4-17-2024

Under the Sun: Songs from Ecclesiastes

Emma Kay Smith
Ouachita Baptist University

OUACHITA BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

UNDER THE SUN: SONGS FROM ECCLESIASTES

SENIOR THESIS
CARL GOODSON HONORS PROGRAM

BY
EMMA KAY SMITH

SPRING 2024

Introduction

"I can see God in a daisy. I can see God at night in the wind and rain. I see creation just about everywhere. The highest form of song is prayer. King David's, Solomon's, the wailing of a coyote, the rumble of the earth. It must be wonderful to be God[,]" Bob Dylan remarked in a 1976 interview for *TV Guide*.[1] Dylan's apparent rapture with divine Presence in the world was far from novel midway into the 70s. For over a decade prior, Dylan's songwriting had, moth to flame, returned time and time again to the text of the Bible. From the Scriptures, he gleaned vivid images and cutting questions to complement his often surreal, revelatory poetic tales. This folk-poet of a generation drew much of his rhetoric from Christian texts. Several of his songwriting contemporaries in the 1960s practiced the same. Images and ideas from Scripture were vehicles to blow the whistle, expressing human stories more evocatively in changing, shifting, turbulent times.

However, what truly changes for people throughout the course of human history? What is new? The book of Ecclesiastes concerns itself with these two questions and answers them rather bluntly: "[T]here is nothing new under the sun" (1:9). Albeit, technology has changed. The writer of Ecclesiastes did not type his work on the keyboard of a pink MacBook Air like I do now, nor did he conceive of nuclear threats, Red Scares, or social media. He did conceive, however, of the human condition: we are born, we strive, and then we die. We cycle through the same essential confusions, oppressions, loves, and sorrows, while the earth, unbreathing, somehow eclipses us in longevity. What do we really gain by living? As Dylan poeticized in 1976, God is intimately privy to all his creation and masterminds its order. Only God enjoys

[1] Hickey, Neil. "Bob Dylan Today." *TV Guide*, September 11, 1976. Accessed electronically: https://www.punkhart.com/dylan/interviews/sep_1976.html

clarity in this mysterious universe existing as he made it. Only God enjoys its praise. God alone is its judge. God alone determines the value of all things. Humans muddle about in the dark. This is nothing new, especially not to poets.

In 1965, Ecclesiastes "topped the U.S. Billboard chart" and climbed to great heights in the UK. The Byrds released their appropriately jangly folk-rock cover of Pete Seeger's "To Everything There Is a Season" under the new title "Turn! Turn! Turn!" on October 1st, and the ancient words catapulted the band to their own unexpected fame.[2] The lyrics of the piece are gleaned straight from Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, with an added anti-war slant: "…[a time for peace,] *I swear it's not too late!*" I knew the words to this tune long before I had ever opened Ecclesiastes, and the folk musings of the 1960s have since inspired and influenced my own songwriting. Ecclesiastes itself became a fascination for me as a teenager. Then, in 2023, after compiling academic research on the text in *A Semantic-Thematic Study of Ecclesiastes*, I decided to shift my efforts to a creative project. Blending my adoration for the 1960s folk songwriting tradition and for the biblical text, I have produced my demo-EP *Under the Sun: Songs from Ecclesiastes.* This thesis capstone project is composed of four folk songs based on the themes and images of Ecclesiastes. It is designed to dually align with the sacred messages of the book and to evoke the works of master songwriters such as Leonard Cohen and Bob Dylan.

