

Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are A-Changin'" – an analysis by Kees de Graaf.

This Dylan song has the magnitude and power of an anthem. For reasons we will explain later in this article, it is important to pinpoint the exact time of its recording. This song was recorded on October 23rd and 24th 1963. The session of the 24th produced the version that became the title song of Dylan's third album with the same name. This song was written and recorded in the wake of the 'March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom' which took place on August 28th 1963, so less than two months after this famous event.

To get down to business at once, there is a lot of paradox in this song. The greatest paradox of the song is that we receive the prophecy "**The Times They Are A-Changin'**" but without any preaching. There is no indication in the song whatsoever what these new times will bring us in comparison with the old order. We are simply told that that the times will change and that we have to accommodate to and accept the new order or else we will drown and perish. But we are not told what this new order comprises, nor are we told what is wrong with the present order or 'old' order and what we are expected to do, to establish a new and better order, except to get out of the way. One may ask the question what the sense is of protesting anything when there is nothing one can do to prevent the coming of this new age. Over and over the song says that change is inevitable and there is nothing one can do to stop it.

To unwrap this, we first we have to take note of the fact that this song is written in the stylings of the late Biblical prophets. Prophets like Isaiah and also the Biblical prophet John the Baptist. We hear John the Baptist say in Mat. 3: 2: "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*". Jesus confirms John's prophecy in Mark 1: 15: "*The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe in the gospel*". It is as if we hear both John the Baptist and Jesus say: "**The Times They Are A-Changin'**". But there is one major discrepancy between the words of John the Baptist on the one hand and the speaker in our song on the other hand. John the Baptist tells exactly what people are expected to do to escape from the axe which – as he says - has already been laid to the root of the trees and which is ready to cut down any tree that does not bear good fruit and to throw it into the fire (Luke 3:9). The multitude asks John: "*What then shall we do?*" (Luke 3:10). John says: "*He who has two coats let him share with him who has none, and he who has food, let him do likewise*". John – in the tradition of the later prophets of the Old Testament – in order to get ready for the times that are a-changing - calls for social justice and ethical integrity when he addresses the multitude, tax collectors and soldiers (Luke 3: 10-13). But none of such preaching comes from the prophet in our song when he prophesizes that "**The Times They Are A-Changin'**". There is only the prophecy that times will change but there is no preaching at all.

The same paradox you may read in the Scriptures is also present in this song. The Bible makes it abundantly clear that the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven is an operation that is entirely conducted by Powers from above and there is nothing and nobody in this universe that can stop it. Yet those who try to stop it are held responsible for their obstruction. Providence and predestination do not wipe out human responsibility. We see this same paradox in this song.

Change may be inevitable, but that does not mean that all change is good. Goodness and inevitability are however not mutually exclusive. One can have change that is both inevitable and good. The German philosopher G.W.F Hegel (1770-1831) believed that change and progress are inherently entwined and that history is moving upwards simply by moving forward. But you cannot find this Hegelian idea in the literal lyrics of "**The Times They Are A-Changin'**". On the face of it, again when you look at the literal words - and not to the context in which this song was written- the song seems more inspired by the political philosophy of Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527) who was more concerned by what *is* true than

with what *ought* to be true. Such a worldview exhorts us to gauge which way the wind is blowing and act accordingly, in the same sense as Dylan wrote in his song “*Subterranean Homesick Blues*”: “*You don’t need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows*” or in his song “*Floater*”: “*They say times are hard, if you don’t believe it, you can just follow your nose*”. Truth in this song is that change is coming but the song does not express what *ought* to be the truth.

There is no specific moral ground in Dylan’s speaker, at least so it seems. Without any contradiction the lyrics of “*The Times They Are A- Changin*” may function as a banner not only for peaceful anti-war protesters but also for blood thirsty revolutionaries and for Nazi dead squads. So Stalin, Hitler, Mao, Pol Pot and ISIS may all take the words of this song in their mouth and say “*The Times They Are A-Changin*” without any contradiction. At one time also Dylan himself used these words as a banner for his theological stance. In a stage rap during a concert in the fall of 1979 Dylan said: “*I told you "The Times They Are A-Changing" and they did. I said the answer was "Blowing in the Wind" and it was. I'm telling you now Jesus is coming back, and He is! And there is no other way of salvation*”.

