

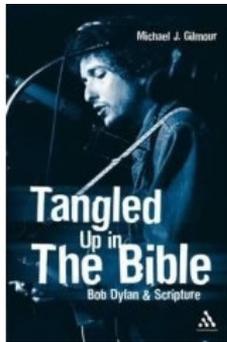
○ REVIEW OF MICHAEL J. GILMOUR'S *TANGLED UP IN THE BIBLE: BOB DYLAN & SCRIPTURE*

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David Jobling reviews Michael J. Gilmour's *Tangled Up in the Bible: Bob Dylan & Scripture* (New York and London: Continuum, 2004. xi + 146 pp. Paper. ISBN: 0-8264-1602-0).



This is a useful little book which could, in my opinion, have been much better. But to be better in the way I wish, it would have to be very different. While acknowledging what Gilmour has usefully achieved, I want to argue for approaching the task differently.

In two tables he provides 'a selective index of biblical imagery' in Dylan's lyrics (the appendix including these tables runs, with introduction and notes, to 38 pages, more than a quarter of the book). By 'selective' Gilmour means only that he cannot guarantee exhaustiveness (p. 108), but this is not for want of trying! These pages are enormously valuable and will probably be the part of the book most consulted. He also offers, in his introduction and elsewhere, some interesting theoretical discussion in the areas of intertextuality and cultural criticism, with reference, though slight, to larger debates in these areas. One short chapter (5) is an interesting typological reading of Exodus imagery in Dylan's album *Love and Theft* and elsewhere he offers a useful "reading" of a single song ('Jokerman').

These parts I admire, but this is as far as my admiration goes. In most of the book (chaps. 2–4) Gilmour pursues a thematic approach to Dylan and the Bible (the themes being prophecy, the Sermon on the Mount, and apocalyptic) which does not and cannot get to the heart of Dylan's value for biblical readers. I want more theory and I want more 'reading'. Dylan is worth it!

My own passion for Dylan is confined to his output before his conversion to Christianity in 1978. Whether it was out of him that the freshness went around that time, or rather out of me, I don't venture to decide (perhaps I ought to note that he is almost exactly 100 days my senior!) But at least I have a theoretical reason for preferring the pre-1978 phase (Gilmour seems to have a general preference for the later one). From the point of view of cultural criticism, Dylan's references to the Bible are of greater interest and usefulness when they are not programmed by an overt belief system. His great value for me is that he is one of those people (like the apostle Paul;

see Richard Rubenstein's *My Brother Paul*) who can't achieve a safe distance from their own psyche, who 'let it all out', and thereby open up our psyches as well as their own. Dylan's references to the Bible, as to anything else, reveal currents hardly accessible to conventional modes of reading. Gilmour does well to refer to Dylan's 'biblical imagination' (13), but I would prefer (*à la* Fredric Jameson) a 'biblical unconscious', a level with which Gilmour seems to me rarely in touch.

Consider 'Desolation Row'. It has references (duly catalogued by Gilmour) to Cain and Abel, the Good Samaritan, and 'Noah's great rainbow'. But these belong to a vast series of references which includes Cinderella (twice), Romeo, the Hunchback of Notre Dame, Ophelia (cf. Romeo), Einstein ('disguised as Robin Hood'), perhaps Freud (= 'Dr. Filth?'), the Phantom of the Opera (cf. the Hunchback of Notre Dame), Casanova, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. In a case like this it is not enough to get excited about the biblical references; the reader must get to grips with the entire series. Dylan suggests in the final verse that the references do in fact form a series ('all these people') and hints that they are actually code-names ('I had to... give them all another name'). The task for Bible or religion scholars who want to appropriate this song will be a demanding one!

'I Pity the Poor Immigrant' (from *John Wesley Harding*, the most overtly biblical of the early Dylan's albums) is oddly absent from Gilmour's catalogue. The references in its middle stanza to Leviticus 26 could hardly be clearer ('Whose heaven is like Ironsides', 'Whose strength is spent in vain', 'Who eats but is not satisfied', cf. Lev 26:19, 20, 26 respectively), and there are other biblical references equally clear (e.g., 'Who falls in love with wealth itself', 1 Tim 6:10). But what is the song all about? Leviticus 26 lays out possibilities for blessing or curse after Israel has immigrated into the Promised Land. Does the song invite us to look at the experience of (Jewish?) American immigrants in these terms? Dylan's immigrant chooses evil, which fits Leviticus, but seems to be victim as well as villain, which doesn't. And who is the first person in 'And turns his back on me'? The singer's voice turns suddenly into a divine voice.

What we need for 'Bob Dylan & Scripture', and for cultural criticism of the Bible generally, is not statistics of references and themes but a practice of reading. Gilmour brings us to the threshold but hardly carries us across it.