



# “ALL ALONG THE WATCHTOWER(S)”: REIMAGINING THE PROPHETIC AND THE APOCALYPTIC IN BOB DYLAN’S LYRICS

**„All Along the Watchtower(s)”:  
Nowe spojrzenie na wymiar  
proroczy i apokaliptyczny  
w tekstach Boba Dylana**

## **Abstract**

The article presents an overview and analysis of the connections between one of the most famous lyrics by Bob Dylan, “All Along the Watchtower” (1967) and a constellation of passages in the Bible. Employing a functionally simplified notion of intertextuality as the operational methodology, these links are demonstrated through references to specific textual argumentation, showing how much Dylan’s text shares with its Biblical sources in terms of imagery, conceptualizing, and even the wording of concrete excerpts in King James Version specifically. The central proposal is that the notoriously puzzling poetic miniature can be interpreted in terms of continuing the literary traditions of the Scripture, with a special focus on the prophetic and the apocalyptic. While discussion of the sources in the prophetic books, the Gospels, and the Epistles builds directly upon the earlier studies, supplementing them with new observations, the original claim

## **Abstrakt**

Artykuł stanowi przegląd i analizę związków między jedną z najsłynniejszych pieśni Boba Dylana, „All Along the Watchtower” (1967) i całą gamą fragmentów Biblii. Połączenia te, opisane w oparciu o funkcjonalnie uproszczone pojęcie intertekstualności, zostają zaprezentowane w odniesieniu do konkretnych argumentów tekstualnych, ukazując, jak wiele elementów obrazowania i konceptualizacji Dylana ma w istocie biblijny charakter, a niektóre anglojęzyczne sformułowania bywają wręcz wprost dzielone z Biblią króla Jakuba. Główną tezę artykułu jest propozycja, by słynącą z tajemniczej niezrozumiałości poetycką miniaturę Noblisty interpretować jako kontynuację biblijnych tradycji literackich, ze szczególnym odniesieniem do ksiąg prorockich i Apokalipsy św. Jana. Podczas gdy omówienie źródeł prorockich, ewangelicznych i znajdujących się w listach apostołskich rozwija wcześniejsze badania, które uzupełnia o nowe obserwacje,

of the article is that “All Along the Watchtower” exhibits strong intertextual ties with the Book of Revelation as well. The assertion is supported by argumentation flowing from concrete textual material.

**Keywords:** Bob Dylan, Bible, intertextuality, Biblical references, prophetic books, the Book of Revelation.

najpoważniejszą z nich jest próba wykazania, że „All Along the Watchtower” ma równie silne związki z Apokalipsą. Twierdzenie to zostaje również oparte o ścisłe zestawienia materiału tekstowego.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Bob Dylan, Biblia, intertekstualność, nawiązania biblijne, księgi prorockie, Apokalipsa św. Jana

## 1. Introduction

This article deals with one of the shortest lyrics by the so-far only singer-songwriter awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. “All Along the Watchtower”, originally released in 1967 on *John Wesley Harding*<sup>1</sup>, has since then proven to be Bob Dylan’s most-performed song and one of the most-covered<sup>2</sup>, with musical reinterpretations ranging from turning what was originally described as a ballad in an “urban folk aesthetic”<sup>3</sup> into a psychedelic rock anthem by Jimi Hendrix in 1968<sup>4</sup> to Bear McCreary’s transformation into a mixture of timeless Middle-Eastern timbres, tense heavy-metal inspired electric tones, and ominous futurism on the soundtrack of the 2007 *Battlestar Galactica* TV series<sup>5</sup>.

While extremely concise, “All Along the Watchtower” has also turned out to be one of Dylan’s most puzzling and mysterious songs, with one critic describing it as full of “doom-laden blanks”<sup>6</sup>. While there exists a body of academic analyses of the lyrics, some of these blanks still await to be filled. While it does not amount to an attempt at an ultimate solution of the riddles of “All Along the Watchtower”, the article is meant as a contribution to one of the most fruitful and convincing lines of interpretation which sees the lyrics of the song as a continuation of Biblical traditions of writing and thinking. Arguably, this is the line of interpretation that does the most to convincingly elucidate the cipher of Dylan’s text. A contemporary popular song enjoying extreme popularity, a literary miniature of sublime aesthetic quality, and a 20th-century dialogue with Biblical sources, all coming together in one work of art, constitute a rather exceptional phenomenon.

<sup>1</sup> B. Dylan, “All Along the Watchtower”. On *John Wesley Harding* [music album], 1967.

