

## Bob Dylan's "All along the Watchtower" – an analysis by Kees de Graaf

This song was written and recorded in 1967 for the album *"John Wesley Harding"*. Dylan at the time remarked that this album was *"the first biblical rock album"*, this remark gives us a hermeneutical key, not only for this song, but for the interpretation of the whole album.

*"All along the watchtower"* has only three verses and there is no chorus. The narrative of the song has a rather unusual structure. The third verse: *"All along the watchtower, princes kept the view...etc."* tells the story and one would expect the song to start with this verse. But in fact the song starts in the middle of a conversation. In an interview which Dylan gave in 1968, he commented on the album *"John Wesley Harding"* saying: *"I haven't fulfilled the balladeer's job. A balladeer can sit down and sing three songs for an hour and a half... it can all unfold to you. These melodies on John Wesley Harding lack this traditional sense of time. As with the third verse of "The Wicked Messenger", which opens it up, and then the time schedule takes a jump and soon the song becomes wider... The same thing is true of the song "All Along the Watchtower", which opens up in a slightly different way, in a stranger way, for we have the cycle of events working in a rather reverse order."*

The unusual structure of the narrative was also noted by Christopher Ricks, an English Literature Professor, who commented that *"All Along the Watchtower"* is a typical example of Dylan's audacity at manipulating chronological time: *"at the conclusion of the last verse, it is as if the song bizarrely begins at last, and as if the myth began again."*

On the album version of the song there is a high haunting harmonica and the simple motion of the riff hurriedly drives you in a forward direction as if you are heading towards some abyss from which there is no turning back. There can be no doubt that this song represents a very important, if not the most important, place in Dylan's works. The song was performed in concert for the first time in 1974 and as per today (December 2011) the song has been performed a staggering 1957 times, more than any other Dylan song, even more than his best known song *"Like a Rolling Stone"* which has been performed 1810 times up till now. One may say that *"All along the Watchtower"* represents Dylan's trade mark or identity card. What is the secret behind this song?

First of all, we'd like to reiterate what we earlier wrote on our weblog about the 60 minutes CBS television [interview](#) Bob Dylan gave in 2004. I think that this interview may give us an important clue on how we should position *"All along the Watchtower"*. 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"***.

It all seems to demonstrate that Dylan doesn't do anything at random. He feels there is a divine purpose, a plan behind everything he does as an actor. He seems to believe that his shows, the set lists, the albums, the songs and in particular this song *"All along the Watchtower"*, all are part of some sort of 'perfect finished plan', a carefully selected process for which he has guidance from above. He feels that as an artist he officiates as ***'Watchtower'*** to warn people, in some sort of a way like the old biblical Prophets once did, that this world is doomed. This may be the reason why *'All along the Watchtower'* has such an important place in his works and has run like a continuous thread through almost all of his shows for so many years. Let's take a closer look at the lyrics of this song to see how we can piece all those things together.

First and foremost, we feel it is important to note that the third verse: *"All along the watchtower, princes kept the view...etc."* echoes the Book of Isaiah Chapter 21 verses 5-9. We will discuss these verses later on in more detail but here it is important to note that in these verses the prophet Isaiah prophesizes the fall of the great Neo-Babylonian Empire, which indeed fell in 539 BC. But it did not end there. In the Bible and notably in the Book of Revelation Babel and Babylon represent, in a spiritual way, all powers, of all ages, which oppose and are hostile to the coming of the Kingdom of God. In all ages, each and every individual human being is called upon to take a moral stance towards Babylon, this call is timeless; the picture that is drawn in this song is therefore also timeless. The question therefore of all ages that now lurks in the background is: *"which side are you on?"* If your heart is with Babylon (like that of the joker), you will perish with Babylon and there is no hope left. If you repent (like the thief did) and obey to the call to get out of Babylon, you will be saved (Revelation 18:4). I think that this question also marks the discussion between the joker and the thief, to which we are now going to have a detailed look.

***"There must be some way out of here," said the joker to the thief.*** In this timeless conversation, the big question is: who is this joker and who is this thief and what do they represent? Some commentators say that Dylan is the joker and Elvis the thief. Elvis was once called a thief by many African Americans because his music was so much influenced by black artists. Others say that the joker and the thief represent the two riders which were

approaching and of whom the final verse speaks. This opinion is based on the fact that there is this reverse order in the song whereby the final verse should actually be the first verse; the two riders approaching start this conversation: *“there must be some way out of here etc....”*.