When I proposed this project, I expected my songwriting process to be entirely academic. However, when I began to write, I found that books and commentaries on the 60s and Ecclesiastes did not aid me in any way. Instead, *listening* did. This is how I absorb and express everything: I study Hebrew with my ears, I learn Greek syntax with my ears, I sponge up

[2] Taysom, Joe. "The Story Behind The Song: The Byrds' Romantic Rework 'Turn! Turn! Turn!'" *Far Out Magazine*, October 1, 2020.

inspiration from Bob Dylan and birdsong with my ears, I read Ecclesiastes aloud and hear it ring in my ears. Therefore, the research compiled for this project became an exploration of the words of folk singers themselves. I gathered biblical allusions from several songs and a truer sense of the colors of Ecclesiastes through repeated reading and meditation. While rooted in academia, this project is a true outpouring of creativity and of lived inspiration.

Historical Context

The 1960s folk tradition hosts a vibrant variety of styles and approaches to songwriting. In relation to the artistic use of the Bible, this is especially true. Leonard Cohen and Bob Dylan represent two strands of "biblical" songwriting in the 60s. Cohen is predominantly method, while Dylan is predominantly flash. While Cohen philosophizes and meditates about religion, Dylan invokes it to illuminate various points. Thus, in the writing process for *Under the Sun*, I endeavored to toe a line somewhere in between these two approaches while remaining faithful to my source text. Therefore, works by Cohen and Dylan were equally instructive.

"Suzanne," Cohen's 1967 debut, has generated commentary ever since its release, including a plethora of interpretations. The story of Cohen's meeting with dancer Suzanne Verdal is spiritualized, sandwiching a verse and refrain centered on Jesus Christ in its middle — elusive in meaning upon a first listening. Mary Anne O'Neil's analysis of the ballad is revelatory: Suzanne becomes, like Jesus and the Blessed Virgin Mary, "a salvific figure."[3] As Dante is to Beatrice, so is Cohen to the Suzanne he has captured. As "Suzanne takes [him, Cohen] down to her place near the [St. Lawrence R]iver," she reveals a world "leaning out for love," desiring, through Suzanne's "mirror," new life, rebirth, and restoration.

[3] O'Neil, Mary Anne. "Leonard Cohen, Singer of the Bible." *CrossCurrents* 65, no. 1 (March 2015): 91–99.

While Cohen writes "Suzanne" autobiographically, the lyrics are in the second person, as he invites the listener to profound intimacy with his record of experience and with Suzanne. O'Neil writes, "[T]he song is a quest for faith."[4] This analysis expresses the movement throughout Cohen's poetry exquisitely. The "you" to which the lyrics are directed initially harbors skepticism (and self-satisfaction) first toward Suzanne, then toward Christ as allegory in the second verse. However, this skepticism transforms into a desire to "trust" and express faith in both figures, first Christ and then the image of divinity reflected in Suzanne — and all the virtues she represents. In his first verse, Cohen's "you" believes Suzanne to be "half-crazy," which is, as the subject admits, her draw. The subject has, at first, "no love to give her," he believes, but somehow, Suzanne "gets [him] on her wavelength[.]" He begins to succumb to her lifestyle despite himself. Nevertheless, the subject retains a certain security in himself, even retaining an implicit belief that *he* leads Suzanne: "And you want to travel with her, and you want to travel blind / And you know that she will trust you / For you've touched her perfect body with your mind." At first, "you" have more faith in yourself than in Suzanne. Perhaps, first, "you" are the speaker of Matthew 4:19, bidding "Come, follow me," as "you" also find yourself near the waters of change. "You" walk beside the St. Lawrence as Jesus walked beside Galilee. Even if "you" first believe this way, "you" are quickly changing.

In Cohen's second verse, the subject contemplates Christ. The songwriter links the two primary figures of the ballad (Suzanne and Jesus) together by making poetic use of bodies of water, referencing Matthew 14:25-33: "And Jesus was a sailor when he walked upon the water."[5] The next lines reference Jesus' redemptive vision for humanity, potentially alluding to

[4] O'Neil, 93.

