

## CHAPTER 1

# “Señor (Tales of Yankee Power)”: A Window into Bob Dylan’s Existential and Religious World

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**Abstract:** “Señor (Tales of Yankee Power)” is a central song on *Street-Legal*, the album Bob Dylan released in 1978, a short time before his Christian conversion experience and the so-called Christian album trilogy of 1979–1981. Within the setting of a journey through a half-real, half-mythical landscape, the song describes an encounter between an I-figure, the singer, and his travel companion, a mysterious, silent “señor”, with the singer going through a process of growing frustration leading to a state of existential despair. The article gives a close, narrative reading of the lyrics and analyzes the song within the contexts of the album, of the development of Dylan’s religious language, of his performances of the song from 1978 to 2011, and of his own comments on it. The main conclusion is that “Señor” can be read in different ways, but that religion, and Christianity in particular, plays an important and integral part in the various readings. The song reflects Dylan’s artistic and personal situation at the time, also by foreshadowing his conversion experience, but at the same time belongs within a long trajectory of Dylan songs from the 1960s until today which deal with fundamental human themes related to history, society, social relations, religion, and life in general.

**Keywords:** Bob Dylan, Christianity, Bible, literary analysis, contextual analysis

**Samandrag:** «Señor (Tales of Yankee Power)» er ein sentral song på *Street-Legal*, albumet Bob Dylan gav ut i 1978, kort tid før sitt kristne gjennombrøt og den såkalla kristne albumtrilogien frå 1979–81. Songen skildrar ei reise gjennom eit halvt verkeleg, halvt mytisk landskap, der eit «eg», songaren, fleire gonger vender seg til reisefellen sin, ein mystisk, taus «señor». I samtalen gjennomgår songaren ei utvikling; frustrasjonen hans veks til eksistensiell desperasjon. Artikkelen gjer ei narrativ

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nærlesing av songteksta og analyserar songen ut frå ulike perspektiv: albumet som heilskap, utviklinga i Dylans religiøse språk, framføringane hans av songen frå 1978 til 2011, og hans egne kommentarar til songen. Konklusjonen er at «Señor» kan bli tolka på fleire måtar, men at religion, og kristendom spesielt, spelar ei sentral og ufråkommeleg rolle i dei ulike tolkingane. Songen speglar Dylans kunstnarlege og personlege situasjon på den tida og kan også lesast som eit varsel om omvendinga hans. Men samtidig høyrer «Señor» til i ei tradisjonsline av Dylan-songar heilt frå 1960-talet og fram til i dag, der han tek opp grunnleggjande menneskelege tema knytt til historie, samfunn, sosiale relasjonar, religion og livet generelt.

**Stikkord:** Bob Dylan, kristendom, Bibelen, litterær analyse, kontekstuell analyse

## Introduction

Most of Bob Dylan’s songs can be heard in multiple ways. How they are interpreted – whether by scholars, fans, or others interested in Dylan – differs widely, and very much depends on the interests and approaches of the interpreters. This is also the case with the beautiful, intense, and fascinating “Señor (Tales of Yankee Power)”, and many have presented their readings of it. The song, which appeared on the 1978 album *Street-Legal*, is in my view an important contribution to Dylan’s large songbook. And in addition to being of much value in itself, the song also has qualities that make it well suited as an access point to Dylan’s existential and religious world in general.

Very roughly, we may sort current interpretations of “Señor” into some main types: as a historically oriented song, from a time of American settlement; a story about migration and ethnic tension, in the past or in the present; a description of lost love; a portrait of human uprooting and homelessness; a portrayal of the inner existential or religious crisis of an individual; or, finally, as an autobiographical account of Dylan himself, as an artist or a person. Often, these types of readings are combined, but with varying emphases. Earlier treatments of the song have usually been brief and sketchy, and no in-depth analysis seems to exist, see for example Webb (2006, p. 78–79); Heylin (2011, chs. 25–26); Gilmour (2011, p. 74–76).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Also <http://www.dgdclynx.plus.com/lynx/lynx27.html>; <https://bob-dylan.org.uk/archives/2566>; <https://bobdylansonganalysis.wordpress.com/2017/04/21/senor-tales-of-yankee-power/>

In the following, I shall not argue in favor of a specific interpretation of "Señor". In my view, a full or consistent reading of "Señor" is not possible: the song is inherently polyphonic. Instead, I approach the song in a more heuristic and experimental way: I shall use it as a window into central aspects of Dylan's existential and religious world as a whole. At the same time, I will inquire into how this world can help us understand the song; in this way, I also aim at adding some new perspectives to the interpretation of this significant song.

My point of departure will be in the text itself, in a narrative analysis of the lyrics. On the basis of this, I widen the perspective to take in the whole of *Street-Legal*, in a reading of the song in the context of the album. Then, I go on to situate "Señor" within the development of the religious language in Dylan's work in general, from the early 1960s and to the present. From this, I take a slight turn toward Dylan's own use of the song over the years. In doing so, we move in the direction of his artistic engagement in "Señor", in the function it has had in his performances. Finally, I address Dylan's own comments and reflections on the song, particularly during the first years after the release of the album; with this, we are within the realm of the personal, which includes both Dylan's artistic intentions with the song and its role in his own biography. As noted, focus will throughout be on existential and religious aspects, and particularly on the Christian element, which is predominant in the song. Importantly, however, these aspects are closely interwoven with other central motifs in the song, and I shall also pay close attention to this interplay.

With this procedure, I cover most of the breadth within which "Señor" has been interpreted, from mainly literary, text-centered approaches, via historical or more contemporary interpretations, and to autobiographical readings. To my knowledge, this is a new way of inquiring into the song. Within the limited format of a single chapter, some aspects of the song must be left out. For example, I shall not touch on musical elements, such as the tune and arrangement of the song, or on differences in Dylan's performances of it, interesting as these aspects may be. Also the reception history of the song, with its manifold interpretations, must mostly be passed over in silence.

## Narrative analysis of “Señor”

Here, I take my point of departure in the album version of “Señor”, which differs a little from the print and online version; Dylan (2016, p. 390).<sup>2</sup> The album version seems to me to be poetically superior, but the differences do not affect my reading of the song (see transcription with notes in appendix 1).

The full title of the song, “Señor (Tales of Yankee Power)”, is not part of the sung version, but is an apt place to start. As noted by many, the word “Señor” is ambiguous: it can in Spanish be a polite address both to a male person in general, “mister”, and to a superior, “master”, but it can also be addressed to God or Jesus, the “Lord”, in the form of a prayer. Most likely, it refers to “master” or “Lord”; as I will argue in the following, the use of the term in the song is probably intentionally ambiguous. Interestingly, the fairly obvious title “Señor” has a subtitle added in parentheses: “Tales of Yankee Power”. When Dylan speaks of the song in 1978, he consistently uses this only. The subtitle may signal that the song is to be interpreted as dealing with American history or contemporary society, with “Yankee” commonly referring to people from the US. When used by outsiders, for example by Latin Americans, the word is often employed in a derogatory sense. Since “yankee” is used as epithet describing “power”, such a negative connotation is probably implied.