Again others, say that the joker represents Jesus on the cross talking to one of the two thieves which were crucified with Him (Matthew 27:38). I think that this interpretation is not very plausible. Although a “joker” in a card game may be an additional playing card of any value – so also of the highest value, a sort of ace in the hole, in the same way as Paul Simon, in one of his songs, meditates on the possibility that Jesus may be the ace in the hole- on Tarot cards, however, Jesus is depicted by the Joker card. On Tarot cards, the Queen card represents the Virgin Mary. In the secrets of cards she is called the mother of harlots. Joker, however, means fool! Jesus Christ is held up by the card players as a fool. And even more appallingly, the secret language of a deck of cards goes further and declares that Jesus (the Joker card) is the offspring of a lustful Jack, and the Queen mother, Mary. We can find an additional reason why the interpretation that the joker would represent Jesus is not very plausible in Dylan’s song “Jokerman”. It is true; in this song the portrayal of the Jokerman is somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, words like *“Man of the mountains”* and who can *“walk on the clouds”* and *“the book of Leviticus and Deuteronomy are your only teachers”* look like as if these words point to Moses and Jesus as being the Jokerman, but these words are not what they seem. It all has to do with false prophecy and deception and Dylan warned us on the same album “Infidels”: *“Sometimes Satan comes as a man of peace “ (“Man of Peace”)*

On the other hand, the overall portrayal of the “Jokerman” is that of the personification of all evil, in fact of Satan himself. That is why the Jokerman is called a *“dream twister, a manipulator of prayers, who goes to Sodom and Gomorrah etc...”*

A much more likely interpretation therefore is that both the joker and the thief represent the two thieves that were crucified on either side of Jesus. Dylan calls the one thief the “joker” because in the same way like the chief priests, the scribes and soldiers standing around the cross did; he mocked and joked on Jesus saying: *“So you’re the Messiah, are you? Prove it by saving yourself—and us, too, while you’re at it!”*(Luke 23:39 NLT). Although the other thief, whom Dylan also calls a “thief”, initially also mocked Jesus, (Matthew 27:44, Mark 15:32), he repented in the end, rebuking the other thief - the joker - saying: *“Don’t you fear God even when you have been sentenced to die? We deserve to die for our crimes, but this man (Jesus) hasn’t done anything wrong.”*(Luke 23:40, 41).

Dylan seems to write a parody on this discussion between the two thieves on the cross. But there is more to it. We have good reasons to believe that the two thieves on the cross represent two sorts of inhabitants of the great spiritual –all time - kingdom of Babylon. The one thief on the cross – called the joker – represents the part of the kingdom of Babylon which opposes and rejects the Kingdom of God represented by Jesus on the cross. On the cross we see this joker persevere in his rejection of Jesus and His Kingdom. The joker is for that reason doomed to perish when Judgment Day comes falling from the sky upon Babylon. **“There must be some way out of here,”** shows that the joker is desperately trying to find a way out of the dreadful situation he is in on the cross. The only way out for the joker is to apply to Jesus and to surrender to Him. But the joker refuses to do that and applies for advice and help to the thief. But the thief cannot help the Joker, the thief needs redemption himself. In his refusal to accept redemption the joker represents the fallen Babylon which has been beaten on the cross by Jesus. For the thief, representing the people of God in Babylon, there is a way to get out of the fallen Babylon; in Revelation 18:4 God’s people are summoned to leave the spiritual Babylon: *“And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues”*.

**“There’s too much confusion, I can’t get no relief”**. Of the Aristotelians it is said that they were liable to the confusion of thought. James 3:16 says: *“For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work”*. When the joker says **“There’s too much confusion, I can’t get no relief”**, the joker uses this as a pretext not to repent as if he says: “there are too many confusing, conflicting, things happening here around the cross, there is a Babylonian “confusion of tongues” going on here, a perfect Babel of tongues, it is therefore not clear to me who and what is right or wrong, so I see no reason why I should turn to Jesus for redemption, I must use my own ingeniousness to get out of here”. The thief could have said to the joker: “I know what you want, joker, you only want is to get relief from the dreadful situation you are in. *“Oh, Jokerman, you don't show any response to the suffering of Jesus, on the contrary, you keep on mocking Him. The only thing you are interested in is saving your own neck, you have the same attitude as the Pharaoh once had, when he was hit by the plagues, he was after relief and not repentance and as soon as relief had come, he became stubborn again (Exodus 8:15) and refused to listen to Moses”*.