One could argue with good reasons that, once you tear the song out of its original context, the song is more descriptive than prescriptive. The song would be prescriptive if the speaker would say to you that the upcoming change is good. And because it is good, the speaker would exactly tell you what you are required to do to embrace this change. That might be his intention of the speaker but it is not what he says. In fact the song is more descriptive: change is happening and that is an irreversible fact, whether you like it or not.

Again, on the face of it, the prophet in this song looks like an amoral, neutral commentator of a wrestling match between two amoral fist fighters. One of these two fighters will eventually win and destroy his opponent and the song exhorts us to join the side of the winner, whoever it might be.

Any social progress or higher transcendent values are not apparent in the lyrics and must therefore be read into the text. We think that Dylan invites you to read these values into the text. It seems unlikely that it was Dylan’s intention that, as far as change is concerned, we should act like some moral chameleon, and adjust our sails in accordance with the prevailing winds, no matter how amoral or wicked these winds may be.

So then, if these higher moral and transcendent values have to be read into the text, then the context in which this song was written becomes very important. We should calibrate our ears to the original milieu in which this song was written to find out what sort of change Dylan is implicitly alluding to. To find out we have to go back to the sixties. You will have a hard time finding any decade in American history which is more culturally charged than the sixties. In that decade there was the rise of the civil rights movement, the counter culture movement, the anti-Vietnam war protests, an emerging environmental awareness, the struggle against poverty, the start of the space race to the moon, the upcoming the gay rights movement and an outburst of feminism.

As said above this song was written in the wake of the famous ‘*March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom*’, which was held in Washington, D.C. on Wednesday, August 28, 1963. The purpose of the march was to stand up for and claim civil and economic rights for African Americans. At the march, Martin Luther King Jr., standing in front of the Lincoln Memorial, delivered his historic “I Have a Dream” speech in which he called for an end to racism. At the time Dylan was known to be a strong supporter of the Civil Rights Movement and one can safely say that he wrote this song to support this movement. However, this song is not a protest song. Dylan has said himself that he didn’t protest. He showed his support for various things but it was never his intention to protest anything.

No matter how amoral the lyrics of “*The Times They Are A-Changin*” may sound in itself when read out

of the cultural context of the sixties, in certain circumstances the performance of the song may feel as an embarrassment, even in the sixties, not only for the audience but also for Dylan himself. This happened to Dylan when, less than a month after Dylan recorded the song, President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas, on November the 22nd 1963. The next night, Dylan opened his concert with "The Times They Are a-Changing"; in an interview Dylan told biographer Anthony Scaduto, "*I thought, 'Wow, how can I open with that song? I'll get rocks thrown at me.' But I had to sing it, my whole concert takes off from there. I know I had no understanding of anything. Something had just gone haywire in the country and they were applauding the song. And I couldn't understand why they were clapping, or why I wrote the song. I couldn't understand anything. For me, it was just insane*". This statement shows that Dylan never meant this song to be a pass par tout, just to describe the inevitable but amoral process of change but that there are defined underlying moral and ethical values in this song which do fit in certain circumstances – the Civil Rights Movement with its '*March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom*'- but which in other circumstances – just after the assassination of J.F. Kennedy- do not fit in at all.

Let us now take a detailed look at the lyrics of this song in a verse by verse analysis.

Verse 1:

***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 better start swimmin' or you'll sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changin'***

The opening line "***Come gather 'round people***" is typical language used by the Biblical prophets such as Joel and Isaiah (see e.g. Joel 3:11, Isaiah 60:4) and also used in the folk traditions of telling villagers to gather around to announce new – and in this case ominous - things that are about to happen. Dylan more or less has the same opening lines in his song "*North Country Blues*" where it says: "*Come gather round friends*".

