he doesn’t. The first reason may be that the narrator is on a pilgrimage through the ancient times of the Old Testament. That was a time when people did not know that the world is round. The Bible teaches that the earth is basically a sphere in shape; that there are pillars which undergird the world and which we conclude to be the crystalline rock corresponding to what we commonly call the mantle. It looks as if he steps, so to say, back from Modern Times into this ancient world of the Old Testamentary period, in a world where people thought the world was flat and to say that the world is round, was at that time just mere speculation.

The second reason is that he wants an end to all this unbridled speculation. You just can’t go on indefinitely opening up your mind to every conceivable point of view. Continuous, never ending speculation will never bring you certainty and peace but it ***“will tear your mind away from contemplation”***. Dylan was inspired by Ovid’s Tristia, Book 5, Section 7, Line 66 - *“tear my mind from the contemplation of my woes”*. Speculation is the mother of doubt but contemplation, the continuous attention of the mind to a subject, will lead you to God, as Milton once said: *“In contemplation of created things, by steps we may ascend to God”*. Once you have given up contemplation in favor of speculation, ***“they will jump on your misfortune when you're down”***. The narrator wants to make it clear that there are evil powers working in this world- *“the devil is in the alley”*-. These powers do their utmost to make you lose yourself in endless speculation; these powers hate contemplation so they do their best to tear you away from contemplation into speculation. Once they have succeeded

“they will jump on your misfortune when you're down”. Dylan was here inspired by Ovid's Tristia 5.8.3-5 who has: *“Why jump / on misfortunes that you may well suffer yourself? / I'm down”*. In the Bible we read of that in the book of Job. Job was hit hard by the hand of God. When Job thought he had lost everything he found out that he could always lose a little more. Job's friends blamed Job himself for his utter misery. In their eyes Job must have done some very evil things to end up in a state like this. But later on in the book, it appeared that the conclusions of Job's friends were highly *speculative*. It is true, those so-called friends – who looked Job squarely in the eye - succeeded in tearing Job's mind away from contemplation, into speculation as to why all those bad things happened to him. In Job 30:14 we hear Job saying *“They come at me from all directions, they jump on me when I'm down”*. (New Living Translation 2007).

*“Ain't talking, just walking, **eating hog-eyed grease in hog-eyed town, heart burning – still yearning, **someday you'll be glad to have me around**”***. There seems to be a traditional 19th century Bluegrass song called “Hog Eyed Man”. In 1996, a group called the Pope's Arkansas Mountaineers released a variation of “Hog Eyed Man” called “Hog-Eye”. There can be no doubt that Dylan was inspired by this song because this song includes the literal line “hog-eye town” and also what was eaten at the table: “hog-eye grease”. An excerpt of the lyrics runs as follows:

“I went down to hog-eye town, Dey sot me down to table; I et so much dat hog-eye grease, till the grease run out my nabel”.

Although the image – eating hog-eyed grease - is not Biblical and should rather be placed in a modern Mexican cantina, it is clear that within the context of the song, the Old Testamentary road on which the poet is walking, the eating of “hog-eyed grease”, a humble pie made of swine, is a very unclean activity and strictly forbidden by the law of Moses. The swine (Leviticus 11:7) because it ‘parts the hoof and is cloven-footed and does not chew the cud’ is an unclean animal and should therefore not be eaten. When you are ***“Walking through the cities of the plague”*** you may come close to many dead bodies; according to the law of Moses this may make a man unclean, the more so when you are not only walking through a “hog-eyed town” but you are actually sitting down at the welcome table ***“eating hog-eyed grease”***, it multiplies your uncleanliness to its maximum. But ***“someday”***, Jesus now speaking through the mouth of the poet says: ***“you'll be glad to have me around”*** to explain to you that it will not stay that way because one day *“there is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him”*(Mark 7:15). Jesus abolishes the ritual laws of Moses and declares all food, even “hog-eyed grease” as clean food which may be eaten. Let us be glad that we have Him around.