<sup>2</sup> M. Gray, *The Bob Dylan Encyclopedia* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2006), p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> A. J. Zak, “Bob Dylan and Jimi Hendrix: Juxtaposition and Transformation All along the Watchtower”, *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 57, no. 3 (2005): 599–644, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jams.2004.57.3.599>, pp. 602 and 616.

<sup>4</sup> B. Dylan, “All Along the Watchtower” (rec. by Hendrix, Jimi), On *Electric Ladyland* [music album], 1968.

<sup>5</sup> B. Dylan, “All Along the Watchtower” (rec. by McCreary,

Bear), on: *Battlestar Galactica: Season 3 (Original Soundtrack From The Sci Fi Channel Television Series)* [music album], Burbank: La-La Land Records, Inc., 2007.

<sup>6</sup> H. Clinton, *Revolution in the Air: The Songs of Bob Dylan. Revolution in the Air* (Chicago Review Press, 2009), p. 352.

While discussing “All Along the Watchtower” in terms of Biblical inspirations is well-established in scholarship (in Section 3), this article introduces its own interpretative contributions. Firstly, scholars mostly point to the prophetic books as the main source of references to Scripture in Dylan’s song. Here I am going to propose that the intertextual dialogue of the 1967 lyrics is also with the Christian apocalyptic writing, taking the form of demonstrable connections with specific passages from the Book of Revelation, and that this assumption sheds new light on the understanding of the lyrics. This observation means that while the article overlaps with my earlier research<sup>7</sup>, it is neither its mere copy nor a reworking of it. Firstly, similarly to most Dylan scholars, I, too, previously have not observed the connections between “All Along the Watchtower” and the Book of Revelation. Secondly, my main goal previously was to understand the recorded, performable Polish translation of Dylan’s song, which forced a certain degree of deemphasizing both the original at large, and the intertextual layer of its text specifically. Instead, the focus was on analyzing how the musical level of reinterpreting Dylan’s song contributes to both the reproduction and transformation of original meanings in the performed Polish translations. This multi-modal angle will not be considered here, replaced by the sole interest not even in the verbal text itself, but rather in its specific aspects and features related to the use of Biblical inspirations. Achieving this

more focused perspective at the cost of a less exhaustive comprehensiveness covering all possible aspects of the multi-dimensional text of culture in question is not so much of a loss here, as I have carried out such multi-layered analyses already<sup>8</sup>.

The next section clarifies the methodological assumptions of the study. Section 3 is the main part of the article, discussing the Biblical references in “All Along the Watchtower” observed in research preceding this article as well as pointing out the passages of the Scripture re-used in Dylan’s miniature which have to-date been largely overlooked. The final section draws conclusions from the overview of older observations and the fresh ones.

## 2. Methodological remarks

A short discussion of methodological is in order before starting the study proper. A well-read recipient of this paper, informed that its main focus is looking into Bob Dylan’s use of specific Biblical textual inspirations to construct his lyrics, may rightly expect the analyses to be informed by one of the methodological theorems of the notion of intertextuality. This concept has been already mentioned and will be employed here. However, it must be stressed that I do not intend to strictly apply or follow Julia Kristeva’s admittedly seminal, but notably complicated theory thereof<sup>9</sup>. Admittedly, the article shares Kristeva’s assumption that a literary text can be better understood if viewed as a dialogue not only

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>7</sup> J. Antosz-Rekucki, *Bob Dylan’s Melic Poetry in Polish Translations*, PhD diss., the Jagiellonian University of Kraków, pp. 57–61, 213–219, 309–330.

<sup>9</sup> J. Kristeva, “Le Mot, Le Dialogue et Le Roman”, in: *Séméiotique. Recherches Pour Une Sémanalyse* (1969), pp. 143–173.

between the author and their recipients, but also between the text itself and other texts, their fragments, and the traditions they belong to. But Kristevan paradigm is not followed here otherwise, especially since the methodology does not continue the traditions of psychoanalysis or of the French school of philosophy which underly much of Kristeva's writing.

Rather than that, the notion of intertextuality applied here is as simple as possible, and “used to denote source identification”, with the goal of “identifying literary precursors, works familiar to an author and introduced to the text as a quotation or allusion, with differing degrees of change to the source”, as put by Michael J. Gilmour<sup>10</sup>. Gilmour follows the simplicity and general focus of this definition himself, and while aware of the efforts by some seminal authors, including Kristeva, to discredit it, he strengthens the methodological efficacy of such non-deconstructed notion of intertextuality with the additional conditions that the indication of sources should be plausible and defensible against counter-arguments for their identification by skeptics, and that it should actually contribute to meaningful interpretations of a given text<sup>11</sup>. This is the set of methodological assumptions employed here as well. An additional rationale is that identification of sources of literary influence upon the text analyzed makes exceptional sense when the text in question clearly positions itself in respect to the posited source, e.g., treating it as a source of authority or showing respect