When it says "***Admit that the waters around you have grown and accept it that soon you'll be drenched to the bone***" the speaker immediately draws our attention to an apocalyptic image of an upcoming flood. Destructive floods are seen by some as an archetypal symbol of the cyclical nature of destruction and restoration, an amoral event, something that will happen over and over again in the history of mankind. The Biblical prophetic backdrop of a flood however, is that of divine judgement, like in the days of Noah's great sin flood (Genesis 7). This flood is occasionally referred in the New Testament as a warning sign not to be caught off guard but to be vigilant and ready for the sudden arrival of change- the arrival of the Son of Man on the clouds. (Mat. 24:37-39). Dylan repeatedly uses the apocalyptic image of floods in his works and this is clearly Biblically inspired. Songs like "*Crash on the Levee*", "*High Water*" and "*The Levee's gonna break*" are some good examples. Dylan seems to be well aware of the double function water has in this respect. It is a destructive power on the one hand and it has a cleansing function – of sin - on the other hand. Fire also has this double function. Fire may destroy and purify. No matter how important floods are in Dylan's work, Dylan seems well aware of the fact that not water is the ultimate apocalyptic sign but fire. The fire on the Latter Day is a purifying fire. Dylan writes in "*God Knows*": "*God knows there's gonna be no more water, but fire next time*".

One of the characteristics of a flood is its suddenness. When there is a big flood, the waters rise so quickly that you have little time to escape. However, it is remarkable that the poet does not instantly

urge you to leave for higher and dryer grounds but instead asks you to **“admit”** that the waters around you have grown and to **“accept”** that soon you’ll be drenched to the bone. In other words, there is no possibility to escape this flood of change. You have to accept the new reality and swim along with the tide and run along with the bulls in a direction which is already predestined. Resistance will kill you and resignation will save you, at least that is to say **“If your time to you is worth savin’**. You are part of a lost generation if you do not value your time and if you are not willing to read the writing on the wall. The speaker sees only one way out of this jam and says: **“Then you better start swimmin’ or you’ll sink like a stone”** which again means that when the **“wind of changes shift”** you’d better adjust your sails to the wind and swim along with the tide or otherwise you will definitely drown and perish. The speaker sums all of this up in the refrain of the song: **‘For the times they are a-changin’**. Dylan writes **“A-changing”** instead of simply **“Changing”** and in doing so he follows the traditional approach used in the 18th century English folk ballads. He may have done this to render the song an ancient cachet and maybe also for rhythmical reasons.

Verse 2:

***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 telling’ who that it’s naming’
For the loser now will be later to win
For the times they are a-changin’***

There is an ironic undertone in this verse when writers and critics are addressed. When the speaker says: **“Come writers and critics who prophesize with your pen”**, the press as a whole is targeted and the speaker expresses doubt whether the media will be able to read the writing on the wall. It is as if he says: ‘you so-called prophets, you who think that you’ve got it always right, most of the time your predictions are wrong, I give you one last chance not to miss this once only, life changing event, that is about to begin, therefore, **“keep your eyes wide the chance won’t come again”**. When the speaker goes on to say: **“And don’t speak too soon for the wheel’s still in spin, and there’s no telling’ who that it’s naming’** it seems as if we are placed at the whims of an ordinary spinning wheel - like a roulette - which seems no less arbitrary than divine mandate. But the poet may have had something else in mind. As said, the song is written in the style of the Biblical prophets, in this case the prophet Ezekiel. In Ezekiel chapter 10, the prophet Ezekiel has a vision and sees whirling, spinning wheels (verse 2 and onwards). A man clothed in linen is ordered to scatter destructive fire from among the whirling wheels over the city of Jerusalem. Later on in the sixties, Dylan would write a parody on this vision from Ezekiel in a song called **“This wheel’s on Fire”** in which he admonishes to take heed of the apocalyptic fire coming from those wheels: **“Best notify my next of kin, this wheel shall explode”**. But it is not only the destructive fire of these wheels that is highlighted in Ezekiel 10. Within the wheel (verse 10) there are four other wheels. The rims and the spokes of the wheels are round about full of eyes (verse 12). The wheels had the ability to move in any of the four directions without turning as they went (verse 11). In this respect the wheel denotes the all seeing eye of the Spirit of God moving in all directions through history to its final destination. The Spirit sees all and knows everything that will happen in the future. Therefore, when it says: **“And don’t speak too soon for the wheel’s still in spin, and there’s no telling’ who that it’s naming’** it may be this foretelling function of the wheel (the Spirit) that may be meant here. The outcome of this divinely inspired wheel is unknown to mortal souls and is usually against all odds. That is why it now says: **“there’s no telling who that it’s naming”**. You may think that the wheel of time and