The word “tales” is also interesting; it indicates a narrative, but not necessarily of a historical kind – rather, “tale” suggests that the song will contain a “story”, or even some sort of “adventure”, maybe from a distant past, such as the time of settlement in the West. The plural “tales” comes as a surprise, since the text mainly deals with one individual. The plural, however, may signal that the tale is representative of other people, maybe even of many other people. Or it can suggest that the song is about the fates of the main figures, each of them being victims of “yankee power”.

For Dylan, it is quite rare to have such parenthetical subtitles, and in particular with formulations not taken from the lyrics themselves; he may have had a specific purpose for this. The fact that *Street-Legal*'s final

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.bobdylan.com/songs/senor-tales-yankee-power/>

track, "Where Are You Tonight? (Journey Through Dark Heat)", has a similar twist, can support this. Is it to direct the attention to some story from the past? Or to conjure up a story, or stories, about human lives or the human condition generally? Or can it even be an attempt at diverting listeners from something else that the story is also about? It may be for any of these reasons, and even all of them. In any case, the bracketed text gives little support to a primarily religious reading – it may rather discourage it. This is a matter that I shall return to later.

Contrary to what "tales" in the title suggests, the lyrics of "Señor", which consists of seven four line verses, elude a straightforward logical or narrative analysis. Like many other Dylan songs, they present a situation, or some kind of state of mind, with chronological leaps back and forth between past, present, and even a potential future. Nevertheless, some features stand out. First, there is more structure to the lyrics than some interpreters, such as Williams (2004, p. 115), have assumed. Five of the verses, 1–2, 4, 6–7 (the two first, the middle, and the two last), are introduced by a repeated "señor", and all verses end with a question (except v. 6) and the address "señor". Verses 3 and 5 have a different structure; they are narratively more elaborated, and seem to function as bridges – this is also signaled in the tune of the song. Worth noting is also that these two verses may not be addressed to the señor, but rather to the singer himself or to the listeners. At the same time, they are through the characters linked up with verses 2 (a woman) and 6 (a gypsy and some "fools") respectively, but in opposite sequence, so that verse 3 develops what has been signaled in verse 2 (the woman), whereas verse 5 prepares for a conclusion in verse 6 (hard hearts). Narratively, this allows for a forward thrust in five steps (1, 2–3, 4, 5–6, 7), while the song at the same time displays a markedly chiasmic structure (1a, 2b, 3c, 4, 5c, 6b, 7a).

Furthermore, three central protagonists emerge in the song: first, the singer and main figure, who in my narrative reading should not be identified with Dylan himself. This character is on a journey, maybe like the one in "Where Are You Tonight?". The second character is the addressee of the song, the "señor". And the third is a woman of the past; she loved the singer, but has disappeared, or even seems to be hiding from him. She wore, and according to the singer "still" wears, "an iron cross ... around

her neck”. The singer’s mention of the cross, a main Christian symbol, as a characteristic of her, shows that this is important for him. The “iron” epithet is somewhat ambiguous: it can connote stability and reliability, but also hardness and repulsiveness. The former interpretation is supported by her loving farewell: “Forget me not”, the latter by the cross being paralleled in the preceding lines with a “wicked wind still blowin’” and a band “still playin’” in a “vacant lot” – the word “still” being used three times.

In addition to the three main figures, some minor characters enter the stage, but only from verse 4 on. They are only hinted at, but generally appear to the singer as scary, or even threatening: the “marching band”, maybe a funeral or military band; a strange “trainload of fools bogged down in a magnetic field”, possibly his travel companions, and perhaps some kind of parallel to a “ship of fools”; a mystic “gypsy with a broken flag and a flashing ring”; and a “dragon”, strongly present in the smell of its tail, and even ominous: the phrase evokes the end-time dragon of Revelation 12:3–4 in the New Testament.

Obviously, the central relationship is between the singer and the señor, whereas the longed-for woman is – at least explicitly – only important in the second and third verses. In the structurally corresponding fifth and sixth verses the attention turns instead to the other, minor characters: the fools and the gypsy. Now, the woman’s loving care, “she held me in her arms” (v. 3), seems to be replaced by their “hard as leather” hearts (v. 6). The singer has at this point not only been separated from his woman, but is also alienated from, and feels opposed by other people.

The singer’s relationship with the señor is unequal, even incongruous – he seems to be a stranger to the singer, a quite distant figure. On the one hand, the señor is clearly in charge: he is expected to know the singer’s past and the destination of the journey (v. 1), where the woman is (v. 2), whom to contact (v. 4), and even the hearts of the singer’s opponents (v. 6). In five of the verses the singer repeatedly addresses the señor from a subordinate position: he needs his help and guidance, and waits for him to be ready. The singer clearly considers his power to be of an extraordinary, possibly even superhuman, nature. On the other hand, the señor is, throughout, passive: he does not respond to the questions and does not at any time speak. His silence is also mirrored in the questions of the singer,

which increase in drama from verse to verse, even to a state of despair: from bewilderment and anxiety (vv. 1–2), to suspense and the unpleasant feeling of being exposed (vv. 4–5), and then to a personal collapse and, ultimately, an existential trauma (vv. 6–7). In the last two verses, the singer seems forced to the point of challenging the señor: here, the singer does not pose a question, but intimates that he is even more prepared than him (v. 6) and urges, nearly demands, the señor to join in for a drastic breakout – waiting is not possible any more (v. 7).

As indicated in verse 1, the two main characters have started out on a journey, but with the singer not knowing where: “señor, can you tell me where we’re headin’?” The first destination mentioned is Lincoln County Road, which can refer to various routes: there are more than twenty counties named Lincoln in the US, and many roads with this name. The Spanish flavor of the song (cf. the song title and the musical arrangement) may refer to one of the southernmost counties of New Mexico, a state bordering on Mexico. It can also refer to a road that stretches from Plains in Georgia to Washington DC (Jimmy Carter was president at the time of writing). Far more important, however, than the possible whereabouts of the road, is probably the word “Lincoln”, with its reference to Abraham Lincoln, the president who abolished slavery in America. The road is also described as a place, a goal in itself, rather than as just a means of transportation; it appears to represent a state of potential and promise.

The other destination is Armageddon, a place referred to once in the New Testament, in Revelation 16:16, and interpreted in some Christian traditions as the scene of the final end-time battle between good and evil. As a geographical location, it may have a historical origin, but in the song, as in the New Testament, it is of a mythical and apocalyptic nature. Both destinations thus refer to, and consequently situate the events in the song in, a mixed landscape of myth and reality. Together, they forebode a fulfilment of a final and decisive character.

It is also worth considering that the two places need not be different or opposite options. Contrary to what most interpreters assume, the singer can also perceive them to be the same, so that Lincoln County Road ironically will turn out to be the way to catastrophe, to Armageddon. This would even heighten the drama which he anticipates.