The joker continues his lamentations: **“Businessmen, they drink my wine, plowmen dig my earth. None of them along the line know what any of it is worth”**. “Businessmen” is a word from our modern times whereas “Plowmen” has an ancient undertone; it underlines the

timelessness of the meaning of the song. As said the thief – called joker by Dylan – on the cross may represent the fallen spiritual empire of Babylon. In the Book of Revelation, Chapter 18, we find a lamentation on the downfall of Babylon. **“Businessmen, they drink my wine, plowmen dig my earth. None of them along the line know what any of it is worth”** is Dylan’s a parody on this downfall of Babylon. The joker, representing the falling Babylon, regards all the riches of this world as **his** personal property. “Businessmen” merchants, they drink **my** wine and plowmen they dig **my** earth. It is as if the joker says: *“I’ll plant and I’ll harvest what the earth brings forth”* just like Revelation 18:12,13 says: *“gold, silver, jewels, and pearls; fine linen, purple, silk, and scarlet cloth; things made of fragrant thyine wood, ivory goods, and objects made of expensive wood; and bronze, iron, and marble cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, olive oil, fine flour, wheat, cattle, sheep, horses etc...”* but I’m going to use it for my own purposes, to glorify myself because all of this belongs to me, it is mine”. The Bible however, teaches us that the earth and all her riches belongs to the LORD (I Cor. 10:26) and is only given to man to glorify God and to serve your neighbor. “Theft” in the Bible means using the earth and her riches for your own purposes, to glorify yourself as if you are the legitimate owner. And if you do that you are called a “thief”.

The thief, the joker, on the cross represents an empire of thieves: Babylon.

Revelation 18:17 tells us that all the wealth and riches of Babylon will be destroyed in a single moment. The businessmen and merchants, who became wealthy by selling her these things, all the captains of the merchant ships and their passengers and sailors and crews will stand at a distance, terrified by her great torment. They, including the joker, will weep and cry out to all those standing by as if they were saying: **“None of them along the line know what any of it is worth.** What a shame and waste that all the wealth and riches of Babylon, all the treasuries of the whole world, which are of incalculable value, are destroyed in the twinkling of an eye, nobody seems to realize what any of it is worth”. Rather than repenting and worrying about her immorality and the *“blood of the prophets and of God’s holy people that flowed in your streets and the blood of people slaughtered all over the world”* (Revelation 18:24), the joker- the thief, representing Babylon - is only concerned about the loss of material property, about the loss of **his** wine and whatever **his** plowmen, digging in **his** earth, will bring forth.

In concert Dylan usually repeats this first verse and ends the song with this verse, emphasizing and lengthening this line and in particular the word “worth”. The band often ends the song with a dramatic end chord. It all sounds like a last, final warning as if Dylan

says: *"This world can't stand long, be ready and don't be late, we should know this world can't stand for it's too full of hate"*

***"No reason to get excited," the thief, he kindly spoke, "There are many here among us who feel that life is but a joke"***. Elsewhere Dylan wrote: *"When God is in His heaven, we all want what's His, but power and greed and corruptible seed; seem to be all that there is"*. Power and greed are typical of the joker but against all odds, things take a turn for the better when the thief starts talking. The thief on the cross has repented and has experienced what saving grace means. And because of that a new situation has now arisen on either side of Jesus hanging on the cross. On the one side there is now faith represented by the thief; on the other side there is continuous unbelief from the joker. On the one side is humility from the thief; on the other is arrogance from the joker. Profanity speaks out of one side and reverence speaks out of the other side. We said that the picture which is drawn here is timeless; these two voices have continued to speak from either side of the cross till this very day and will continue to do so until the Latter Day. The world has always been divided, and always will be divided, with Christ at the center. I read somewhere that God may have placed a man on each side of Jesus for this reason: one is the voice of the kingdom of this fallen world, the kingdom of Babylon, and the other is the voice of the Kingdom of God. This saving grace from Jesus has made the thief humble and he now gently tries to persuade the joker to join his side saying: ***"No reason to get excited,"*** These words sound as if the thief says: *"You only worry about the loss of material things, your wealth and riches, your influence and power in this world; all these earthly principles which have corrupted you, the loss of all these things is no big deal and no reason to get excited about. Remember that all that there is in this world, is only temporary, only means to an end. What really *is* bad and frightening in this world is that ***"There are many here among us who feel that life is but a joke"***. Not only the chief priests, the scribes and soldiers standing around the cross, mocking and joking on Jesus, are meant here (Luke 23:35-37) but also the whole fallen world of Babylon of which the joker and the thief are both part of. Those who take life as a joke say: *"Let's feast and drink, for tomorrow we die!"*(I Corinthians 15:32). They are without any hope; they *"laugh in the face of what sorrow brings"*.*

It was W.S. Gilbert (1836-1911) the famous British dramatist and librettist who wrote:

*"Everything is a source of fun. Nobody's safe, for we care for none! Life is a joke that's just begun!"*