change may move into a certain direction when in fact it moves in quite an unexpected and opposite direction. An ostensibly hopeless quest may turn into a great victory in the end. That's why the speaker concludes: **"For the loser now will be later to win"**. This line comes close to a quote from Jesus in Mark 8:35: *"For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it"*. Those who are now beggars will soon become kings because **"the times they are a-changing"**.

Verse 3

***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 he who has stalled
There's a battle outside and it is raging
It'll soon shake your windows and rattle your walls
For the times they are a-changin'***

On the face of it, this song can be a pass par tout in any political or social situation which calls for change. However, when it says **"Come senators, congressmen please heed the call"** the song is linked to the specific American political system where you have a congress and a senate and therefore senators and congressmen. For this reason, the original milieu in which the song was written becomes of some importance. Remember that this song was written in the wake of the famous 'March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom', which was held in Washington, D.C. on Wednesday, August 28, 1963. As said the purpose of the march was to stand up for and claim civil and economic rights for African Americans. It is therefore fair to assume that the members of American Senate and Congress are implicitly summoned here to give political support to this movement and **"to heed the call"** and not obstruct legislation that grants these civil and economic rights. The status quo in this verse is represented by a house standing the middle of a battlefield. The Senators and Congressmen are inside this house, change is knocking at their door and is on the doorstep of their house and wants to come in. The status quo often has a tendency to be on the safe side, whereas change is often chaotic, disruptive and uncertain. Politicians, representing the status quo, have a tendency to be on this safe side of things and are usually not inclined to take chances. The speaker has a premonition that Senators and Congressmen will oppose this new movement of change or at least delay it and he warns them to get of the way by saying: **"Don't stand in the doorway don't block up the hall"**. When the speaker goes on to say: **"For he that gets hurt will be he who has stalled"**, this may sound quite revolutionary, words which would not be unbecoming if they were used and practiced during the bloody French (1789-1799) and Russian revolution (1917). Therefore, although it is probably not the intention of the speaker, yet underneath these words there may be an implicit threat that the use of violence cannot be avoided for those who obstruct change. In the words **"For he that gets hurt will be he who has stalled"** there may be the Machiavellian connotation of the prince who must *"do whatever circumstances require"*, as if it says: 'the end justifies the means and therefore, if you do not collaborate freely, we will have to resort to the use of force and in this process you may get hurt or even killed'. For this process of change is serious business and remember: **"There's a battle outside and it is raging, it'll soon shake your windows and rattle your walls"**. Although there is no direct hint in the lyrics that the battle outside the house is waged by freedom fighters and that those inside are corrupt bureaucrats, yet it seems clear that the speaker is on the side of those who are in battle outside this edifice. As said the song is written in the stylings of the Biblical prophets and here it is as if the prophet Ezekiel bursts upon the scene and says: *"The sword is without, and the pestilence and the famine within: he that is in the field shall die with the sword; and he that is in the city, famine and*

pestilence shall devour him". (Ezekiel 7:15 KJV).

Verse 4

***Come mothers and fathers throughout the land
And don't criticize what you can't understand
Your sons and your daughters are beyond your command
Your old road is rapidly aging
Please get out of the new one if you can't lend your hand
For the times they are a-changin'***