“They will crush you with wealth and power, every waking moment you could crack”. The poet tried to love his neighbor and do good to others but had to confess: ***“Things ain't going well”***. He has to deal with opposing powers, evil powers, which have access to the human heart – ***in the human heart an evil spirit can dwell”***. These powers try to ***“tear him away from contemplation”*** into a world full of speculation. These powers also try to tear him away from the correct ethical path: ***“eating hog-eyed grease in hog-eyed town”***. But the Evil Powers have more strings to their bow. If all these things don't bring down the poet, the next thing they try to do is ***“crush you with wealth and power”***. A good example of this is King Salomon. We read in I Kings 10:23 *“Thus King Salomon excelled all the kings of the earth*

in riches and in wisdom. And the whole earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put in his mind". King Salomon was so strong in "**contemplation**", he wrote all those beautiful Proverbs and nobody could ever tear him away from contemplation. Yet in the end, wealth and power crushed him, because his riches allowed him to have many foreign women. He had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines, we read that "*his wives turned away his heart after other gods*" (I Kings 11:4.). In this respect it is very meaningful what Jesus would later on say: "*It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God*" (Luke 18:25). Therefore, it is essential that you keep your eyes wide open because there is always the danger that "**every waking moment you could crack**", you have to be on the alert constantly, because if your opponent, the Evil One, catches you sleeping, he'll slaughter you where you lie. When Dylan wrote: "**every waking moment you could crack**" he might have had in mind Matthew 26:40, 41 "*Then he returned to the disciples and found them asleep. He said to Peter, "Couldn't you watch with me even one hour? Keep watch and pray, so that you will not give in to temptation. For the spirit is willing, but the body is weak!"* Every waking moment the disciples could crack, and indeed they did.

"I'll make the most of one last extra hour, I'll avenge my father's death then I'll step back"

Dylan was inspired here by Ovid's - Tristia, Book 1, Section 3, Line 68 – which says: "*let me make the most of one last extra hour*". I read an analysis of this section of the song which suggests that the "**one last extra hour**" refers to one of Jesus's last hours in the Garden of Getsemane where, while His disciples slept He prayed: "Avenge my father's death when I step back", reversing the curse brought on by humanities' "father" Adam. Jesus would then "step back" in time to redeem all humanity from sins past and bringing back spiritual life. True as the latter may be, I don't think that this interpretation makes good sense. First of all, in the Gospel we do not find Jesus saying the words: ***I'll avenge my father's death then I'll step back***" and secondly, Jesus did not come to avenge Adam's death. On the contrary, he came to atone Adam's sins, and through Adam for the sins of all mankind.

I think that Dylan was inspired here by Shakespeare's "Hamlet". One can say that Hamlet is a revenge tragedy led by a protagonist who is incapable of committing the act of avenge. It is Hamlet's inability and delay to avenge the murder of his father that ultimately leads to the deaths of Polonius, Laertes, Ophelia, Gertrude, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. To focus attention to Hamlet's inability to take action, Shakespeare portrays a number of other characters, like Fortinbras and Laertes, who are capable of taking resolute avenge as may be expected of them. In comparison to these characters, Hamlet's revenge is half-baked. When at last he decides to take action, he delays any action until the very end of the play. In Elizabethan revenge tragedies this is not so unusual. What makes *Hamlet* into an outstanding piece of writing is the way in which Shakespeare uses the delay to portray Hamlet's emotional and psychological complexity. In "Ain't talking" we find the same complexity. The will to love his neighbor and do good to others is present but there are evil forces at work to delay and prevent him from doing all this good things. Dylan uses this delay in the song too when he says: "**I'll make the most of one last extra hour**". The avenge is postponed until the very last hour of his life.

How do we piece all these things together? First of all we have to remember that the poet, expelled from the mystic Garden of Eden, is still walking on the Old Testamentary road. To our modern eyes, to avenge the death of one's father may seem weird, harsh and wrong. But it wasn't like that in the days of the Old Testament. The "Avenger of blood" was part of the judicial system. The Avenger is the nearest relative of a murdered person. It was his right

and his duty to slay the murderer, if he found the murderer outside a city of refuge. To safeguard this law against possible abuse Moses appointed six cities of refuge (Exodus 21:13; Numbers 35:13; Deuteronomy 19:1, 9). This arrangement applied only to cases where the death was not premeditated. The case had to be investigated by the authorities of the city, and the willful murderer was on no account to be spared. He was regarded as an impure and polluted person, and was delivered up to the avenger of blood (Deuteronomy 19:11-13). If the offence was merely manslaughter, then the fugitive must remain within the city till the death of the high priest (Numbers 35:25).