[5] Ibid., 92.

his death upon the cross in the lines, "And he spent a long time watching from his lonely wooden tower / And when he knew for certain only drowning men could see him / He said, 'All men will be sailors then until the sea shall free them." Only those in crises of faith, sinking beneath the waves of sin into spiritual death, as Peter sank beneath the waves on the stormy sea and cried to the Lord for help, reach to him for salvation. Cohen then points the finger at his "you," in the last two lines of this verse, as Jesus himself is the Great Martyr, "broken long before the sky would open." Instead of being met with humanity's acceptance, he was "[f]orsaken, almost human," a reference to Jesus' own dying quotation of Psalm 22:1 from his cross.[6] Cohen's allusion to the dual nature of Christ does less to deny Christ's humanity and more to subtly identify humans with the Godman. His "you" begins to recognize the weight of his profound denial of Christ. Finally, in a grave indictment of his subject, Cohen concludes, "he sank beneath your wisdom like a stone." Because God's wisdom is foolishness to proud people, it was this pride that nailed Christ to his cross and thus why "he sank." In the second refrain, "you" begin, then, a repentance, understanding 1 Corinthians 1:25. The subject agrees that "the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength." Therefore, Cohen sings, "And you'll think maybe you'll trust him / For he's touched your perfect body with his mind."

Verse three shifts back to Suzanne, and through biblical anti-wisdom she symbolizes a Christ-figure as they travel down the waterfront. There, Cohen's subject "finds evidence of divine care in Montreal."[7] Suzanne is dressed in "rags and feathers from Salvation Army counters," and she is in this line both unconventional like a prophet (e.g. John the Baptist) and a

[6] Burnell, Joel. "Touching the Perfect, Embracing the Real: Leonard Cohen and Theodicy." *Theologica Wratislaviensia* 15 (2020): 115–36.

[7] O'Neil, 93.

deliverer like Christ: poor, unassuming, but quite literally wearing "Salvation." Suzanne beautifies the world, as, Cohen continues, "And the sun pours down like honey on Our Lady of the Harbor[.]" Here, he references a statue of the Blessed Virgin at the Church of Notre Dame de Bon Secours, called the Star of the Sea, who blesses the sailors who come and go from the harbor.[8] As Suzanne "holds the mirror," the subject can now witness his world redemptively. "[A]mong the garbage and the flowers," he can find "heroes in the seaweed" and "children in the morning / …leaning out for love." O'Neil writes:

> The juxtaposition of garbage and flowers, as well as the colloquial expression "wavelength" [in verse one], are typical of the *sermo humilis*, or low style, of the Gospels, which presents Christ mingling with the bottom stratum of society, speaking in simple language, and performing miracles at ordinary events like weddings. In "Suzanne," such imagery and language encourage us to view our contemporary world from a biblical perspective. Poverty, mental illness, and pollution are modern evils in need of redemption.[9]

In the final refrain, Cohen's "you" reaches a profession of faith in Suzanne and, moreover, the redemption she represents as he sings, "And you want to travel with her, and you want to travel blind / And you know you can trust her / For she's touched your perfect body with her mind." Thus, in "Suzanne," Cohen presents a journey to the knowability of the divine through his reflection in created things as people experience them and experience one another.[10] Cohen uses

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid., 94.

[10] Burnell, 119.

the themes and images of the biblical text to methodically approach its application to modern human life. In this, Cohen presents us a poetic theology of love, wisdom, and redemption.

On the other hand, Bob Dylan often writes his lyrics as a flash symbolist instead of a careful theologian, though he is by no means Cohen's antithesis. In Dylan's autobiography, *Chronicles, Vol. 1*, he recounts his introduction to the French symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud: "I came across one of his letters called *'Je est un autre,'* which translates into 'I is someone else.' When I read those words the bells went off. It made perfect sense. I wished someone would have mentioned that to me earlier."[11] This introduction, it seems, wasted no time in fanning a flame of influence, since many of the biblical allusions Dylan exacted upon his canon throughout the 1960s were character-driven and surreal. These were designed to bolster the impression of his poetry and to complete the complexion of an image or a tone, while rarely providing exact clarity. A number of these allusions are sarcastic or comical, such as "Jezebel the nun [who] violently knits" and "John the Baptist… torturing a thief" in the song "Tombstone Blues" off 1965's *Highway 61 Revisited*. This song in particular is riddled with other similar cameos. As each biblical character rubs shoulders with historical and contemporary figures, Dylan comprises one great gaggle of chaos for the song's speaker who repeats, "I'm in the kitchen / With the tombstone blues" in response to their antics.