The travelers' means of transportation is not clear. It may be on horseback (v. 2: "ridin'"), which signals a historic, possibly a migration or settler, situation for the song. This is supported by the mention of a "painted wagon", as in the 1969 western musical "Paint Your Wagon" – Dylan's lasting interest in film is well known. But the lyrics may also refer to a boat or a bus, cf. "upper deck" (v. 3), or more likely to a train, cf. "trainload" (v. 5) – "train" is a metaphor Dylan uses repeatedly, interestingly also in the final song on *Street-Legal*, "Where Are You Tonight?", and on the next album, the 1979 *Slow Train Coming*. At the same time, there is a gradual change of metaphor in the lyrics from journey to place. This is signaled already by "door" in verse 2, and by "here" in verse 4 (as opposed to "there" in verse 2).

This transition in use of metaphor becomes manifest in the two last verses: here, the journey motif is gone, and the singer is in a room, even lying on the floor (v. 6), locked up in a space void of meaning: "this place don't make sense to me no more" (v. 7). What may have been a journey of promise has instead ended in a cul-de-sac, a standstill. The singer has appeared to be moving but is in reality standing still. And in this claustrophobic state the option is not to search or run, but to break out. Drastic change is needed: a disconnecting of cables like those of an amplifier or those between train wagons, and a turning of the tables like Jesus's action in the temple of Jerusalem (e.g. Gospel of John 2:13–16). The biblical reference can imply a change on an individual as well as on a societal level, considering the public nature of Jesus's act. Again, as with the travel destinations, Dylan combines biblical and modern references.

To sum up: the lyrics of "Señor" are more sophisticated than has been generally assumed. They depict a flickering scenario, with the main character, the singer, being on the verge of a dramatic change, and with the other main character, the superior "master", remaining silent in spite of the singer's many appeals to him. The drama intensifies as the singer gradually loses control of the situation, with a personal breakdown close at hand. The singer vacillates between looking back at a past of love lost and of scary creatures, envisioning a future of uncertainty and great anxiety, and experiencing a present which is increasingly unbearable: he senses himself to be both in motion and at a standstill, on his way



but with no way out. In addition to the portrayal of the singer, elements from American history, biblical imagery and expressions, and real and unreal geographical places are mixed together in ways that underscore the confusion and unrest of the singer. Together, the structure, figures, references, and motifs add up to a song that presents a coherent, growing drama, while at the same time lending itself to a variety of interpretations.

## **"Señor" within *Street-Legal***

My analysis so far has offered some indications of possible readings of "Señor", not least based on its historical, geographical, and biblical references. Now, we turn to the contexts of the song to see how they can throw light on an interpretation of it. The most immediate context is the position and function of "Señor" on *Street-Legal*. The album, which was recorded April 26–May 1, 1978 and released June 13, has received quite mixed reviews. As far as artistic quality is concerned, assessments have varied from markedly negative to positive; for example Gray (2000, p. 215–30); Williams (2004, p. 113–17). In my view, the songs are both lyrically and musically somewhat uneven.

Like several other Dylan albums, *Street-Legal* does not have a clear organization or dramaturgy (see appendix 2 for track listing). Nevertheless, some elements tie it together. First, and most important here, two main themes run through its lyrics, partly separate and partly mixed: *dramatic change*, either recent, imminent, or potential – see also Burns (2008, p. 77–82) – and *love*, either hoped for, conflictual, or lost. Change comes particularly to the fore in "New Pony", "Señor", and "Where Are You Tonight?", and love in "Baby Stop Crying", "Is Your Love in Vain?", "True Love Tends to Forget", and "We Better Talk This Over". Both themes are prominent in "New Pony" and "We Better Talk This Over", but even more so in "Changing of the Guards" and "Where Are You Tonight?"; in these, the two themes appear to a degree of despair ("desperate men, desperate women" and "my despair") – and the same is, as I showed above, also the case in "Señor". Thus, change and love emerge as closely intertwined: each of the songs and the album as a whole bear witness to a stage of transition, where love – in a variety of meanings – may be found or,

equally often, lost. In both respects, the lyrics throughout depict a state of unrest: the singer is partly impatient, partly overwhelmed – there is “no time to think”. In spite of the album’s unevenness, the two themes give *Street-Legal* a certain – though somewhat rent – cohesion.

Furthermore, the sequence of the songs underscores the same: the fact that “Changing of the Guards” is placed first signals the centrality of change, with obvious links to “Señor” and to “Where Are You Tonight?”, the final song. This sets the change theme up-front and creates a link, an *inclusio*, from beginning to end. In the original vinyl version, “Señor” is number two on side B, a relatively inconspicuous position. Here, it is sandwiched between other songs that deal with love relations of differing, but in all cases challenging, kinds. In the preceding song “Is Your Love in Vain?”, the singer is clearly in love, but reserved and distrustful: he is not confident that his love is genuinely returned by the other, a female who is to meet both his physical and his emotional and/or existential-spiritual needs (cf. “my pain”). He has also repeatedly experienced being let down by others. Still, he is, in his longing, willing to commit himself. As in “Señor”, a negotiation takes place: “All right, I’ll take a chance, I will fall in love with you”.

In “True Love Tends to Forget”, the song after “Señor”, love is also challenging: the singer and his “baby” are in a relationship, but a conflictual and strained one. In order to persevere in it, he no longer has the option to forgive but only – the less satisfying option – to forget. Here, too, a negotiation is going on, but the singer is more resigned than in the two previous songs. Interestingly, “True Love” appears in its penultimate line to link back to the Latino mood of “Señor”: “Don’t keep me knockin’ about from Mexico to Tibet”.

Finally, both the title and the cover of *Street-Legal* signal change as a main theme. Being “street-legal” suggests that a person – like a car or a motorcycle – has acquired the qualifications and right to move freely about in the “streets”, in the world, and is ready for something new, for example a new love affair. The photo on the front cover intimates the same, with Dylan standing in the door opening of his *Rundown Studios* in Santa Monica, California, looking to the left at the street, as if watching out for something to pass by or for someone to turn up.

Characteristic of *Street-Legal* as a whole is also the central position of "I" and "you" figures. In the analysis above, I have implicitly assumed that the "I" – the narrator – of the lyrics, the singer, is the same throughout. This need not be the case, however: they can also be seen as diverse narrators. If so, the album may appear less coherent. But not much: the I-figures can then be viewed as staging different situations of challenge in the conflict between experiences of love and change. In my view, there are good reasons for seeing the I-figures as related throughout. The "I" is, for instance, for the most explicitly depicted as male. More important is the fact that an I-figure is central in each and every song on the album, both as an observer and an agent. It is very common for Dylan to have an I-figure in his songs, but on *Street-Legal* this feature is more prominent than on any other album. The "I" should, however, be seen as a narrative tool and not be equated with Dylan himself – at least not in this stage of analysis.

In nearly all *Street-Legal* songs there also appears a "significant other", a "you", either linked to or opposed to the I-figure. In most of them, they appear to be female. Usually, the female is portrayed in sensual or fleshly ways, but she also occasionally takes on a more-than-human character, either diabolical, such as Lucifer in "New Pony", or dreamlike, such as the woman in "Where Are You Tonight?". The male you in "Señor" is an exception, but a special exception, considering this character's ambiguous, both earthly and otherworldly, nature.