When the thief goes on to say to the joker: ***"But you and I, we've been through that, and***

***this is not our fate***", it is as if the thief says: "We are both part of this fallen world of Babylon. I'm not naïve unworshipful person; just like you, I experienced all the ups and downs and all the hardships of this fallen world. In this world I was no better a man than you are. We are both thieves and we fully indulged in whatever we could grasp in this world and we all grabbed it fast. We've both *been to Sugar Town* and we both *shook the sugar down*. We both deserve to die here on the cross but the saving grace of Jesus came over me and now I'm on my way to heaven and I will be in paradise with Jesus today (Luke 23:43). It was grace that taught me how to fear but Jesus reaches out for you too. You can either accept his hand or refuse it; that is your own responsibility. You can no longer hide and say that this is your fate, if you go down now, it's gonna be your own fault". "**Fate**" – if defined as the force by which all existence is determined and conditioned- is often unjustly invoked as a last resort to justify immoral practices.

Dylan has always been preoccupied with the concept of fate and destiny, the idea of "fate" as a last resort to justify immoral practices is very immanent in songs like "[With God on our side](#)" and in "Who killed Davey Moore" where the death of Davey Moore is in the end unjustly justified by: "*Don't say 'murder,' don't say 'kill' It was destiny, it was God's will*". Dylan wants to make it clear that although from a biblical point of view "fate" and "destiny" play an important role in the unfolding of God's plans – "*God knows everything, 'God sees it all unfold', 'some perfect finished plan'*"- this concept never intends to neutralize individual human responsibility. On the contrary, when the thief on the cross says to the joker: "***but this is not our fate***" he wants to make it clear that they both have a choice. The choice is to either accept the saving grace of Jesus – which the thief will do – or to reject this saving grace; at the same time the thief emphasizes that is no use for the joker hiding behind words like "fate" or "destiny" when spiritual freedom for the joker is available just around the corner of his eyes. But if the joker perseveres in his unbelief, the thief presumably will have to heave a sigh in the end, saying to himself about the joker: "*But with truth so far off, what good will it do!*"

When the thief goes on to say to the joker "***So let us not talk falsely now, the hour is getting late***" he increases the sense of urgency. The word "falsely" reminds us of the Biblical ninth commandment not to "bear false witness". The ninth commandment tells us that we must never give false testimony against anyone, twist no one's words, not gossip or slander, nor join in condemning anyone rashly or without a legitimate hearing. But all these things happened to Jesus on the cross. It is as if the thief now says to the joker: "Look at that Roman officer standing there at the foot of the cross, this officer is a pagan, can't you see

that even he is convinced that the way in which Jesus died is such an unprecedented and world shaking event, that this officer has to admit: *“This man – Jesus - **truly** was the Son of God!”* (Mark 15:39), so please open up your eyes to the truth which is now more apparent than ever, ***how long can you falsify and deny what is real, how long can you hate yourself for the weakness you conceal?”***.

*“The hour is getting late”* is a biblical metaphor for the approach of the Day of Reckoning (Judgment, it) expresses here that time is running out quickly. Time is piling up for the joker and he has nearly reached the end of his trail, it is now or never. Just like the thief, the joker will die on the cross within the next few hours. The joker must come to a decision now. The thief now gently urges the joker, in the same way Dylan would do later at the beginning of this century when he performed the bluegrass gospel song *“ This world can't stand long”* 38 times in concert: *“This world it can't stand long, be ready don't wait too late,”*.

We now come to the final verse which, as we said above, should actually be the first verse. It was Dave Van Ronk, a fan and mentor of Dylan at the time, who remarked that the *“Along”* of *“All **along** the watchtower”*, is simply a mistake. A watchtower is not a road or a wall, and you can't go along it. In van Ronk's eyes it was a poetic liberty Dylan thought he could get away with. Probably the words *“All **along”*** were inserted for rhythm purposes or to focus not on what happened **on** the watchtower but on what happened **alongside** the watchtower, the activities surrounding the watchtower. We also remarked above that the whole of the discussion between the joker and the thief on the cross is marked by this verse. This verse *“All **along the watchtower, princes kept the view...etc.**”* reflects the Book of Isaiah Chapter 21: 5-9 which reads:

*“Prepare the table, **watch in the watchtower**, eat, drink: arise, ye princes, and anoint the shield. For thus hath the Lord said unto me, Go, set a watchman, let him declare what he seeth. And he saw a chariot with a couple of horsemen, a chariot of asses, and a chariot of camels; and he hearkened diligently with much heed: And he cried, A lion: My lord, I stand continually upon the **watchtower** in the daytime, and I am set in my ward whole nights: And, behold, here cometh a chariot of men, with a couple of horsemen. And he answered and said, **Babylon is fallen, is fallen; and all the graven images of her gods he hath broken unto the ground”**.*