Also in this verse, when mothers and fathers are addressed, the figure of speech again very much resembles the Biblical prophets. When these prophets prophesize about **'the times a-changing'** which will be caused by the upcoming appearance of the Kingdom of God on earth, the incarnation of God in the flesh, the prophet Malachi, like the speaker in this verse, talks about mothers and fathers and their children by saying: *"and he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse* (Malachi 4:6 KJV). In this quotation we see that Malachi threatens the world with a 'curse' and Dylan also speaks of a curse when in the final verse it says: **"the curse it is cast"**. Whereas Malachi admonishes both parents and children to turn their hearts to each other, in this verse only mothers and fathers are summoned to pay attention and to stop criticizing their children. Although this is not expressed literally in the lyrics and must therefore be read between the lines, it is the status quo here, the status quo represented by the older generation, which opposes the new social movement of change initiated by the younger generation. Certainly at the beginning of the sixties, when society was much more hierarchically organized than nowadays, words like **"don't criticize what you can't understand, your sons and your daughters are beyond your command, your old road is rapidly aging"** were seen by many – law abiding people - as breaking parental control and authority and violating the 5th Commandment which commands you to honor your father and mother. However, if change is not only inevitable but also good, all authority, both parents and children have to bow their knees in obedience to this new order (Phil 2:9). What is 'good' is a matter of debate however. The speaker in this song seems convinced that this new road is not only inevitable but also good and also seems to believe that there is an absolute distance between (the) right and (the) wrong (way). You are either with it or against. You are invited to accommodate and if you can't, you are politely urged: **"Please get out of the new one if you can't lend your hand"**. If you don't support the younger generation initiating change and if **"you can't lend your hand"**, the least you could do as parents is to make room **"to get out of the way"**, because one thing is sure: **"your old road is rapidly aging"**, a new era is coming **"For the times they are a-changin' "**.

Verse 5.

***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 fading
And the first one now will later be last
For the times they are a-changing***

This final verse once again sums it all up. There is no turning back now: **"The line it is drawn, the curse it is cast"**. When the Biblical prophet Malachi says: *"and he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse* (Malachi 4:6 KJV) it looks like that the threat *"to smite the earth with a curse"* is conditional. But that is

only partly the case. Even if mothers and fathers and their children are unwilling to listen to the prophet, the prophesied world changing events will take place anyway. This is even more the case so here in this final verse. It is not said: *"the line will be drawn and the curse will be cast unless"* but the **"the line is drawn and the curse it is cast"**, therefore this statement has more of a proclamation than of a threat. The least you can say of a "curse" is that it is often cast by those who have or claim to have divine powers. The lyrics do not explicitly say that this curse comes from above, therefore this likely notion, that in fact this curse comes from God, has to be read into the text of the lyrics. When it says: **"The slow one now will later be fast"** this may reflect Ecclesiastes 9:11: *"I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all"* (KJV). Dylan echoes this notion in his song *"I and I"*: *"Took an untrodden path once, where the swift don't win the race"*. It is as if the poet wants to say: 'the process of change that is now underway will take place against all odds. Things are not what they seem. The process of change may now seem to come very slowly into effect, but this slow tempo will be rewarded later'. **"As the present now will later be past"** may call for patience and endurance. The present labors of birth of this new order will soon be forgotten and past, once the new era of change is born. The words **"As the present now will later be past"** may also be an attempt to tone down high pitched expectations. If that is what is intended, then this also reflects the book of Ecclesiastes when it says: *"That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been; and God requireth that which is past"* (Ecclesiastes 3:15). All labors of birth, brining forth this new era, will soon be over because : **"The order is rapidly fading"**. Though not expressed, it is clear that it is the "old" order, whatever this old order may be, which is **"rapidly fading"**. The words **"And the first one now will later be last"** is reminiscent of a quote from Jesus in Mark 10: 31, where Jesus says: *"But many that are first shall be last; and the last first"* (KJV). Within the context of this quote Jesus intends to say that those - like Peter and the other apostles -who gave up everything in life to follow Jesus will be rewarded later and those who have everything now – the glory and adoration of people like the Pharisees- will be dismissed when the Kingdom comes when the times are a-changing. However, here in the song Dylan only quotes the first part of this saying from Jesus: **"And the first one now will later be last"**. At the time when he wrote this song in 1963, within the social and political context at that time and which we outlined above, it may mean that those who are now in power, the government, those who are in society's driving seat, will lose their power and significance and will **"later be last"** once the new political order of social justice has been established, just because **"the times they are a-changing"**.