Again, biblical characters as symbols in Dylan's imaginative landscape reveal themselves in the masterwork "Desolation Row," which ends *Highway 61 Revisited*, 11 minutes and 20 seconds in total. Thomas S. Johnson writes that, in "Desolation Row," Dylan composes an impression of life unbound to romanticism. His impressionism is also stark realism as he presents a "parade of grotesques," characters as they actually are, as they "pass before [him]"

[11] Dylan, Bob. *Chronicles: Volume One*. New York City: Simon & Schuster, 2004.

along his street, in his world.[12] In Rimbaldian fashion, Dylan can only paint the characters he describes in their truest forms if he symbolizes them. Thus, we meet Cain and Abel thronging with the Hunchback of Notre Dame, neither joining in the joyful lovemaking or melancholic expectance of rain described in the third verse. Directly afterward, we witness the Good Samaritan "dressing / …getting ready for the show," which is revealed to be "the carnival [that night] / On Desolation Row." Despite the compassion and sensibilities of his symbol, this Good Samaritan "too now is a freak, to go on display in the modern carnival freak show."[13] The song's next verse then shifts to another "freak," called by the name of Shakespeare's Ophelia. In contrast to the unchaste in the third verse (and to the prostitute Cinderella of the second), "she wears an iron vest[.] / Her profession's her religion / Her sin is her lifelessness." Dylan's speaker fears for this Ophelia because at only twenty-two years of age, "[s]he already is an old maid," and, "[t]o her, death is quite romantic." In the final phrases of the verse, Dylan uses covenantal imagery to express the tension between her iron-willed (and miserable) aspirations and the sullied street which excites her near-dead curiosity: "And though her eyes are fixed upon / Noah's great rainbow / She spends her time peeking / Into Desolation Row."

However, Dylan's biblically-gleaned work in the 1960s cannot be constrained by even a symbolist label. Prior to his electric trilogy of 1965-1966 — folk-rock albums *Bringing It All Back Home, Highway 61 Revisited,* and *Blonde On Blonde* — he used biblical imagery and phrasings on albums more heavily saturated with protest ideology, such as 1963's *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* and 1964's *The Times They Are A-Changin'.* Most often, these allusions were used to more effectively identify and denounce the evils of war and racial

[12] Johnson, Thomas S. "Desolation Row Revisited: Bob Dylan's Rock Poetry." *Southwest Review* 62, no. 2 (Spring 1977): 135–47.

[13] Johnson, 140.

oppression. *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*'s "Blowin' In the Wind," a series of rhetorical questions each beginning with "How many," is thick with the language of biblical prophecy and judgment. These "How many" questions are a "desperate appeal for an 'end time' to suffering" and echo a biblical cry for divine justice. This type of query is repeated throughout Scripture, such as by Isaiah in Isaiah 6:11 and by the martyrs beneath God's heavenly altar in Revelation 6:10.[14] For example, in the song's third verse, Dylan asks, "How many times must a man look up / Before he can see the sky? / How many ears must one man have / Before he can hear people cry?" Francis di Lauro identifies a parallel with Isaiah 42:20: "You have seen many things, but you do not observe them; Your ears are open, but none hears[,]" alongside Isaiah 6:9 and Ezekiel 12:2; all three passages are echoed in Matthew 13:13, in which Jesus states, "Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand."[15] Dylan somewhat parabolizes his indictments of the culture similarly by using Biblical imagery. The repeated refrain even evokes Ecclesiastes as Dylan sings, "The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind / The answer is blowin' in the wind[.]" This refrain signifies that the answers to the "How many" questions are opaque to those asking them. However, Ecclesiastes teaches that God knows what is opaque to human beings. In conjunction with each verse's reliance on prophetic language, "Blowin' In the Wind" perhaps both calls on and anticipates God's judgment. Other tracks which function similarly from this era are "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall," "Masters of War," "When the Ship Comes In," and "With God on Our Side."