while wrestling against some of its ideas<sup>12</sup>. Such largely simplified approach to intertextuality has been also adopted by Marta Kaźmierczak, for whom “intertextuality is understood as a relation of a given text with another text, a group of texts, or with texts of culture that precede it in time”<sup>13</sup>. In line with Kaźmierczak's thinking, I assume that for “an intertextual relation” to be posited, there needs to be “a link with another text [which] significantly contributes to a poem's semantics or is necessary for the understanding of it ...”<sup>14</sup>.

The observation that there are such intertextual relations between Dylan's numerous song lyrics and Scriptural sources is well-established. Gilmour argues not only that Dylan has cited the Bible at length, but also that his demonstrable inspirations can usually be traced back to the wordings of King James Version (hereinafter: KJV) specifically<sup>15</sup>. Seth Rogovoy likens Dylan's songwriting technique to that of the Jewish *midrash*. What is meant by that is that the Jewish-American songwriter and the authors of *midrashim* alike use extensive quotation, comment upon the Biblical sources in a manner which both follows from tradition and showcases the commenter's own erudition and creativity, and find connections between seemingly disparate and unrelated excerpts<sup>16</sup>. Both Christopher

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, p. 17.

<sup>13</sup> M. Kaźmierczak, “Intertextuality as Translation Problem: Explicitness, Recognisability and the Case of «Literatures of Smaller Nations»”, *Russian Journal of Linguistics* 23, no. 2 (2019), p. 364.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 364.

<sup>15</sup> M. J. Gilmour, *Tangled Up in the Bible...*, p. 20.

<sup>16</sup> S. Rogovoy, *Bob Dylan: Prophet, Mystic, Poet* (Simon and Schuster, 2009), pp. 6–11, 40, 91–142, 171, 206, and 283.

<sup>10</sup> M. J. Gilmour, *Tangled Up in the Bible: Bob Dylan and Scripture* (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2004), p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 15nn.

Ricks<sup>17</sup> and David and Lucy Boucher's<sup>18</sup> monographs on Dylan's poetry are largely concerned with discussing it in terms of its relationship with the Scripture.

### 3. "All Along the Watchtower" as a reworking of Biblical sources

"There must be some way out of here," said the joker to the thief  
"There's too much confusion, I can't get no relief  
Businessmen, they drink my wine, plowmen dig my earth  
None of them along the line know what any of it is worth"

"No reason to get excited," the thief, he kindly spoke  
"There are many here among us who feel that life is but a joke  
But you and I, we've been through that, and this is not our fate  
So let us not talk falsely now, the hour is getting late"

All along the watchtower, princes kept the view  
While all the women came and went, barefoot servants, too

Outside in the distance a wildcat did growl  
Two riders were approaching, the wind began to howl

Bob Dylan, "All Along the Watchtower"

The lyrics open with a conversation between two mysterious characters: the joker and the thief. Both figures' names are archetypal but they defy the expectations completely. The joker is by no means funny or entertaining. He wants to escape the situation he has found himself in and complains about confusion, lack of relief, the plowmen, the businessmen, and their ignorance. Although the two interlocutors intuitively represent the margins of the society and are

"stripped of the pretenses of civilization"<sup>19</sup>, the joker calls both the wine and the earth misused by the plowmen and businessmen his own.

Dylan's thief is equally paradoxical. Rather than exhibiting any traits intuitively associated with a criminal, such as

a preference for violence, he speaks "kindly" and calms down the joker. He assumes a philosophical stance towards the two characters' situation, combining peaceful acceptance through understanding of its universality ("There are many here among us who feel that life is but a joke"), experience ("But you and I, we've been through that"), and the promise of going beyond what seems restricting now ("this is not our fate"). Encouragement to avoid falsehood and the

mention of the late hour combine a warning and an exhortation; a recipient steeped in Bible study will notice immediately this manner of speaking has more in common with the Bible's prophets and authors of the apostolic epistles than with any intuitive idea of a thief.

The two stanzas of the characters' conversation are followed by four lines – in prosodic terms, constituting the single last stanza but usually divided into two couplets in the authorized printed version

<sup>17</sup> C. Ricks, *Dylan's Visions of Sin* (Canongate, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> D. Boucher and L. Boucher, *Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen: Deaths and Entrances* (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2021).