We conclude that, when the poet, walking on the Old Testamentary road, says: ***"I'll make the most of one last extra hour, I'll avenge my father's death then I'll step back"***, it is as if he says the following: "Although avenging my father's death is lawful and something which I see as my duty to do, yet I feel resistance to do it, I keep on delaying it but in my final hour, I will make the most of that hour by doing what I have to do, and when I have done that I'll step back. My duty is fulfilled. I'll step back also means that no personal revenge or hatred is involved, I just let the law take its course".

"Ain't talkin', just walkin' hand me down my walking cane, heart burning, still yearning, got to get you out of my miserable brain".

"Hand me down me walking cane" is taken from a traditional song written presumably by James A. Bland in 1880. The first lines read: *"Oh, hand me down my walking cane. Oh, hand me down my walking cane, hand me down my walking cane, Lord, I'm leaving on the midnight train, cause all my sins are taken away"*.

"Hand me down my walking cane" evokes the image of Dylan's "Blood in my eyes" video. The image is drawn of a stern man, dressed in black, hat on and walking up a bridge, an umbrella in hand, in the same posture as when he would have a walking cane in his hand. As earlier said, in this song Dylan connects our Modern Times with the ancient times of the Old Testament. In your imagination you see some wild-eyed, out of time, grim faced Puritan, on a pilgrimage striding through the Old Testamentary roads, passing through the cities of the plague, and on his way to avenge his father's death.

"Got to get you out of my miserable brain", the "you" may either refer to the man-slayer who was responsible for his father's death and whose death he is now going to avenge, or to ***"the gal he left behind"*** about whom he talks about later in the song.

"All my loyal and much-loved companions, they approve of me and share my code, I practice a faith that's been long abandoned, ain't no altars on this long and lonesome road". Initially, these lines have been inspired by the Roman poet Ovid (43 BC-AD 17/18). Ovid's - Tristia, Book 1, Section 3, Line 65 – has *"loyal and much loved companions, bonded in brotherhood"*; Ovid's - Black Sea Letters, Book 3, Part 2, Line 38 has - *"who approve, and share, your code"*; and Ovid's- Tristia, Book 5, Section 7, Lines 63-64 has- *"I practice terms long abandoned"*.

I read somewhere that the narrator might think he possesses a secret arcane numerical formula, a Da Vinci code, a secret formula or something like that. A code only his ***"loyal and much-loved companions"*** will approve and understand. But I don't think that this is the case here. Nor do I believe that there is a suggestion in the song that he would be some kind of an extremist cult leader. Dylan never wanted to be a member, a leader or spokesman of whatever church or organization.

These lines are reminiscent of what Dylan once wrote in the song "Mississippi": *"I've got*

*nothing but affection for all those who've sailed with me". His "loyal and much-loved companions" may be those who set out with him on the same spiritual journey. This spiritual journey is part of the deal he once made with God (or Jesus). In part 1 of our analysis of Dylan's "[When the deal goes down](#)", we referred to the 60 minutes CBS television [interview](#) Bob Dylan gave in 2004. In this interview Dylan is asked why after so many years he still out there on stage, performing all of his songs on tour. After emphasizing that he doesn't take any of it for granted, Dylan gives the following reply: "It goes back to that destiny thing. I mean, I made a bargain with it, you know, long time ago. And I'm holding up my end". On the question what his bargain was Dylan answers: "to get where I am now". And asked whom he made that bargain with he answers: "With the Chief Commander, in this earth and in a world we can't see". His "loyal and much-loved companions" may be those who accept and approve of this deal with God. The "code" in Dylan's work is a set of basic principles which govern Dylan's work and which constitute the deeper layers in his songs. This code can only be deciphered by those who have found out what this set of principles is that governs Dylan's work. In my opinion the overriding basic concept in Dylan's work is his role as watchman on the watchtower, to warn the world that Judgment Day, the Kingdom of God is coming and for that reason a lifelong quest for personal salvation and a lifelong struggle against all evil powers is indispensable. That does not mean that Dylan has the ultimate answer to *all* questions. Michael Gilmour quite correctly wrote that: "For Dylan, the ineffable is always just out of reach, and our attempts to grasp it are necessarily partial and incomplete. Yes, the answers we seek often blow about in the wind".*