[14] Di Lauro, Frances. "Living in the End Times: The Prophetic Language of Bob Dylan." *The Buddha of Suburbia: Proceedings of the Eighth Australian and International Religion, Literature and the Arts Conference 2004*, May 29, 2008, 186–202.

[15] Di Lauro, 194.

Post-1966, Dylan continued to draw on the Scriptures to communicate. His most significant biblical effort was 1967's *John Wesley Harding*. He later referred to *John Wesley Harding* in the aforementioned *TV Guide* interview as his "first biblical album," a precursor to his gospel trilogy in the late 1970s.[16] After the album's release, Dylan's mother Beatty Zimmerman told music journalist Robert Shelton in an interview,

> In his house in Woodstock today, there's a huge Bible open on a stand in the middle of his study. Of all the books that crowd his house, overflow from his house, that Bible gets the most attention. He's continuously getting up and going over to refer to something.[17]

John Wesley Harding is widely known to be filled with biblical allusions. It retains the symbolist bent of Dylan's writing in the 1960s, but it also marks a shift, backed by folk-country pickings, toward the reflective and meditative. In some respects, it is closer to Cohen's songwriting. Dylan, still no longer speaking for a generation or acting as the mouthpiece of a collective since his shift in 1965, stands and speaks his own thoughts solitarily. On the album, essayist Frank Devita writes, "Dylan offers hope in the form of parables that point the way back to moral and religious truth."[18]

The height of parabolic form on *John Wesley Harding* comes from its fifth and longest track, "The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest." It is not, in fact, a traditional ballad but a spoken-word poem, with the sparse backing of a simple acoustic chord progression and a jaunty

---

[16] Hickey.

[17] Beatrice "Beatty" Zimmerman, interview by Robert Shelton, Hibbing, MN, May 1968. This interview is included in Shelton's posthumous 2011 second edition of *No Direction Home: The Life and Music of Bob Dylan*, originally published in 1986.

[18] Devita, Frank. "Religious Themes in John Wesley Harding." Web essay. *Frank Devita: Philosophy, Etc.* (blog), November 13, 2011.

drumbeat. This structure, already unusual in the Dylan catalogue, even culminates in a straightforward moral, separated from the rest of the story by only a harmonica solo and set in perfect rhythm with the rest of the track as the fable's explicit end.

In Dylan's tale, "gambler" Frankie Lee approaches his friend Judas Priest for money — Judas Priest, imaging Iscariot, offers him the moneybags in the form of "a roll of tens." The Priest character is unsettling, off-putting. His eyes are "cold," and his gaze makes Lee uncomfortable. It appears that Lee has reservations about accepting the money he asked for while Priest watches him, so Priest leaves him, informing Lee that he's on his way to a place called "Paradise." After his departure, a "passing stranger" informs Lee that his friend is "stranded in a house." When Lee rushes to the scene, Priest is in, presumably, a brothel, as the house is complete "[w]ith four and twenty windows / And a woman's face in every one." As Priest explains to Lee sinisterly, "'It's not a house, it's a home,'" the listener understands that Judas Priest's "Paradise" is debauchery. A surreal malady comes upon Lee while he stays with Priest in this "home," eventually killing him:

> …foaming at the mouth
> He began to make his midnight creep
> For sixteen nights and days he raved
> But on the seventeenth he burst
> Into the arms of Judas Priest
> Which is where he died of thirst.