<sup>19</sup> W. Mellers, *A Darker Shade of Pale: A Backdrop to Bob Dylan* (Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 155.

of the lyrics<sup>20</sup> – which appear to zoom out to show the listeners a tense, ominous landscape “all along the watchtower”, with vigilant princes, women and “barefoot servants” whose presence is only characterized by their transience, and the approach of “two riders” against the sonic background of the rising wind and the growling, under-specified “wildcat”. Indeed, it would seem logical to simply consider the entire scene to be impressionist, oneiric, and surrealist, which is often done in Polish interpretations of Dylan’s output<sup>21</sup>. However, indicating the rather self-evident allusions to specific passages of the Scripture and Biblical ideas at large does much more to elucidate the meanings of the text.

The perhaps most well-established line of Biblical interpretation of “All Along the Watchtower” links the American songwriters lyrics to the Book of Isaiah<sup>22</sup>. Looking into specific passages indeed demonstrates a striking resemblance of imagery and ideas between the prophet’s words and Dylan’s lyrics, especially if, following Gilmour’s suggestion<sup>23</sup>, the English wording of KJV

is referenced. Isa 21 is a prophecy against the Babylonian empire, foretelling its fall (Isa 21: 1b) likens the vision to follow to a horrible desert “whirlwind”, perhaps echoed by Dylan’s line “the wind began to howl”. Isa 21: 4b, “the night of my pleasure hath he turned into fear unto me,” may be related to the joker’s complaint about “lack of relief”. But it is the several verses that follow (Isa 21: 5–9) which feature the greatest number of images and ideas remarkably parallel to those in Dylan’s lyrics. These items are marked in bold below.

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.

The image of a watchtower, signifying the need for vigilance and a location from which an unfolding scene in the prophetic vision can be perceived, is not unique to the above passage. In Hab 2: 1, the prophet declares: “I will stand upon my watch, and set me upon the tower, and will watch to see what he will say unto me, and what I shall answer when I am reproved”. What follows directly after this image provides additional intertextual links to Dylan’s lyrics, while shedding light on interpretative possibilities which are not as evident based on Isa 21

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, B. Dylan, *Bob Dylan – the Little Black Songbook* (Wise Publications, 2015), and the lyrics of “All Along the Watchtower” on the artist’s official website, <https://www.bobdylan.com/songs/all-along-watchtower/> [accessed: June 4, 2026].

<sup>21</sup> D. Wyszogrodzki, “Bob Dylan – droga do Nobla”, *Teksty Drugie* 5 (2018), p. 230–56, <https://doi.org/10.18318/td.2018.5.14>; J. Kaczmarzki, “Epitafium dla Boba Dylana” 1985; Łobodziński’s comments on his own translations of Dylan’s lyrics in B. Dylan, *Duszny kraj: wybrane utwory z lat 1962–2012*, ed. and trans. by F. Łobodziński, Biuro Literackie, 2017, especially pp. 299–306.

<sup>22</sup> D. Boucher and L. Boucher, *Bob Dylan...*, pp. 75–76; Gilmour, *Tangled Up in the Bible...*, p. 113; Mellers, *A Darker Shade of Pale...*, p. 155; Rogovoy, *Bob Dylan...*, pp. 38, 122–23.

<sup>23</sup> M. J. Gilmour, *Tangled Up in the Bible*, p. 20. Following this observation, all Biblical passages in English are given according to KJV, indeed the most probable direct source of Dylan’s most literal reference to the Scripture, as visible in my analyses as well.

only. Hab 2: 5 speaks against the one who “transgresseth by wine”, like Dylan’s businessmen, and Hab 2: 6b proclaims “woe to him that increaseth [that which is] not his!” – like Dylan’s plowmen, digging the joker’s earth. This parallel image in Habakuk and its relation to “All Along the Watchtower” seem to have been overlooked by researchers to-date.

However, the parallels between Isa 21 and Dylan’s lyrics are crucial enough on their own. The watchtower as a post for vigilant observation, allowing the vision to unfold, is shared by both texts, and the phrase “(all) along”, with its connotations of polysemous spatial positioning, metaphorical affinity, and temporal completeness<sup>24</sup>, shares both general semantics and the emotional tension with Isaiah’s image of keeping the watch “continually”. There are also princes – either ordered to “arise” or already vigilant in Dylan’s text – and although for now the similarity of the watchman’s observation of the lion (or the strength of his voice likened to that of a lion – KJV appears to follow the polysemy of the Hebrew expression **לִיֹּאֵל** the discussion of which is beyond the ambitions of this article) and Dylan’s growling wildcat may seem too far-fetched, other Biblical excerpts can be found which make the connection more plausible. The “couple of horsemen” needs much less explanation: their connection to the “two riders” in “All Along the Watchtower” is strengthened by the observation that, at least in KJV, Isa 21: 7–9 is the one and only passage of the Bible

specifically and explicitly depicting horsemen arriving somewhere in twos<sup>25</sup>.

