

## The Weight: A Christian Perspective

I pulled into Nazareth, was feelin' about half past dead  
I just need some place where I can lay my head  
"Hey, mister, can you tell me where a man might find a bed?"  
He just grinned and shook my hand, "No" was all he said

<refrain>

Take a load off Fanny  
Take a load for free  
Take a load off Fanny  
And (and) (and) you put the load right on me

I picked up my bag, I went lookin' for a place to hide  
When I saw Carmen and the Devil walkin' side by side  
I said, "Hey, Carmen, come on let's go downtown"  
She said, "I gotta go but my friend can stick around"

<refrain>

Go down, Miss Moses, there's nothin' you can say  
It's just ol' Luke and Luke's waitin' on the Judgment Day  
"Well, Luke, my friend, what about young Anna Lee?"  
He said, "Do me a favor, son, won'tcha stay and keep Anna Lee company?"

<refrain>

Crazy Chester followed me and he caught me in the fog  
He said, "I will fix your rack if you'll take Jack, my dog"  
I said, "Wait a minute, Chester, you know I'm a peaceful man"  
He said, "That's okay, boy, won't you feed him when you can"

Yeah,

<refrain>

Catch a cannon ball now to take me down the line  
My bag is sinkin' low and I do believe it's time  
To get back to Miss Fanny, you know she's the only one  
Who sent me here with her regards for everyone

<refrain>

There is something about this song that seems to defy explanation. The lyrics are simple, and would be depressing if not so comical. Not the kind of comedy that leaves one rolling on the ground with uncontrolled laughter, but more of a slight chuckle at life's absurdities. The accompanying music is adequate to the task, but by no means inspired. The plot is straightforward although not what one typically expects to hear in a song or story. It is a song that, at first glance, might be listened to once

without complaint, but not one worth remembering. Yet it seems to keep popping up over and over again.

The song was written by Robbie Robertson, the acoustic guitarist of a rock group that would later be known as "The Band." So disorganized was this effort that the group did not even have an official name when they recorded it, so their individual names were used for credit. Rather than call out all their names on the radio, they were collectively referred to by DJs as "the band," and thus earned their *nome de plume*. Their [obviously] first release peaked at 63 on the pop charts in the U.S. on September 26, 1968. On that same day, Jackie DeShannon released her own cover, which would make #55. About six months after DeShannon's copy peaked, Aretha Franklin's version made #19 in March 1969. This was the highest pop chart position the song would make in the U.S., but it did even better on more specialized charts and in foreign markets. Covers have been done by Smith, The Black Crowes, Bob Dylan, John Denver, The Grateful Dead, The Allman Brothers, Joan Osborn, Keller Williams, King Curtis & Dave Allman, Otis & Travis, Rotary Connection, Spooky Tooth, the Ventures, Joe Cocker and others. It has also appeared in movie soundtracks. *Rolling Stone* magazine included it in their "500 greatest songs of all time" in 2004, Pitchfork Media named it the "13th best song of the 1960s," the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame called it "one of the 500 songs that shaped rock and roll," and PBS claims it is "an essential part of the American Song Book."

The inspiration for the song is also unexpected. Robertson claimed it came from the Spanish filmmaker Luis Buñuel, who was famous for promoting the idea that sainthood was impossible. The films were greatly anti-Christian, and anti-Catholic in particular. The premise is that whenever someone tried to do good, a series of unintended consequences will happen. These consequences will pile on the do-gooder, until the do-gooder is crushed under "the weight." The movies were thus discussing religion without actually being religious. Of course, Christians already know that this is the price we pay for doing good. One of the defining characteristics of Christianity is the idea that the world would try to crush its practitioners. Christians accept this fate in hopes of being like Jesus, who must be crushed by the world in order to inherit eternal life. Saint Paul makes this quite clear in 1 Corinthians 15:19 when he says, "We are the most pitiable people of all." And we do indeed see in the song the idea of a do-gooder being crushed by his good deeds. Robertson himself denied any religious connections in the song, although I think the lyrics clearly say otherwise (which I'll get to soon).