Whereas an otherworldly dimension is only hinted at in the description of the main figures on *Street-Legal*, it is strongly present in the album's numerous metaphors; throughout, they evoke a bewildering – partly surrealistic, partly apocalyptic – scenario. The many mundane, everyday-like human negotiations and conflicts described in the songs are again and again clothed in existential-religious language taken from various traditions: Afro-American ("voodoo" in "New Pony"), American-Indian ("Cherokee" in "Where Are You Tonight?"), gypsy ("gypsy" in "Señor"), and others. The great majority of such metaphors and concepts, however, are drawn from the Bible and Jewish-Christian tradition; many of the biblical references are listed in Gilmour (2004, p. 116–17). They permeate the album from beginning to end; examples are "the good

shepherd”, “moving mountains”, “wheels of fire”, “betrayed by a kiss”, “sacrifice”, “the Babylon girl”, and “enemy within”. The mention of an original, but now forfeited, paradisiac state serves to frame the album as a whole: in the first song is “Eden ... burning”, and in the final song the I-figure has bitten a “forbidden fruit”. Paradise, the longed-for place of love, is endangered, maybe even destroyed by change.

Together, these elements – the themes of change and love, the depiction of the main characters, and the biblical references – emphatically strike a key with religious overtones, and disclose an existential urgency that not only permeates “Señor”, but also *Street-Legal* as a whole.

## **“Señor” in the development of Dylan’s religious language**

My analyses of “Señor” and *Street-Legal* have indicated that existential and religious concerns play an important part at this stage in Dylan’s artistic oeuvre. Thus, it is now appropriate to take a look at his songs as a whole, and reflect on how “Señor” may fit in with the general development in Dylan’s songbook. To stay focused, I shall pay attention to one of the main ways that religion finds expression in his songs, namely through his use of biblical material. Dylan has from the early 1960s continuously been referring to the Bible, whether by means of quotations, allusions, or metaphors. As I have argued elsewhere, his relationship to Scripture has gone through six stages; Aasgaard (2011). Each stage does not rule out the preceding ones, however, but generally follows up on and complements them in a process of gradual development and maturing; see Taylor and Israelson (2015) and Marshall (2017) for more biographically oriented approaches.

The first stage goes from Dylan’s debut album in 1961 to circa 1966, after *Blonde on Blonde*. In this period, Dylan uses the Bible primarily in the service of social and economic criticism, and in a manner similar to spirituals and the blues, with references to well-known biblical phrases, such as “the first one now will later be last” (“The Times They Are A-Changin’”), and to biblical figures, for instance “like Judas of old” (“Masters of War”).

The second stage is from 1966 to 1973, when Dylan has stepped out of the limelight. During these years, he studies the Bible more intensively and develops a deeper understanding of ideas and concepts in it and of Jewish and Christian traditions in general. Here, the Bible serves as a reservoir for interpreting life and the world more generally. Dylan's use of biblical motifs, figures, and events becomes more varied and multivalent, with different motifs often being woven together. This is particularly visible on *John Wesley Harding* (1967), by Dylan himself referred to as "the first biblical rock album". By far the most famous example is "All Along the Watchtower", which has allusions to a broad range of writings from the Hebrew Bible, particularly the prophet Isaiah and the Psalms, and from the New Testament, especially the Gospels and the Revelation of John.

During the next period, from 1973 to 1978, the year of *Street-Legal*, the Bible appears to affect Dylan more personally. This is privately a demanding period, with his divorce from Sara Lownds in 1977. In addition to the Bible, other religious traditions also influence him, with examples on the album *Desire* (1976), most typically "Isis" and "One More Cup of Coffee (Valley Below)". Dylan's personal involvement with religion is also evident in the sincere "Forever Young" on *Planet Waves* (1974), which echoes blessings in the Hebrew Bible and in synagogue rituals. It is also evident in the self-comparison of the I-figure with Christ in songs like "Idiot Wind" and "Shelter From the Storm", both on *Blood on the Tracks* (1975), and – as argued above – in the many biblical references on *Street-Legal*.

The fourth phase, 1979–81, is Dylan's charismatic-Christian time of "Sturm und Drang", with three albums steeped in biblical language, with frequent renderings of stories from the Torah and the Gospels, and extensive references to sayings of the prophets and of Jesus, and to the letters of Paul and the Revelation of John. This stage reaches its peak in personal engagement on *Saved* (1980), which is the one of the three albums to come closest to being a full-fledged gospel album. Just like in the earliest stage, Dylan uses the biblical material to criticize social and economic injustice, but now he also employs it for an explicit call to personal conversion.

The next period, from late 1981 and *Infidels* (1983) to the early/mid-1990s, is artistically very uneven and shows a vulnerable Dylan with the expressive

fervor gone. His major album here is undoubtedly *Oh Mercy* (1989), on which he appears religiously and personally more integrated, and – as on *Street-Legal*, but even more – makes use of biblical imagery and motifs to describe relationships, whether with one’s own self, other humans, or with God, as in “Ring Them Bells”. There also appears to be a running thread of self-scrutiny from “Señor” via “Every Grain of Sand” (1981) and to “What Good Am I?” (1989), evolving from existential confusion via self-doubt to more ethically colored self-criticism – in all three songs this is clothed in biblical language.

The final period, from the mid-1990s and until the present, is the artistic culmination of Dylan’s use of Scripture. Here, the elements from the previous periods, such as biblical metaphors and allusions, are woven together with other kinds of material, in particular literary and historical, in ways more integrated and holistic than in any of the earlier periods. Differently from the other periods, however, the singer appears more resigned, but also at the same time more lenient. He is less proclaiming than in the years 1979–81, but maybe even more biting in his criticism of social injustice and human folly. Examples of such songs are “Things Have Changed” (1999) and “Scarlet Town” (2012). In the latter, which takes its point of departure in the old ballad “Barbara Allen”, a broad range of biblical imagery is mixed together with references to American history and to present social and political injustice into a somber portrait of a world gone astray.

As can be seen, “Señor” fits in well with this chronological survey of Dylan’s religious, *in casu* biblical, language. The song is closely reminiscent of his use of biblical figures and texts in the 1960s, with references to God, the “Lord”, and to Jesus and the cleansing of the temple being the most obvious examples. At the same time, something is new in “Señor”: the material is applied to the singer – the finger in 1978 is not primarily pointing at others but at the I-person – what was once employed as socio-cultural reproach has here been redirected into a personal showdown. In the post-charismatic stages after 1981, but perhaps most pronouncedly from the late 1990s, both these aspects are taken further: the last two decades have witnessed a return to, and more mature continuation of, what is reflected in “Señor” and generally on *Street-Legal*. Differently from then, however, Dylan now more commonly describes the

existential condition of his I-figures not as a close-to-traumatic standstill, but as a walk in perseverance: a main and recurring motif in his songs in this period is of a wandering, a pilgrimage in a life and in a world that are both aging. Typical examples are "Highlands" (1997), "Cross the Green Mountain" (2003), and "Ain't Talkin'" (2006).