This raving sickness evokes those oppressed by demons in Matthew 17, Mark 9, and Luke 9. Spiritual sickness and demonic possession were regularly cured by Jesus in the Gospels.

However, Lee throws himself upon a different "Priest," where he meets his end. Dylan alludes to Judas Priest's role in Frankie Lee's downfall in his final moral:

> Well, the moral of the story
>
> The moral of this song
>
> Is simply that one should never be
>
> Where one does not belong
>
> So when you see your neighbor carryin' somethin'
>
> Help him with his load
>
> And don't go mistaking Paradise
>
> For that home across the road

The listener can identify Lee as the character in a place "[w]here [he] does not belong," but Priest's role is also condemned. Devita writes that this Judas Priest — though he had recognized his gambling friend's vulnerability to temptation in the opening lines of the story — "as his name might suggest, did not properly help Frankie Lee with his predicament, but in reality led him to his demise," and, thus, Frankie Lee "perished from spiritual thirst."[19] Perhaps Priest twists Jesus' directive in Matthew 22:39, taken from Leviticus 19:18: "'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" Priest, given over to immorality, manipulates and entices Lee to join his revelry. Lee is doomed by this expression of false love and neighborship. Thus, in folk parables, Dylan draws on not only the words and images of the biblical text, but also on its form.

Scriptural language is timelessly ripe for capturing the human experience and for the continued work of guiding pilgrims to Christ's salvation. It is wondrously rich and varied in its forms and symbolism. Both Cohen and Dylan employ its images, stories, characters, and

[19] Devita.

phrasings masterfully. The influences of these men pave several avenues for further biblical songwriting. I have attempted such songwriting in this project and now turn to discuss my own process.

Integrating Ecclesiastes into Song

Like the examples analyzed above, the songs composed for this project are snapshots of experience which have been synthesized into writing using biblical imagery. However, on the whole, *Under the Sun* is perhaps situated more concretely within its source material than other biblically bolstered works of the same kind. The songs themselves have been gleaned primarily from specific passages in Ecclesiastes rather than from any overt personal circumstances of mine channeled through or embellished by the book. They are, however, sung in first person, which stands partly to reflect the universality of Ecclesiastes, partly to paint the narrator as Seeker and Preacher, and partly, of course, to reflect less-than-blatant elements of my experience in the world as Seeker as I have studied the text and come to live among its lines. Together, the four tracks I have composed aim to evoke the broad themes of Ecclesiastes: to evoke the path of human life under the sun, to confront the reality of death and the slippage of time, and to situate these senses within an awareness of God.

For the Preacher in Ecclesiastes and the Seeker in these songs, this awareness and the awareness of life's chief quality, its vaporousness, call attention to an intrinsic powerlessness to do much of anything of true value, to make a mark on the earth, while the earth and the cycle of the earthbound remain forever. Thus, the Seeker's vital question in *Under the Sun* is, "What *is* good for me to do?" In each of the four tracks, the Seeker encounters ignorance, whether her own or that of another, and she gathers from her experiences, settings, and reason what appears to become the bedrock of her perspective and, therefore, the listener presumes, her choices. This

is most recognizable in the final track, "The Seeker's Song," wherein the Seeker, cognizant of her own inability to teach anything to life itself and the instituted world, happens upon two conclusions. These are the author of Ecclesiastes' own conclusions based on similar acknowledgments: foremostly, to "fear God and keep his commandments" (12:13), and secondarily, to "eat and drink and be merry" (8:15). "The Seeker's Song," taken mostly from these references and the images of 1:2-11 and 3:1-9, can then be interpreted as a hymn to these twin testimonies, evidence of the decisions to which the Seeker is ultimately aligned. In folk tradition, it is set in large part to the tune of two much older ballads — "Loch Lomond" and "Red is the Rose," Scottish and Irish versions of the same melody respectively.

