

“And though the line is cut / It ain’t quite the end”: Eschatological Fictions in the Protest  
Songs of Bob Dylan

Bob Dylan’s protest songs have been the subject of much, sometimes vexed, discussion. There is even an argument that denies that Dylan ever wrote protest songs. A view that has sometimes been endorsed by Dylan himself. Be that as it may, I find ‘protest songs’ a useful shorthand for those topical and instrumentalist songs predominantly in an acoustic folk idiom such as “Blowin’ In The Wind,” “Masters Of War,” and a “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall,” (*The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan*, 1963) and “The Times They Are A-Changin’,” “With God On Our Side,” “Only A Pawn In Their Game,” “When The Ship Comes In” and “The Lonesome Death Of Hattie Carroll” (*The Times They Are A-Changin’*, 1964). These are the songs that brought Dylan to the attention of a wider public, and on which his reputation was, and in large measure still is, built. These songs are broadly millennialist and apocalyptic in that they speak, some more overtly than others, of an endtime and an approaching cataclysm. In my proposed paper, I argue that they are most usefully seen as pre-millennialist (pre-millennialists believe that Jesus will come before the millennium). This has been, and remains, the dominant strain of American millennialism although the Anglo-Irish biblical scholar and teacher John Nelson Darby (1800–1882) is a central figure in its evolution). This approach is useful because places Dylan in a distinctively American tradition of thought, distinguishes Dylan’s work from that of other protest singers such as Pete Seegar and Joan Baez (who might be described as post-millennialists) and brings out significant continuities in Dylan’s work through its various dispensations (to appropriate one of Darby’s key terms) up to and including *Rough and Rowdy Ways* (2020).

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