The fact that Isa 21 is a prophecy against Babylon allows for noting the affinity of Dylan’s song to several other passages of the Scripture. Firstly, the Babylonian empire can be associated with the Tower of Babel (Gen 11: 1–9), a symbol of human hubris punished by God by confusing the human languages. The connection with the image of the tower and the joker complaining about “too much confusion” in the 1967 song is quite clear-cut. Secondly, Isaiah’s other speeches against Babylon can be related with Dylan’s lyrics as well. Isa 24: 10a depicts “[t]he city of confusion” which “is broken down” and Isa 61: 7b promises the listeners that their “confusion” will be replaced with joy. Isa 62: 1 proclaims there will be neither peace nor rest until the salvation of Zion and Jerusalem comes, which may be echoed by Dylan’s joker lack of relief. Isa 62: 8 is a direct answer to joker’s another complaint, against those who appropriate the produce of the earth and the wine which is not theirs:

The LORD hath sworn by his right hand,  
and by the arm of his strength, Surely  
I will no more give thy corn [to be] meat  
for thine enemies; and the sons of the  
stranger shall not drink thy wine, for the  
which thou hast laboured.

The thief – as noted already, a paradoxical one – can be clearly identified as

<sup>24</sup> Compare “Definition of ALL ALONG”, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/all+along> and “Definition of ALONG”, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/along>. Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary [accessed: June 2, 2026].

<sup>25</sup> I have first tentatively made this observation in *Bob Dylan’s Melic Poetry in Polish Translations*, p. 61. Further reading and queries appear to support it with a higher degree of certainty at this point. 2 Kings 9: 25 and 10: 15–16 both describe two people riding one chariot, but they do so in implicit rather than explicit terms. Gilmour (*Tangled Up in the Bible...*, p. 113) sees the source of Dylan’s two riders in Rev. 6: 2–8, but this is the famous image of the four riders of the Apocalypse, not two.

a Scriptural allusion as well, albeit, unlike those presented previously, related to the Christian canon only. As pointed out by Gilmour<sup>26</sup>, this character and his words are clearly related to Jesus' speech in Matt 24: 42–44 (bold emphases mine):

**Watch** therefore: for ye know not what **hour** your Lord doth come. But know this, that if the goodman of the house had known in what **watch** the **thief** would come, he would have **watched**, and would not have suffered his house to be broken up. Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an **hour** as ye think not the Son of man cometh.

The organizing idea of the parable is that vigilance is required of Christians, as the Second Coming of Christ will happen unexpectedly. Importantly, for the simile to work, Jesus Himself must be identified with the thief. If He is also the thief in Dylan's lyrics this explains speaking "kindly" while providing moral and emotional guidance. Also the unknown hour Jesus' listeners should wait for, the reference to the Roman system of dividing the night into four watches *versus* Dylan's idea of keeping watch introduced by the image of the watchtower, and the warning "the hour is getting late" can be viewed as intertextual links between the two texts.

The passage from Matt 24 is closely mirrored by Luke 12: 36–40 (noted by Gilmour), as well as by 1 Thess 5: 2–4, and 2 Pet 3: 10. Apparently, these connections have been pointed out neither by Gilmour nor by other researchers into

Dylan's lyrics so far. However, observing there is yet another parallel passage may be even more important. In the Book of Revelation, while dictating Letters to the Seven Churches, Christ amplifies the simile first presented in the Gospels by likening Himself to a thief in the first person (Rev 3: 3, emphases mine): "If therefore thou shalt not **watch**, **I** will come on thee as a **thief**, and thou shalt not know **what hour** I will come upon thee". The warning is repeated in a very similar phrasing in Rev 16: 15–16, interjected in an excerpt foretelling the preparations of both the heavenly powers and the powers of the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet for the Armageddon.

Apart from Gilmour's aforementioned idea that the two riders in "All Along the Watchtower" can be related to the four riders from Rev. 6, direct intertextual connections between Dylan's lyrics and the Book of Revelation have not been observed in earlier studies, although quite a few can be proposed. The angel appearing between the 6th and the 7th trumpets "cried with a loud voice, as when a lion roareth" in Rev 10: 3a, echoing Isa 21: 8, and perhaps echoed by the wildcat growling "outside in the distance". Rev 18: 1–2 is one of the several announcements of the fall of Babylon<sup>27</sup>, but what follows is more crucial: the image of drinking wine as a moral transgression committed by monarchs and merchants, and the pronouncement of punishment for them (Rev 18: 3, emphases mine):

<sup>27</sup> It should be remembered that Babylon, already fallen in the first ages of the Christian era, actually constitutes a hidden reference to the Roman Empire in Rev.