The interplay between Seeker and vital question is perhaps most cryptic in the second track, "Whether Love or Hate," drawn from 9:1-6. However, this is the song in which the Seeker becomes best acquainted with her ignorance, specifically her ignorance of the future. If it is not cryptic, it is more internally or abstractly driven. Here, the question is not entirely, "What acts should I adopt physically with the awareness that I have obtained about my own knowledge?" Instead, it is, "What sort of attitude should I give my assent to, knowing that I know so little about what will befall me?" Because she agrees that "righteous men and their deeds are in the hand of God" (9:1), the Seeker, by the last refrain, contents herself with God's knowledge as opposed to further straining for her own or to lamenting her lack thereof. She also acquiesces to the "hope" of the living espoused in 9:4-5, the one certain knowledge among the living: death is on its way. Though, in Ecclesiastes, the Preacher describes the certainty and impartiality of death for all men as an "evil" in 9:3, these acceptances also make measured physical choices within the chronological bounds of birth and death possible. Thus, in answer to the vital

question which binds the entire body of work together, it is good — that is, best practice — that the Seeker leave herself, her future, and her works "in the hand of God."

This mental assent follows from the Seeker's observational revelations in the opening track "Sweeter Almost." The song acts as a catalyst for the Seeker's own personal decisions and musings on life, death, love, knowledge, and fate, which follow from this first synthesis of experience and principle. Inspired by 6:1-5, the lyrics unfold the Seeker's mediations on the enjoyment of life (and lack thereof) as she processes the story of an acquaintance who was powerless, due in large part to ignorance and vanity, to take delight in the riches of his own life. He could've enjoyed his teeming brood of children, agricultural success, and architectural accomplishments. Instead, these blessings, indicative of the great wealth he had amassed, were enjoyed by "strangers," while the man himself was never satisfied. He therefore rendered his children and achievements void of significance in his life and was, as the listener presumes, much to be pitied. Additionally, implicit within the lines of this track, the Seeker actually *becomes* the Seeker, as revelation pours forth from the opening of the final stanza (emphasis added): "*And I saw the dead* reap more joy 'neath the waves / Of infinity's sleepy ocean, cradled by their graves…" The mystical vision gives birth to insight, and insight births the Seeker's search, turning her focus to the rhythms of her own life which now, upon new awareness, must be examined.

Finally, third track "The Clouds Always Win" is a catalyst for "The Seeker's Song." It is the most personal to the Seeker out of the four songs, capturing the tension between hurt due to a lover's idleness and her mistaken, futile attempts to remedy it in him. The Seeker here confronts her own vanity close to home, and her dual recognition of her futile pursuits and acceptance of this situational vanity turn her to make the better conclusions of the final hymn in this collection.

"The Clouds Always Win" is drawn from phrases in 11:4-6 and in 12:1-4, an application of the text to another universal scenario to illustrate and further humanize its principle. 11:4 asserts, "He who watches the wind will not sow and he who looks at the clouds will not reap." The Seeker uses this language to confess her experience with a preoccupied lover, in which both parties engage in vanity and fail to draw closer to one another, despite their short and slipping time on Earth. The Seeker here also reveals complex feelings toward God, wishing he himself would change her lover's heart, signaling that she "[does] not know the activity of God who makes all things" (11:5). Even in this implied ignorance, her acceptance of her lover's futility in the final stanza is what spurs her toward carefully examined choices and renewed faith, her ultimate alignment.