In this trajectory of stages, 1979–81 emerges as a deviation from what had been, but also as a stepping stone to what was to come: all in all, the continuity in Dylan's existential and religious sensibilities from the pre-1979 stages – including "Señor" – and to the later stages seems to be stronger than with the 1979–81 charismatic Christian period.

## "Señor" in Dylan's Performances

In his career, Dylan has been very conscious in his selection of songs for concert performance. This is reflected in how he has standardized his repertoire for parts of, or whole tours, particularly in recent years. In my view, Dylan's selection of songs functions as statements of his own position as an artist: he does not base his setlists on what the audience may expect, but primarily on what message he wants to mediate. This makes his shows an ideal object for a performance study approach: he has developed his persistently austere shows into an artistic expression of his own, cast in a mold I would term Dylan's "performatology". On stage, his main means of communication are the selection of songs and his manner of presenting them. Thus, the frequency, periods, and occasions of his performances of songs give valuable hints as to what songs he holds in regard and his motivations for using them. It is important to note here, however, that there are also several songs Dylan values highly, but which he has rarely or never played live, due, for example, to their length.

In the following, I shall inquire into how "Señor" has functioned to color Dylan's performances existentially and religiously. According to the listings, which are not quite consistent, Dylan has played "Señor" 265 times from 1978 to 2011 (74 of these were in 1978). This puts it in circa position sixty in the ranking.<sup>3</sup> This is not very high, but nevertheless among

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3 See <https://www.setlist.fm/stats/bob-dylan-1bd6adb8.html> and <https://www.bobdylan.com/setlists>

his twenty percent most played songs, and on a level with several songs that he has performed since the early sixties.

Although Dylan, after the release of *Street-Legal*, expressed the view that he himself appreciated the album as a whole, “Señor” is the only song to survive 1978 in concert. Apart from “Señor”, the most cherished has been “Changing of the Guards”, which he played 68 times that year, 1978, – in fact in each and every concert from July 5. Three of the other songs Dylan has performed thirty to forty times, two others half of that, and the two remaining have never been played in public. Thus, *Street-Legal* in retrospect appears as an intermezzo in Dylan’s album catalog.

When dealing with Dylan’s performance of “Señor”, I distinguish between the years 1978 and 1980–2011, since the song in these periods serves different functions in his shows.<sup>4</sup> It is also worth noting that Dylan did not play “Señor” between late December 1978 and early December 1980. The main reason for this hiatus is his complete shift in repertoire from the first concert in 1979 (Nov. 1): he now only uses material from his new album *Slow Train Coming* (Aug. 18) and from *Saved* (released 1980). We may, however, also speculate – in a biographically oriented interpretation – that the song in this period did not resonate with his present state: the “suspense” described in “Señor” had become a thing of the past and was replaced by the fervor of his new beliefs.

As for Dylan’s use of “Señor” in 1978, his first performances were from June 1 and in seven warm-up shows in Los Angeles ahead of the release of *Street-Legal* (June 13); here, he presents it as a “new song” from his forthcoming album. In the 91 concerts from June to December, he performs “Señor” regularly; the only exception is the three weeks from October 9 and for the rest of the month – here it is suddenly omitted (except for Oct. 28). In the shows up to October 9, the song is usually played around the middle of the second part, in a less conspicuous position.

During the summer and early autumn tours, the dramaturgy of Dylan’s setlist, which is fairly stable throughout, appears to focus on change – a main motif on *Street-Legal*. The shows almost invariably start with “My Back Pages” (“I was so much older then / I’m younger than

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4 See <http://www.bjorner.com/still.htm>



that now") and ends with "Changing of the Guards" as an encore, with "Forever Young" – a blessing song – serving as the finale. From October 18, however, Dylan revises the repertoire: he introduces "The Times They Are A-Changin'" into the shows and puts it in first position in the second part of the show, thus strengthening the motif of change. On November 1, "Señor" is back for the whole last part of the tour, until December 16. Now, however, Dylan has rescheduled the song from the middle of the second part to a more prominent position, as the final song of the first part. With "Señor" placed there, the motif of change is highlighted even more. And, importantly, the emphasis on existential and religious aspects becomes very strong, with songs drawing heavily on biblical references at the end of the first part, the start and end of the second part, and as an encore ("Señor", "The Times They Are A-Changin'", "Forever Young", and "Changing of the Guards"). All these songs remain in the same position until the final concert in December.

With these repertoire adjustments from June to December, we observe gradual revisions, or maybe even leaps, in the dramaturgy of the shows, during which elements of change and of existential and religious coloring are clearly intensified. Something seems to be on the way, at least as far as the setlist and the positioning of "Señor" is concerned. The next section, on Dylan's own comments to the song, will further substantiate this.

When turning to the 1980 to 2011 period, we move to a new stage in Dylan's touring in which his charismatic-Christian fervor quickly fades out. Now, he gradually returns to his earlier repertoire, but also still makes use of several explicitly Christian songs. We may for this period expect that "Señor" will have a somewhat different function than in 1978. During these years, Dylan performs the song much less frequently; even so, there are some distinct patterns in his use of it.

In his late 1980 tour Dylan returns to some of his pre-1979 repertoire. At the first concert (Nov. 9), "Señor" is one of the five old songs that he picks up again – the others are the classics "Like A Rolling Stone", "Girl From the North Country", "Just Like a Woman", and "Blowin' in the Wind". Dylan performs "Señor" in all eighteen concerts of this tour – a clear indication of his appreciation of the song. Among the few old songs that he introduces, "Señor" appears to serve as a bridge, or even reconciliation,

between his pre-conversion and his present post-conversion state. Then, in the summer tours of 1981, which mix recent Christian songs with older classics and material from the upcoming *Shot of Love* album, it is not on the setlist. But after the release of *Shot of Love* (Aug. 12, 1981), “Señor” is played again, in eight of twenty-seven concerts. In these shows, explicitly Christian songs take up about a third of the repertoire.

From January 1982 to late autumn 1987, years with few concerts, Dylan performs “Señor” only about ten times. However, other, more explicitly Christian songs are represented, particularly the self-reflective “Every Grain of Sand”, but occasionally also the searching “Knocking on Heaven’s Door” and the challenging “When You Gonna Wake Up”. Thus, the existential and religious element is frequently present in the shows. From early winter 1987 and until February 1994, however, years of very active touring, Dylan rarely plays “Señor” – only five times. In this period, he mainly uses material from *Oh Mercy* (1989) and *Under the Red Sky* (1990), material from the 1960s, and some covers. He also regularly uses several of his explicitly Christian songs: in addition to those mentioned above, also “In the Garden” and “Gotta Serve Somebody”. From 1982 to 1994, these songs seem to serve as statements of the religious message he wants to convey, together with other kinds of messages. During these years, “Señor” does not have such a function; it seems almost ruled out of the repertoire. At the end of this period Dylan’s use of the 1979–81 songs also dwindles.