"I practice a faith that's been long abandoned". I read somewhere that Dylan attacks here a certain type of religious mentality which inevitably leads to intolerance and extreme violence and which thinks it has the 'secret codes' to tell us how to live. I don't think that this is what Dylan had in mind. We have to remember that in this song Dylan tries to connect and reconcile our Modern Times with his own roots: the principles of the Old Testament. What Dylan may have had in mind is what the prophet Elijah once experienced. We read of this in I Kings 19. In I Kings 19:10 Elijah says to God: "*the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away*". Elijah felt that he was the only one left in this world still practicing his faith in Jaweh, the whole nation of Israel had long abandoned this faith and they now tried to kill him, the last survivor on this long and lonesome road. All altars were torn down and Elijah had to run for his life and fled into the mountains. It may be the reason why the poet says: "**ain't no altars on this long and lonesome road**". There is also a connection with our Modern Times. In the sleeve of the album "World Gone Wrong" Dylan makes our Modern Times synonymous with the New Dark Ages. Dark Ages in which the name and true knowledge of God is more and more obliterated and erased and where there is nothing left to hang on to: "**no altars on this long and lonesome road**", or as Dylan also wrote in the sleeve of the album "World Gone Wrong: "**technology to wipe out truth is now available, not everybody can afford it but it's available. When the cost comes down look out!**"

"Ain't talking, just walking, my mule is sick, my horse is blind, heart burning, still yearning, Thinking about that gal I left behind" His sick mule and his blind horse are not only expressions of the miserable state he is in, but are at the same time an indication that he is getting close to the end of his lonely pilgrimage. Soon he will have to abandon both his mule and horse and then he will have to go bare foot. "**Thinking about the gal I left behind**" is

borrowed from an old traditional song. The “gal” may be the person of whom he earlier in the song said: **“Try to get you out of my miserable brain”**. For a long time, there has been some kind of ambivalence in Dylan’s work between, ‘the girl, ‘the woman’ on one hand, and his spiritual status on the other. He is torn between the girl, the woman, representing temptation’s angry flame to give in to the demands of the flesh, and his spiritual journey which points him into an opposite direction. This has been quite a dominant feature in the body of Dylan’s works and is apparent in many Dylan songs e.g. *“Marching to the City”*, where he is walking on a spiritual road which ends in the City of Gold, in heaven, but where at the same time the opposing, counterpart voice *“once I had a pretty girl, but she’s done me wrong”* keeps on bothering tempting and distracting him.

“It’s bright in the heavens and the wheels are flying, fame and honor never seem to fade. The fire’s gone out but the light is never dying, who says I can’t get heavenly aid?” It seems as if the lonesome pilgrim is now suddenly taken off his legs and for a while freed from his wretched earthly existence, he is shown a heavenly vision. The scene is reminiscent of the vision the prophet Ezekiel once had when he was in exile at the river Chebar. The heavens were opened and Ezekiel saw visions of God (Ezekiel 1:1). Ezekiel saw spinning wheels; their appearance was like the gleaming of chrysolite (1:15). The chrysolite of the wheels reflected the fires that were between the cherubim (1:13, 10:7), as if the wheels themselves were on fire. The wheels in the vision of Ezekiel represent the Spirit of the Lord. These wheels (like the Spirit of the Lord) are always in action, unstoppable, maneuverable in all directions, never missing its target, always fulfilling the will of God. The pilgrim, raised into heaven, is now in a place where the power and wealth, the wisdom and might, the honor and glory of the Almighty God is everlasting and omnipresent, a place **“where fame and honor never seem to fade”**.