<sup>26</sup> M. J. Gilmour, *Tangled Up in the Bible*, p. 113.



For all nations **have drunk of the wine** of the wrath of her fornication, and **the kings of the earth** have committed fornication with her, and **the merchants of the earth** are waxed rich through the abundance of her delicacies.

The “merchants” are mentioned as guilty and doomed three more times in the same chapter (Rev 18: 11, 15, 19). Admittedly, the Book of Revelation makes abundant use of inspirations from the prophetic books. It could be argued that similarities between the poetic world of Dylan’s miniature and Rev may be secondary if the songwriter used Isaiah as the Biblical backbone of his lyrics. However, the above full set of closely related images and ideas (drinking wine as related to guilt, close juxtaposition of “the earth”, the monarchs, and those who become rich by buying and selling, whether they are called “merchants” or “businessmen”) can be found both in the Book of Revelation and in “All Along the Watchtower,” but not in Isaiah.

Positing that Dylan’s thief’s admonition against falsehood in speech could be related to Rev appears less well-grounded. The book does describe “the false prophet” and the danger of deceiving even believers (cf. Rev 13 and 19), there are also admonitions against “liars” (Rev 2: 2; 21: 8) and “whosoever loveth and maketh a lie” (Rev 22: 15) but the conceptual resemblance to Dylan’s lyric is not very convincing. Gilmour<sup>28</sup> relates “let us not talk falsely now” to Jer 5: 31 (“The prophets prophesy falsely”) and Jer 29: 9 (“they prophesy falsely unto you in my name”) but the association is similarly a remote one. It seems more

defensible to propose a link between the admonition in “All Along the Watchtower” and the fact that lying and falsehood is clearly prohibited in the Torah (see, for instance, Exod 20: 16 and Deut 5: 20) while avoiding it at all costs is one of the central tenets of Jesus’ teaching (Matt 5: 33-37; Mark 10: 19; Luke 18: 18; John 8: 32) and of early Christianity (e.g., Jas 5: 12).

While the presence of a lion in KJV in Isa 21: 8 and perhaps in Rev 10: 3a, too, already suggests a potential reading of Dylan’s “wildcat growl” as a threatening roar of a lion, stronger argumentation is needed to make this reading convincing. In an appendix to his book, Gilmour<sup>29</sup> simply notes 1 Pet 5: 8 as the source of Biblical allusion in that line of “All Along the Watchtower”, without additional explanation but, to his credit, the verse speaks for itself: “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour”. Like the sources in Isa and Rev, this single verse shares more than enough conceptually with Dylan’s lyrics for a connection to be proposed. An exhortation to sobriety, as opposed to ignorant drunkenness, confusion, and lack of relief the joker complains about, and to vigilance, arguably one of the organizing ideas of the entire song, is placed against the sonic background of an ominous sound uttered by a wild cat – in St. Peter’s epistle, tantamount to the devil.

The 20th-century lyrics, unlike their Scriptural sources, feature a “wildcat” rather than a lion, but the difference in context between them makes the two expressions semantically closer than they would be had

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, p. 113.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem.

Dylan mentioned the same animal literally. In the Bible a lion can be also the symbol of good (e.g., as the emblem of the Tribe of Judah, cf. Gen 49: 9) but for addressees familiar with the desert and the fauna of the Middle East and North Africa, it was also clearly connoted with deadly danger. For Dylan's American recipients that connotation might have been less clear and put aside because of the positive valence of the lion as a symbol in popular culture. In contrast, the lexeme "wildcat" has idiomatic meanings, especially in American English, and can be used to describe a violent person, financial fraud and unreliability, and illegitimate business practices<sup>30</sup>.

Still, not everything in "All Along the Watchtower" can be interpreted from the perspective of intertextual links with the Bible, nor should it be. Gray has observed the similarity between Dylan's line "while all the women came and went" and T. S. Eliot's "the women come and go" from *The Waste Land*<sup>31</sup>. Additional connection between the texts is that they both involve the idea of a desolate, desert-like landscape.