From April 1994 to September 1998, “Señor” turns up again, and far more frequently: Dylan plays it at one out of five to ten concerts, from eight to twenty-two times a year. During these years, he usually also performs one or two explicitly Christian songs at each concert, mainly “In the Garden”, “I Believe in You”, and a few others. Thus, the religious coloring is again clearly present, with “Señor” now being one of the songs that make this audible. From 1999 until April 2011, “Señor” is performed irregularly, on the average six times annually, ranging from once in 2001 and 2008 to twelve in 2005. During these years, Dylan has a surge of new songs, with the albums *Love and Theft* (2001), *Modern Times* (2006), and *Together through Life* (2009), and he combines this material with classical material from the sixties and some from the early seventies. However, he

relatively often also performs songs with a Christian or distinctive religious character, particularly "Tryin' to Get to Heaven", "Forever Young", "I Believe in You", "Every Grain of Sand", "Saving Grace", and "Gonna Change My Way of Thinking".

From 1994 to 2011, then, "Señor" appears to have become part of an established stock of existential and religious songs that are fairly interchangeable: whereas there was, from 1980 to 1994, an either-or relation between "Señor" and the explicitly Christian songs, there is, from 1994 to 2011, a both-and relation. If this is the case, it marks a shift in the function of "Señor" from primarily describing an existential search to also stating, or even calling for, a religious conviction. Even though we should beware of making too much out of Dylan's use of the song, it is clear that "Señor" remained important for him also in the long period from 1980 to 2011. In any case, his use of "Señor" together with the explicitly Christian songs has served to broaden the palette with which Dylan as a performer portrays the existential and religious longings of human beings.

The last time Dylan performed "Señor" was on April 27, 2011. From then and to August 2013, he mixed songs from various periods, with "Forever Young" and "Every Grain of Sand" being the most explicitly religious representatives. In October 2013, he had a major repertoire shift, with the emphasis on songs from *Time out of Mind* (1997) and later, combined with covers from the "Great American Songbook", and a small selection of his own classics. Songs from 1979–81 now turn up only very occasionally. Instead, recent songs marked by biblical imagery fill the "religious slot" in the repertoire, with "Scarlet Town" and "Pay in Blood", both from *Tempest*, being the prime examples. In October 2017, "Tryin' to Get to Heaven" reenters the repertoire (last played regularly in 2012), and from July 2018 Dylan has performed "Gotta Serve Somebody" at most concerts. Thus, his repertoire shift in 2013 is not a change in orientation, since existential and religious motifs are central in the material he has performed also since then. And with "Gotta Serve Somebody" in the setlist from summer 2018, an explicitly Christian element has again resurfaced. So if Dylan continues to tour in the years to come, there seems no reason why "Señor" should not turn up again.

## “Señor” as interpreted by Dylan himself

Dylan has not himself written anything about “Señor”. He has, however, commented on it both at concerts and in interviews, particularly during 1978–80 – and far more than on most other songs; Cott (2006); Crowe (1985). These comments give a view into Dylan’s artistic and personal development on the way to his Christian breakthrough.

“Señor” is known already from a studio recording in December 26, 1977.<sup>5</sup> It can have been written some time before this, maybe as early as summer 1977. Dylan is unreliable on this; at a concert July 12, 1978, he claims to have written it “about six months ago”. What is important, however, is that the song predates his conversion experience in late November 1978 by about a year or even more. With the divorce from his wife Sara, the second half of 1977 was a difficult time for Dylan: he was reported to be “suffering” and in “a bad way”; Heylin (2011, p. 455). According to himself, however, he was, in hindsight, not in crisis in 1978, but in a “fine” state (Nov. 23, 1980); see Cott (2006, p. 279, 281–82). To what extent this was the case, is a matter of discussion. On a psychological and a social level, he seems to have regained a foothold, and he describes his conversion as coming upon him as a surprise and not as a result of being “down” or the like. Interviews at the time, however, in January and March, suggest that he was on the move existentially and religiously. He speaks of magic, Karma, Christ, death, and the devil, and states “that he feel[s] a heartfelt God” and that he is “not a patriot to any creed”, but “believe[s] in all of them and none of them”; Cott (2006, p. 181–85, 234–35, 259).

From the first show in June 1978 and for the rest of the year, Dylan consistently introduces his new song as “Tales of Yankee Power” – he seems deliberately to avoid using the full album title.<sup>6</sup> At his June–July concerts in Europe, he makes occasional comments about the song, that it was written “after going down to Mexico” (June 26), or “on a trip through the southern part of the ... northern part of the States” (July 12). On the autumn tours in the US, he starts developing his comments, particularly about the origin of the song and about his own state, such as that he was

5 See <http://www.bjorner.com/DSNo3550%201977%20sessions.htm>

6 See “BobTalk”, <http://www.bjorner.com/still.htm>

traveling on a train from Monterrey in Mexico to San Diego in the US and that he "hadn't eaten for three days" before writing it (Sept. 16), later also adding Chihuahua, Mexico, to his geographical comments (Sept. 20). Later again, he states that he "fell asleep and ... woke up" and then wrote it (Sept. 29), and even that he "fell asleep for three days" (Oct. 4). Interestingly, a few days later, on October 7 he remarks that he "tried not to write this song, but I just had to" – and then, as I noted in the previous section, suddenly omits it for the rest of the month, while the rest of the setlist remains virtually the same.

These factors indicate that Dylan is ambivalent about "Señor": by commenting repeatedly on it, and more frequently than on most other songs, he betrays a special interest in it, but by referring to the context of writing (the "Tales" title and the Mexican setting) he seems to divert attention from other aspects of it; Sept. 27, he calls it "a little song". Somehow, Dylan appears in need of explaining it, and in a way that tones down its importance for him. The ambivalence is also apparent in his inner conflict between both needing and being unwilling to write it, and in his omission of it from the setlist.

For the first two weeks of November, Dylan occasionally repeats his geographical remarks about "Señor". Then, on November 13, he develops on the motif of being somehow compelled to write it, stating that "I can't tell you what it's about, I just know I wrote it"; the day after, he even maintains that "I found this song written in my back pocket", as if it had been given to him, or mediated unknowingly or subconsciously through him – the song is not really his. Again, his ambivalence pops up: he seems shy, almost embarrassed about it, but at the same time under obligation, and even eager, to speak about and perform it.

Around mid-November, Dylan strikingly begins expanding three song introductions into some kind of short stories, or raps: first "Ballad of a Thin Man" and "One More Cup of Coffee (Valley Below)", and then "Señor". He repeats them in many versions and in almost all concerts for the rest of the tour; the intro to "Señor" occurs more than twenty times. The first occasion is November 17, in San Diego. It is noteworthy that this was the concert in which Dylan picked up a small silver cross thrown onto the stage and put it in his pocket – an incident frequently described

in Dylan literature. The incident led up to his experience a couple of days later in an Arizona hotel room when he dramatically sensed the presence of Christ; see Cott (2006, p. 276). A year later, at his next concert in San Diego (Nov. 27, 1979), Dylan describes the incident, stating that he at the time was “feeling real sick” and getting “even worse”, and then thanks the person who had thrown the cross. At the concert November 24, he wears a cross himself, possibly the same that he picked up a week earlier. Two days later he also exchanges the mention of “an Italian poet” in “Tangled up in Blue” with a reference to the Bible.