“The fire’s gone out but the light is never dying”. A fire may be an expression of apocalyptic wrath and judgment like in Dylan once said: *“This Wheel’s on fire, rolling down the road, best notify my next of kin, this wheel shall explode”*. In the song: *“Changing of the guards”* (from the album *“Street Legal”* which may be seen as a prelude to Dylan’s conversion to Christianity in 1979) Dylan seems to have come to terms with the judgmental character of the word “fire” when he says: *“Peace will come, with the tranquility and splendor on the wheels of fire”*. Although the fire of judgment – through divine atonement – has gone out, the light, however, will forever remain and will never die. God is Light (1 John 1:5). The Light that will never die is the shining glory and omnipresence of God.

Although it was the Roman poet Ovid who once said: *“Who says I can’t get heavenly aid when a God’s angry with me?”* the wretched pilgrim, when he concentrates on that shining Light ahead of him, finds great comfort in this bright shining Light of God, and against all odds he exclaims: **“who says I can’t get heavenly aid?”** The pilgrim is near the end of his trail and he knows that amidst the darkest hour of his painful pilgrimage, he has nowhere left to go but to throw himself upon the mercy of God: *“I know the mercy of God must be near”* and as a last resort, he trusts his fate in the hands of God.

“Ain’t talking, just walking, carrying a dead man’s shield, heart burning, still yearning, walking with a toothache in my heel”. After this uplifting verse, the narrator is thrown back into the harsh reality of things. **“Carrying a dead man’s shield”** is a way of describing how people avail themselves of useless weaponry – like a dead man’s shield - as if that would protect them from any danger. Here the remedy (a dead man’s shield) is worse than the disease and in spite of the poet carrying this shield; it cannot prevent death from coming soon.

“Walking with a toothache in my heel” is inspired by the nineteenth-century minstrel song *Old Dan Tucker* in which we hear that Old Dan *“died with a toothache in his heel”*. Within the context of the song- the Old Testament revisited - *“walkin’ with a toothache in my heel”* may refer to Genesis 3:15, *“He will strike at your head; while you strike at His heel.”* It expresses the struggle, the pain and agony, of the poet’s long journey from the mystic Garden of Eden, from which he was expelled, to his destination, the mystic Garden of John 20, the place where the tomb was from which Jesus was resurrected from the dead.

“The suffering is unending, every nook and cranny has it's tears, I'm not playing, I'm not pretending, I'm not nursing any superfluous fears”. The downfall of man not only caused man to be expelled from the Garden of Eden, but with his fall man also dragged down the whole of creation. Romans 8:22 says that *“the whole creation has been groaning in travail”*. This causes the pain and suffering to be unending and unlimited. Pain is all around. The pilgrim is confronted with the tears of decay in every nook and cranny he passes by. It was Paul Simon who wrote in the song *“Born at the right time”*: *“The planet groans, every time it registers another birth”*. ***“I'm not playing, I'm not pretending, I'm not nursing any superfluous fears”*** emphasizes that the pain and agony the creation has to go through will not be taken away in the near future but, as we are nearing the end of the world, things will get worse; the worst fears of the poet will come true, there is a lot of pain ahead of him and nobody and nothing will be able to escape from it. We are all boxed in until the end of time.

“Ain't talking, just walking, walking ever since the other night, heart burning, still yearning, walking ‘til I'm clean out of sight”. It seems that the nearer the pilgrim comes to his ultimate destination, the more diligently and hurriedly he keeps on walking, not allowing himself any night’s rest. But suddenly the camera zooms out. The picture of the pilgrim walking in the desolate landscape, in the last outback, at the world’s end is getting smaller and smaller, giving us the same impression as in Dylan’s song *“Highlands”*: *“I’ve got new eyes, everything looks far away”*. In the end, a small tiny figure disappears in the distance, behind the corner, in the last outback, and here the song could have ended, but it doesn’t, two important verses are to follow.