Similarly, the character of the joker does not have a straightforward Biblical provenance. Meanwhile, expectations-defying jokers, clowns, joker-like figures, and circus or carnival entertainers who are characterized by a thoughtfulness and sadness rather than by cheer recur regularly in the American songwriter's oeuvre. In "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" (1963), the subject hears "a clown who cried in the alley". In "Like A Rolling Stone" (1965), the addressee

should have (but have not) seen "the frowns on the jugglers and the clowns". "Ballad of a Thin Man" (1965) features socially-marginalized entertainers whose understanding of the confusing situation exceeds that of "professors", "great lawyers", and of Mr. Jones, the eponymous well-educated "thin man". Perhaps most importantly, in both "Mr. Tambourine Man" (1965) and "Jokerman" (1983) a joker-like entertainer becomes the main focus of the lyrics and takes on prophetic-, or even messianic-like qualities. "The Jokerman" can "walk on the clouds", go "to Sodom and Gomorrah" knowing "nobody there would want to marry [his] sister" (at the same referencing Abraham and positioning the character to be unlike him), and "look into the fiery furnace, see the rich man without any name" from Jesus' parable in Luke 16: 19–31, like Lazarus from the same narrative, or perhaps like Jesus' listeners.

Dylan's jokers, including the one in "All Along the Watchtower", can also be associated with the cultural archetype of the trickster. Polish scholars researching the Jewish-American poet's oeuvre have proposed identifying his carefully-constructed, ever-evolving artistic persona in these terms, while noting that assuming the role of a trickster allows Dylan to sing in the voice of a modern prophet from behind a much-less serious mask<sup>32</sup>. Indeed, Rogovoy argues that "[m]uch of the subject matter of the songs on *John Wesley Harding* directly confronts Dylan's role as

<sup>30</sup> "Definition of WILDCAT", <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/wildcat> [accessed: June 4, 2026].

<sup>31</sup> M. Gray, *The Bob Dylan Encyclopedia*, p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> Compare W. J. Burszta, "Bob Dylan jako *Wicked Messenger*", in *Dylan i jego czasy*, M. Friedrich and A. Szóstka (eds.), (Muzeum Literatury im. Adama Mickiewicza w Warszawie, 2019), pp. 32–43; Koziółek Ryszard, "Głośna nieobecność. Dylan i Nobel", in *Dylan i jego czasy*, ibidem, p. 57.

prophet”<sup>33</sup>. “All Along the Watchtower” is all written in third-person narration, never betraying the identity of the poetic subject, but following the suggestions of Rogovoy, Koziółek, and Burszta, it could be assumed the sad, confused, and restless joker is the poet’s mouthpiece and a less pathos-inducing stand-in for a Biblical prophet. After all, Dylan’s joker’s role is to name uncomfortable truths nobody else can utter, taking advantage of his special position both sanctioned by the society and beyond its normal frameworks. And like many of the greatest prophets, from Moses to Jonah, the joker is not exactly willing to do what he should, and complains instead of taking action.

#### 4. Conclusions

The article has demonstrated how the lyrics of Bob Dylan’s “All Along the Watchtower” can be related to a plethora of Biblical passages which appear to be a rather direct source of imagery and ideas of the song. As discussed, reading the famously puzzling literary miniature from the perspective of sources located in the Scripture is one way to shed light on and clarify the meanings within while keeping the view on their complexity and depth.

Dylan does not merely reuse a web of Scriptural quotations and allusions, he makes the message of the Biblical books he turns to relevant in the present-day context – not only for the original listeners in 1967, but for the 21st-century recipients as well. This relevance is achieved by combining a patchwork of symbols, metaphors, ideas, and poetic images with clearly demonstrable Biblical provenance and Dylan’s own poetics. On the

one hand, “All Along the Watchtower” shares not only certain patterns of thinking with the Bible but also exhibits occasional resemblance to exact wording of KJV. On the other, on the whole, Dylan avoids the archaic style of KJV, instead giving his diction the flair of a fairly neutral and modern register, hardly detached from the everyday language. While his princes, plowmen, and barefoot servants signal an ancient, mythical world, the women, the thief, confusion, lack of relief, wine, and indeed the very imposing watchtower are linguistically at home both in KJV and 20th/21st-century English. Though arguably related to the apocalyptic (and evil) merchants, the image of businessmen taking what is not theirs makes the lyrics immediately relevant in any human context in which unjust hierarchies and greed still exist. The two approaching riders, identifiable as riding out of a passage in Isaiah, match the landscapes of both the Biblical lands and of a mythologized America. This makes sense in a song from the “first Biblical rock album”<sup>34</sup> in history and at the same time one whose title bears the name of a legendary Wild West outlaw. The world of Dylan’s lyrics depicts the cultural and geographical landscape of America “as though it were continuous with the fantastic dimensions of Biblical religion”<sup>35</sup>.

On top of that, Dylan makes a masterful use of the power of vagueness, double (or multiple) reference, and the power of imagination. His wild cat is as ominous

<sup>33</sup> S. Rogovoy, *Bob Dylan...*, p. 118.