In the famous November 17 concert, Dylan, in the expanded “Señor” intro, briefly mentions the train travel, but then goes on to describe a person sitting next to him “wearing a blanket”, seeming “to know everything”, and his “eyes were burning up, smoke was coming out of his nostrils”. Dylan wanted to talk to him, but when he “turned around to look at him, he was gone”. According to Dylan, the man had either got off, or he himself may have been hallucinating. He repeatedly states that he eagerly “wanted to talk to” him. The next day, Dylan adds that he at first was all alone in the train car and that the man entering “looked to be about 150 years old”. Two days later a family with twelve kids – in other versions up to 18 – enters Dylan’s story, but they leave the train before the man gets on. Now the old man does not sit next to him, but takes a seat across the aisle, and Dylan mostly observes him with his own window serving as a mirror in the dark.

These are the main narrative elements until December 12; then the family is gone from the story (with a single return Dec. 16). The focus is now even more on the man, who is dressed only in a blanket (Dec. 1), has a long, stripy beard (Dec. 12), and is later even – almost comically – equipped with a derby hat (Dec. 15). In most versions, Dylan is eager to talk with him, but not sure what to ask him about, and when he makes an attempt, the man has disappeared. In a couple of versions, however, Dylan is able to address him: “I finally got up the courage to talk to him. And the train started moving and the conversation went something like this” (Dec. 10, also 12), and then goes on to perform the song. Clearly, the man is in this instance identified as the señor. In some later versions, Dylan dwells on how he was himself affected by the encounter: “I felt this strange vibration” (Dec. 8, also 10, 15, and 16).

In their core, Dylan's comments may reflect an element of truth about the song's origin, but this must here remain undecided. What is far more relevant for us is how the comments develop during the late summer and the autumn of 1978. In an early stage, up to mid-November, the comments on geography and other things seem to function as a diversion, some kind of cover-up for his existential strain, his "feeling real sick". At the same time, his remarks on his double-mindedness toward the song appear to be a letting out of some of the growing inner steam. The setlist adjustments in the second half of October, with more focus on change and on the religious dimension, whether made consciously or intuitively, also correspond well with this. Worth special notice are Dylan's remarks on his own state: his sleeping and not eating for three days and his ambivalence in writing the song echo biblical models, particularly the accounts of Jesus's death and resurrection, and the reactions of figures such as Moses, Jeremiah, and Paul, who are called by God, but reluctant to heed the call.

In a later stage, from mid-November, when Dylan suddenly starts developing his intro into this strange short story, other elements come into focus, primarily the old man, but also the big family. Since the first telling of the story coincides with the cross incident (Nov. 17), it cannot have been caused by it. Instead, it is far more likely that his "hotel room experience" triggered it, since the expansion of the story took place during just those days. Dylan's description of feeling a "strange vibration" in the encounter with the old man reminds of his meeting with Jesus: in an interview May 21, 1980, he describes the encounter with Jesus as "I felt my whole body tremble. The glory of the Lord knocked me down and picked me up"; see Cott (2006, p. 276), cf. also the similarity to the phrase "gotta pick myself up off the floor" in "Señor"; also Cott (2006, p. 281). Such accounts of response to encounters with the divine are common in the Bible, but also in other religious contexts.

Dylan's description of the old man also seems to be heavily influenced by biblical material, such as the smoke coming out of his nostrils (2 Samuel 22:8–10; Psalms 18:7–9; Job 41:20, about God and Leviathan) and his flaming eyes (Daniel 10:6; Revelation 1:15). Other elements may have other sources; the "blanket" can, for example, be borrowed from

Dylan's "I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine" (1967), in which Augustine is also said to have a "fiery breath". Dylan looking at the old man with the window as a mirror may draw on the idea that seeing God directly is perilous, or it may also be a borrowing from Paul (1 Corinthians 12:13).

Why does Dylan recite this strange – almost confused – story? And does he himself know what it is about? And how important is it for our interpretation of "Señor"? Again, no definitive answers can be given. In any case, the reciting of the long song intro is something quite different from a cover up; it appears instead as a trying out or veiled profession of what is going on within him, maybe almost inadvertently. Possibly, this revelation-like story – with its mixture of biblical and religious elements, personal experiences, and more or less conscious ruminations – can be described as an oral counterpart to the literary phenomenon of automatic writing, or a stream of unconsciousness/subconsciousness story. In the setting of the shows the intro appears to be a way of providing his audience, and maybe even more himself, with a – or, rather, one – key to the interpretation of the song. Together with other factors, such as the reorganization of the setlist, the intro also serves to underscore the central part "Señor" seems to have played in Dylan's own religious development during this period.

As I have noted, Dylan on some occasions during the 1978 tours intimated that he did not really know what "Señor" was about; he is also vague about the song in his liner note comments on *Biograph*; Crowe (1985, p. 57). It is not unlikely that this is true: the meaning of the song may very well have grown on him over time, or even dawned upon him. This also agrees well with his description of how other songs come to him, that he is some kind of a medium, and that they are given him from above: "sometimes I don't know what I'm writing about until years later it becomes clearer to me"; see Cott (2006, p. 241–42, also 263 and 268). Very likely, in the case of "Señor", Dylan's own artistic and creative sensibilities have forestalled his own digestion of what was going on.

This may of course be undue psychologizing. But I do not think it is: over the years Dylan has constantly been in discussion with, even wrestling with, many of his songs, musically as well as textually. He has revised and reshaped them again and again, managing to adapt them to ever new



contexts. This is also the case with "Señor". But in a way that is different from most of his other songs, Dylan seems not to have been in control of it. Instead, the song appears to have defeated Dylan, and he to have surrendered to it. Read this way, "Señor" serves as an apt window into a crucial stage in Dylan's existential and religious development. Admittedly, this is not a totally new idea, but the discussion above develops on, and makes a far stronger case for this as a plausible reading of the song – at least as far as Dylan's biography is concerned.

## Looking out of the window, and beyond

In this chapter, I have aimed at two things: first, to show how "Señor" can serve as an opening to the existential and religious world of Dylan, as this is visible both in his songbook and in his life as an artist and individual; and second, to bring out how "Señor" itself has been informed and shaped by this world, both in how it is similar to it and how it may stand out from it. As argued above, there is a very close interplay between the song and its various contexts. I shall round off with some reflections with this interplay in mind.