Concluding Reflections

Perhaps very little of the groundwork in producing a creative piece that makes use of a biblical text is, at face value, genuinely obvious in it, especially without creator's notes like the ones I have briefly provided in this paper. During my own process, a frustration occurred to me: it is impossible to capture all of Ecclesiastes in song, impossible to capture every nuance, particularly when producing a sound work of an exegetical capacity is not my central aim; I am not used to such a shift in object when I approach the biblical text. Was I writing correctly? What is correct in a folk song? Is what I have said *enough*? I suffer next to no fear in songwriting outside of what I present in this project, as all things are mine in it to puppet as I please — mine to twist and probe and state unabashedly. My other songs produce for themselves necessities which I follow, for they are necessities about myself, speaking what the outpouring of my subconscious would have me speak. In a project such as this, by contrast, I am

tethered to a sense of justice, and perhaps it is only my own. I wished to do *justice* to the text from which I pulled; that is what I committed to do, and thus my perfectionism hitchhiked along.

This sense of justice, well-intentioned and rightful in one sense, cramped my writing in another. Before refocusing my work, I wrote five other songs, ambitious to demonstrate the whole of the research I'd done on the text of Ecclesiastes, to check enough essential boxes regarding its major themes. This was in order that I would not and could not be proved lacking in my understanding about the text and my task ("Vanity!"). This was misguided, and nothing truly productive resulted. Box checked. Unsatisfied, I separated myself from the work I had done and began to look back at the text anew: stripping everything else away, which passages inspired me? I wrote them down. Then I wrote poems about them. By stream-of-consciousness, I made my way into a loose character and a loose story, part of the time unaware of it. When I finally crafted the four songs that make up this body of work, I combed through them, recognized their threads, and arranged them thematically. Thus, I mitigated a great deal of the dissatisfaction that had previously plagued me. Of course, a songwriter will rarely feel their songs are complete and without room for improvement, but I believe *Under the Sun* has accomplished its purpose, not perfectly, but well. With it, in a small way, I have scratched the surface of what biblical folk songs *could* look like: while not explicitly purposed for Christian worship, this collection is certainly for probing, for processing, and for glimpsing through a new medium the story of human life underneath the sun.

Bibliography

Burnell, Joel. "Touching the Perfect, Embracing the Real: Leonard Cohen and Theodicy." *Theologica Wratislaviensia* 15 (2020): 115–36.

Devita, Frank. "Religious Themes in John Wesley Harding." Web essay. *Frank Devita: Philosophy, Etc.* (blog), November 13, 2011. https://frankdevita.wordpress.com/2011/11/13/religious-themes-in-john-wesley-harding/.

Di Lauro, Frances. "Living in the End Times: The Prophetic Language of Bob Dylan." *The Buddha of Suburbia: Proceedings of the Eighth Australian and International Religion, Literature and the Arts Conference 2004*, May 29, 2008, 186–202.

Dylan, Bob. *Chronicles: Volume One*. New York City: Simon & Schuster, 2004.

Hickey, Neil. Bob Dylan Today. Other. *TV Guide*, September 11, 1976.

Johnson, Thomas S. "Desolation Row Revisited: Bob Dylan's Rock Poetry." *Southwest Review* 62, no. 2 (Spring 1977): 135–47.

O'Neil, Mary Anne. "Leonard Cohen, Singer of the Bible." *CrossCurrents* 65, no. 1 (March 2015): 91–99. https://doi.org/10.1353/cro.2015.a782594.

Robert, Shelton. *No Direction Home: The Life and Music of Bob Dylan*. Edited by Elizabeth Thomson and Patrick Humphries. 2nd ed. London: Backbeat/Hal Leonard, 2011.

Taysom, Joe. "The Story Behind The Song: The Byrds' Romantic Rework 'Turn! Turn! Turn!'" *Far Out Magazine*, October 1, 2020.

Link for Listening Purposes

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1CdKgp0lFJaq3t-yIckR1vwnTfxQxLtPq?usp=sharing

Above is a link to a Google Drive folder which contains the recordings of all the songs written for this project in their entirety. Each song is performed live and is without autotune, multitracking, or major enhancements. Any prospective listener should be able to access *Under the Sun: Songs from Ecclesiastes* with this link and this link only.

If any difficulties, questions, or comments arise, I accept correspondence by email at:

emmakaysmithcontact@gmail.com