<sup>34</sup> S. Rogovoy, *Bob Dylan...*, p. 117. R. C. Spargo, A. K. Ream (“Bob Dylan and religion”, in: Dettmar, J. H. Kevin (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan*, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 95) claim *John Wesley Harding* contains sixty-one references to the Bible.

<sup>35</sup> R. C. Spargo and A. K. Ream, “Bob Dylan and religion”, p. 92.

as a lion roaring in a Biblical wilderness, but the animal's threatening quality is amplified by the fact we are not told what its species is. It can only be deduced that although its name can be colloquially used to denote *Felis silvestris*, this is definitely not the case. That species is just slightly larger than the domestic cat, incapable of a loud growl, and found neither in the historical or contemporary Levant, nor in the USA<sup>36</sup>. At the same time, the idiomatic semantics of the lexeme “wildcat” hint that whatever or whoever the animal is, the danger is not only the potential wild and violent character of the beast – it is also a moral peril.

The article strived to show that the short, indeed miniature song which has sparked number of creative covers is – on its poetic level – composed in a voice of a Biblical prophet, speaking from behind the double mask of an urban folk balladeer and the frustrated joker. This is not, however, exactly a revolutionary finding. Dylan has been dubbed “the latter-day Jeremiah”<sup>37</sup> and described as identifying himself with prophet Daniel<sup>38</sup>.

The article has identified some Biblical passages which appear to be strongly connected conceptually and in terms of imagery with “All Along the Watchtower” but which also seem to have been overlooked in preceding studies. Here, the key finding proposed is that excerpts from the Book of Revelation can also be credibly viewed as being in intertextual relationship with Dylan's song. This observation opens new interpretative paths for the future.

It is worth noting it is surprising previous research has not observed references to Rev in “All Along the Watchtower” since some have described Dylan's oeuvre as apocalyptic. Admittedly, these authors usually do not use any Biblical-studies-inspired definition of apocalypticism of apocalyptic literature<sup>39</sup>, and only mean the American poet's songs exhibit such a character in the most general, secular meaning of the idea<sup>40</sup>. Moreover, they often apply the idea to Dylan's output in general and when they do so in respect to specific pieces, “All Along the Watchtower” is usually not one of them<sup>41</sup>. A few researchers with a background in Biblical studies see the Jewish-American songwriter's oeuvre as reworking not only prophetic, but also apocalyptic sources in the proper sense but, again, prefer not to apply their observation to “All Along the Watchtower”<sup>42</sup>. Hopefully, the findings presented will open up a discussion about the apocalyptic inspirations in this song, and contribute to the analyses of Dylan's writing as a creative continuation of the prophetic and apocalyptic traditions in general.

<sup>36</sup> See J. C. D. Schreber, (ed.), “Die wilde Kaze” [The wildcat]. Die Säugthiere in Abbildungen nach der Natur mit Beschreibungen (Dritter Theil) [Mammals illustrated from nature with descriptions], Erlangen, 1778, pp. 397–402.

<sup>37</sup> R. C. Spargo, A. K. Ream, “Bob Dylan and religion”, p. 88.

<sup>38</sup> S. Rogovoy, *Bob Dylan...*, pp. 118, 121.

<sup>39</sup> Admittedly, defining apocalyptic literature itself constitutes a major debate in Biblical studies, one beyond the scope of this article. For overview, see J. J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination. An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*. Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011 (pp. 2–42).

<sup>40</sup> I.e., in the sense of predicting the end of the world or of being related to cataclysmic, global disaster, or as a full synonym of “prophetic,” or any vague combination thereof; see “Definition of APOCALYPTIC”, May 31, 2026, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/apocalyptic> [accessed: June 5, 2026].

<sup>41</sup> Cf. D. Boucher and L. Boucher, *Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen*, p. 80; C. Heylin, *Revolution in the Air...*, p. 104; G. M. Campbell, “Bob Dylan and the Pastoral Apocalypse”, *Journal of Popular Culture* 8, no. 4 (1975), p. 696nn; Th. O. Beebe, “Ballad of the Apocalypse: Another Look at Bob Dylan's ‘Hard Rain’”, *Text and Performance Quarterly* 11, no. 1 (1991): 18–34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10462939109365991>. W. Mellers, *A Darker Shade of Pale...*, pp. 132–134, 155, 192–202.

<sup>42</sup> M. J. Gilmour, *Tangled Up in the Bible*, pp. 41–43, 71–86, S. Rogovoy, *Bob Dylan...*, p. 281.

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## Discography

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