First, as for the understanding of "Señor": what has occurred to me as the main insight from my inquiry into the text and its contexts is the central role of religion. As I noted at the outset, "Señor" can be interpreted in various directions: as referring to American history, ethnic tension, forfeited love, human rootlessness, the crisis of an individual or even of Dylan himself. Each interpretation, and combinations of them, can find support in the song. Although I have offered some suggestions about how to read "Señor", my aim has not been to go for one specific reading or to add a new one. Instead, it has been to foreground the religious dimension of "Señor", since this dimension has turned out to be integral to the various readings of the song. The existential and religious elements – and the Christian one in particular – appear tightly interwoven with each reading and cannot be removed without loss in meaning. For example, the señor figure is obviously indispensable, and on more than one level: he can be a master from history, an ethnically superior – a yankee – but also Christ or God. The iron cross may be a reminder of people who left

for America because of religious persecution, or of a lost and longed-for, almost otherworldly, lover. Armageddon may forebode an earthly or a personal mayhem, or the final combat between good and evil, and the overturning of the tables anticipate a fundamental social or individual upheaval. And so on. Even far into the area of Dylan's own artistic and personal life, these elements make sense, as I have argued above.

Second, as for the relation of "Señor" to the rest of Dylan's work: there are several ways in which this song directs our attention to other parts of his oeuvre. There are a number of songs that in similar ways weld religious elements together with historical narratives, with aspects of social and human relationships, or with the experiences of individuals, also his own. With its mixture of American and biblical-mythical history, "Señor" clearly belongs within a long and varied trajectory of songs from "Gates of Eden" (1965) and "I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine" (1967) via "Blind Willie McTell" (1983), "High Water (For Charley Patton)" (2001), "Cross the Green Mountain" (2002), to "Scarlet Town" (2012). In its description of personal uprooting and homelessness, "Señor" has much in common with "Shelter from the Storm" (1975), "Oh, Sister" (1976), and "I and I" (1983), songs that all have a distinctive biblical coloring; in "Shelter from the Storm" the male I-figure is even said to be relieved of a "crown of thorn" similar to that of Christ.

Furthermore, in Dylan's songbook, there are few, maybe no other songs that describe an existential crisis with an urgency and energy comparable to "Señor". This is clearly one reason why so many cherish the song. Its energy is perhaps only paralleled by his most insistent Christian songs, such as "I Believe in You" (1979) and "Saved" (1980). Differently from them, however, "Señor" is more open and indefinite. In this, it seems more kindred to songs with less – at least pronounced – intensity, such as "Dear Landlord" (1967), where the singer also enters into negotiation with his addressee, "Every Grain of Sand" (1981), "What Good Am I?" (1989), and "Things Have Changed" (1999) – all songs marked by serious self-examination, and with many explicit biblical references.

During his career, Dylan has also taken much care to protect his autonomy and private life, and he has frequently warded off attempts at biographical readings of his songs. At the same time, many of them

are clearly triggered by his own experiences. There is often only a thin membrane between his songs and his life; Dylan can in this respect be described as a "translucent" artist, despite his many attempts at rejecting this. Without doubt, this too is a reason for his appeal: people can recognize their lives in his songs, whether they are about relationships of love, about aging, or about death. Also within this personal, almost private, domain, existential and religious motifs emerge as central. Again, "Señor" may be an apt example, with its description of the lost, and now unattainable, lover – the female with an "iron cross". Here too, there seems to be a connection to songs about love and also about love lost, such as "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands" (1966), "Wedding Song" (1974), "Sara" (1976), and to an extent even "Standing in the Doorway" and "Can't Wait" (both 1997), in which the women often take on close-to-celestial features.

Dylan has stated that many of his songs must be understood on different levels: "that's because my mind and my heart work on all those levels ... I don't want to be chained down to the same old level all the time" (Nov. 16, 1978); see Cott (2006, p. 269). As we have seen, this also holds good for "Señor". But characteristic of the song is, at the same time, the position religion, and Christianity in particular, has across these levels. The same is also the case with a great number of other songs in Dylan's six-decade-long career.

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- <https://www.bobdylan.com/setlists>
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- <https://www.setlist.fm/stats/bob-dylan-1bd6adb8.html>
- <https://www.setlist.fm/stats/songs/bob-dylan-1bd6adb8.html?song=Se%C3%B1or+%28Tales+of+Yankee+Power%29>

## Author description

**Reidar Aasgaard** is Professor of Intellectual History at the Department of Philosophy, Classics, History of Art and Ideas (IFIKK), University of Oslo. He has published books and articles in English and Norwegian on the history of childhood, the New Testament, Late Antiquity, and early Christian apocrypha. He has worked as a Bible translator and translated classical texts from Greek and Latin into Norwegian. Aasgaard has also edited a volume on Bob Dylan in Norwegian (with Botvar and Kvalvaag) and since 2011 has been responsible for a popular lecture series on Dylan at History of Ideas.

## Forfattaromtale

**Reidar Aasgaard** er professor i idéhistorie ved Institutt for filosofi, idé- og kunsthistorie og klassiske språk (IFIKK), Universitetet i Oslo. Han har gjeve ut bøker og artiklar på engelsk og norsk om barndommens historie, Det nye testamentet, seinantikken og tidlegkristne apokryfar. Han har arbeidd som bibelomsetjar og har omsett klassiske tekster frå gresk og latin til norsk. Aasgaard har også vært redaktør av ei bok om Bob Dylan på norsk (saman med Botvar og Kvalvaag) og har sidan 2011 vore ansvarleg for ei populær førelsesrekke om Dylan på idéhistorie.

## Appendix 1

### Señor (Tales of Yankee Power)

Señor, señor, can you tell me where we're headin'?

Lincoln County Road or Armageddon?

Seem like I been down this way before

Is there any truth in that, señor?

Señor, señor, do you know where she is hidin'?

How long are we gonna be ridin'?

How long must I keep my eyes glued to the door?

Will there be any comfort there, señor?

There's a wicked wind still blowin' on that upper deck

There's an iron cross still hangin' down from around her neck

There's a marchin' band still playin' in that vacant lot

Where she held me in her arms one time and said, "Forget me not"

Señor, señor, I can see that painted wagon

Smell the tail of the dragon

Can't stand the suspense anymore

Can you tell me who to contact here, señor?

Well, the last thing I remember before I stripped and kneeled

Was that trainload of fools bogged down in a magnetic field

A gypsy with a broken flag and a flashing ring

He said, "Son, this ain't no dream no more, it's the<sup>b</sup> real thing"

Señor, señor, you know their hearts is hard as leather  
Well, give me a minute, let me get it together  
Just gotta pick myself up off the floor  
I'm ready when you are, señor

Señor, señor, let's overturn these tables  
Disconnect these cables<sup>c</sup>  
This place don't make sense to me no more  
Can you tell me what we're waiting for, señor?

<sup>a</sup> *Lyrics* 2016: 390 has “do you know where we're headin'”. This seems lyrically more flat and has a slightly different meaning.

<sup>b</sup> Dylan may here sing “it's a real thing”.

<sup>c</sup> The change in sequence of lines 1 and 2 in my view weakens the rhetorical-poetical effect.

## Appendix 2

### Track listing, *Street-Legal* (original vinyl version)

#### Side A

1. “Changing of the Guards”
2. “New Pony”
3. “No Time to Think”
4. “Baby Stop Crying”

#### Side B

1. “Is Your Love in Vain?”
2. “Señor (Tales of Yankee Power)”
3. “True Love Tends to Forget”
4. “We Better Talk This Over”
5. “Where Are You Tonight? (Journey through Dark Heat)”