This prophecy of the great Prophet Isaiah (740-639 BC) focusses on the fall of the great Neo-Babylonian Empire. A typical phenomenon of the prophecy of the Old Testament is that a prophecy may have multiple fulfillments throughout the history of this world, even without

the prophet necessarily being aware of these multiple fulfillments. The first fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy took place when the great Neo-Babylonian Empire fell in 539 BC. We see a next fulfillment - in fact **the** biggest and the ultimate fulfillment- when Jesus died on the cross and by doing so, Jesus did what is written in Colossians 2:15: *"He disarmed the spiritual rulers and authorities"*, in fact Jesus defeated the spiritual empire of Babylon on the cross. We see a next fulfillment of the prophecy of the fall of Babylon represented in the fall of the Roman Empire and we see a final fall of Babylon on the Latter Day, the fall of the great superpowers, the great Babylon as described in Revelation 18. The prophecy sees all these events as sequences, following one another in intervals, rather than as events next to one another as on a picture. This enhances the timelessness of the scene. Babylon stands for the all the powers which oppose the coming Kingdom of God. What strikes us in the prophecy of Isaiah is the great activity surrounding the watchtower – this may be the reason why the song says **"all along"** the watchtower. Isaiah sees a lot of stir and bustle: *"a chariot with a couple of horsemen, a chariot of asses, a chariot of camels, a chariot of men, with a couple of horsemen"*. Dylan pictures the same activity, the same stir and bustle when he writes: ***"princes kept the view. While all the women came and went, barefoot servants, too"***. In some sort of a way whenever a big catastrophe, a world shaking event, is about to occur we see the highest state of alert in heaven and on earth, a whirlpool of activity. (Revelation 8:5; 11:13). We see the same stir and hustle around the cross: ***"all the women (John 19:25) came and went barefoot servants too"***. Barefoot servants may represent the messengers of God, the prophets, the apostles, who gave up everything they owned to serve the LORD: *"How beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news"* (Romans 10:15, even if these servants are poor and have to go barefooted. A barefooted servant may also be a messenger who publicly mourns for the sins of the people, like king David once did when he publicly mourned and wept for his own sins (2 Samuel 15:30). As we read in Revelation 18, the fall of the spiritual empire of Babylon is reason for 'weep and wail' (Revelation 18:9, 17). ***"Outside in the distance a wildcat did growl, two riders were approaching, the wind began to howl.*** In this final line the omen that something ominous is about to happen is getting stronger, as if we're just past the stillness in the winds before the hurricane begins. We have the idea that *"the last part of the day is already gone"* and that *"it's way past midnight"*. ***"Outside in the distance a wildcat did growl"*** may be a contemporary way of saying what is written in 1 Peter 5:8: *"Be sober, be watchful – that is: stay on the watchtower – Your adversary, the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour"*. ***"Two riders were approaching, the wind began to howl.*** The two riders may be the two

riders of Isaiah 21:7; they may be, in a figurative sense, the joker and the thief, approaching your life house, urging you to make a decision: “*which side are you on?*” or the two riders may be, also in a figurative sense, the last two witnesses of Revelation 11. This final line warns us: “*whatever you wish to keep, you’d better grab it fast*” because the hour is getting late, the hour is near.

In part 1 of this analysis we raised the question why this song is so important for Dylan. Does Dylan see himself as some sort of a prophet like Ezekiel? Ezekiel received orders from the LORD: “*Now, son of man, I am making you a **watchman** for the people of Israel. Therefore, listen to what I say and warn them for me*”. (Ezekiel 33:7)

During his 1979/1980 gospel tour we hear Dylan say in a stage rap: “*Years ago they ... said I was a prophet. I used to say, "No I'm not a prophet" they say "Yes you are, you're a prophet." I said, "No it's not me." They used to say "You sure are a prophet." They used to convince me I was a prophet. Now I come out and say Jesus Christ is the answer. They say, "Bob Dylan's no prophet." They just can't handle it*”. In his 2004 CBS interview Dylan says that people use to say to him: “*You're the prophet. You're the savior.' I never wanted to be a prophet or savior. Elvis maybe. I could easily see myself becoming him. But prophet? No.*”.

We conclude that it is true that Dylan never regarded himself as a prophet with a capital “P”, speaking with divine authority like the biblical prophets. I Corinthians 14, however, says that all Christians may be in a sense prophets, but they are prophets with a small “p” and Dylan is certainly one of them. And that is why this song is so important to him.