“As I walked out in the mystic garden, on a hot summer day, hot summer lawn, “Excuse me, ma'am” “I beg your pardon, there's no one here, the gardener is gone”. There can hardly be any doubt that this verse is based on what we read in John 20:11-18. The first thing that strikes us that it was ***“on a hot summer day, a hot summer lawn”***. In the first verse of the song he walked out ***“tonight”*** in the mystic garden. It was in the cool evening breeze of the Garden of Eden where Adam had his fatal encounter with God. But here in this mystic garden, on the day and at the place where Jesus was resurrected from the dead, it all happens in full broad daylight; it is ***“on a hot summer day, a hot summer lawn”***. *“In the Summertime, when you were with me”*, an occasion where the poet seems to have had an encounter with Jesus, simmers through here.

As said this verse is based on John 20:11-18, but when you take a close look at John 20:11-18 there is of course a difference. The ***‘madam’*** is obviously Maria of Magdalene but whereas in John 20:15 Maria Magdalene initially mistakes Jesus for the gardener; here in the song Dylan has Maria say something different than in John 20. In John 20: 15 Maria says: *“Sir if you have carried him (Jesus) away, tell me where you have laid him and I will take him away”*. Here Dylan has her say: ***“I beg your pardon, there's no one here, the gardener is***

gone". We do not find Maria saying this in John 20. Now Dylan connects an event which took place earlier that day with this event. Earlier that day – at dawn – Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the sepulchre (Matthew 28:1). Then an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and said about the resurrected Jesus: **"He is not here"** (Matthew 28:6). The lyrics here have something similar: **"there's no one here"**. But instead of saying: **"Jesus is gone"** which is what one would have expected Maria to say, Dylan has Maria Magdalene say: **"The gardener is gone"**. Why does Dylan do that? The first reason may be a poetic reason. The poet doesn't want to force an open door. He wants you to think about it and to draw your own conclusions; it may be an intentional elusiveness. Dylan said about that in his 2004 CBS 60 minutes interview: *"They (the songs) change their meanings for different situations that a person is in and they hold up because they are so wide, there so many levels in them"*. The second reason may be that the word **"Gardener"** is used in the Bible to refer to God. In John 15: 1 we read: *"I (Jesus) am the true grapevine, and my Father is the Gardener"* (New Living Translation).

"The gardener is gone" does not mean that the gardener, Jesus, God, is dead and that the narrator has lost all hope of redemption. On the contrary, **"The gardener is gone"** means that Jesus is no longer here on earth but has gone to heaven, to rule at his Father's right hand. To reach that one sweet day when he will stand beside King, the narrator, against all odds, has to keep on walking, to last outback at the world's end, just like the final verse says:

*"Ain't talking, just walking, **up the road around the bend**, heart burning, still yearnin **In the last outback, at the world's end**".* Once again, but this time for the last time, the camera zooms out. He slowly disappears **"up the road around the bend, walking till he is clean out of sight"**.

"In the last outback, at the world's end" This line is again inspired by the Roman Poet Ovid, we find an almost identical line in his "Black Sea Letters", Book 2, Part 7, Line 66. **"In the last outback, at the world's end"** evokes the image of a lonely pilgrim who tries to cross the Australian continent. It reminds us too of Patrick White's novel ["Voss"](#). Voss set out to cross the Australian continent in 1845. He and his party headed inland from the coast only to meet endless adversity. The explorers met with drought-plagued deserts which stretched out endlessly and where all vegetation had withered, followed by waterlogged lands until they retreated to a cave where they lay for weeks waiting for the rain to stop. **"In the last outback, at the world's end"** on the one hand shows the utter forlornness of the poet and on the other hand, that his dreadful journey is almost accomplished. His journey started in the Garden of Eden and ended in the mystic garden, near the tomb where Jesus resurrected from the dead. Here on earth **'the gardener is gone'** that is why he has to keep on walking, but has found consolation as if he says: "we gonna meet again, some day on the avenue, tangled up in blue as long as I have to keep on walking!".

I'd like to finish with a quote from Michael Anton Miller's book called 'Hard Rain, Slow Train: Passages about Dylan':

"I haven't been talking at all, if talking means speaking to others. I've been speaking only to myself in my songs, my way of walking through this life". A Dylan song is therefore best understood as an artistic rendering of an extremely intimate self-conversation".