The town of Nazareth, as mentioned in the song, is in Pennsylvania and is famous for making guitars, including the ones The Band used. The characters mentioned in the song were all real people that the members knew (although some were named under aliases). Only Fanny, who is mentioned but never seen, was made up. Robertson claimed the name just fit. But just because the people and town were taken from the U.S. and not the Bible does not mean it can't tell a Biblical tale. Indeed, as I hope to show, it not only tells a Biblical tale, but it actually tells a version of the gospel.

The very first line speaks of Nazareth, the childhood home of Jesus. Before the first verse is over, we are told no beds are available in the town. Granted, it was in Bethlehem that the Biblical lack of sleeping space was found. But in a single verse, we have two powerful connections to Jesus. When one considers that the Devil, Moses, Luke and Judgment Day are all mentioned before the song is halfway over, any credible case that there is no religion involved falls apart. If there was some punchline at the end of the song to show that it was all a farce, then that might save non-religion theory. But instead of a punchline, we find the most conclusive evidence for the song becoming a gospel.

When one accepts the theory that this is a Biblical story, almost every line has a Biblical connection. I admit some are a bit of a stretch, but many are quite solid. We have already seen an

abbreviated version of the Nativity in the first verse. In the second verse, the protagonist is seeking a place to hide. This could remind one of the Holy Family fleeing to Egypt to escape King Herod. Then again, it can also remind one of Jesus going to the desert to fast before being challenged by the Devil. If this is Jesus in the desert, then the appearance of Carmen and the Devil fit right in with the temptations of Jesus.

The third verse is the most difficult to interpret. Miss Moses not having anything to say reminds me of the Biblical Moses trying to get out of his calling by claiming he had a stuttering problem. Luke's concern of Judgment Day reminds me of the destruction of the temple and the following tribulation (Luke 21:5-28). Asking the protagonist to stay with Anna Lee is a bit problematic, but perhaps she was the woman who was left behind when the other was taken (Matthew 21:41). Or perhaps we are to remember all the women Jesus visited: the Samaritan woman, Peter's mother-in-law, or even Mary while Martha cooked?

The fourth verse calls to my mind how so many thought Jesus was a brave warrior, despite his constant calls for peace. Or perhaps we are to remember the peace Jesus promises in life's travails?

But it is the fifth and final verse where the Biblical story becomes a gospel. We are given many clues to the weariness of Jesus as he drew closer to Jerusalem, from his lament that he would take the city under his protection like a mother hen does her chicks (Matthews 23:37), to the simple gifts bestowed upon Him by Mary, to the subdued language before and after the Last Supper. All these can be summed up by the lyric "sinkin' low." All the while, Jesus knew His hour ("I do believe it's time") was upon him. Jesus predicted that He would join His Father ("get back to Miss Fanny.") Just like Jesus, all the frustrations and travails of the protagonist were willingly endured to give "her regards for everyone" (read: salvation to the people).

When all is said and done, the idea that sainthood is impossible is one of the best ways to justify Christianity. Buñuel was known to be anti-Catholic, but I have been unable to determine Robertson's beliefs. Robertson was intrigued by the "impossibility of becoming a saint" motif in any case. Ironically, if any intent was made to discredit Christianity with this work, it clearly failed. Buñuel could have saved a lot of effort in his attempt to show man cannot be saintly. It's a core belief in Christianity. If it were otherwise, then Jesus would not have needed to come to Earth, and Christianity would be redundant. So Buñuel did not actually discredit Christianity; he demonstrated the need for it. I don't know if Robertson's motives were anti-Christian or simply an effort to imitate Buñuel, but he outdid Buñuel by transforming a mere lesson in human nature into a gospel of sorts.

The attached video is not the "official" video of the song, or even a copy of the original recording. It came from the movie "The Last Waltz," whose story is almost as convoluted as the song itself. On November 25, 1976 (Thanksgiving Day), The Band performed what was advertised as their farewell concert at the Winterland Ballroom in San Francisco. They had over a dozen special guests, including Ronnie Hawkins, Bob Dylan, Paul Butterfield, Bobby Charles, Eric Clapton, Neil Diamond, Dr. John, Joni Mitchell, Van Morrison, Ringo Starr, Muddy Waters, Ronnie Wood, and Neil Young. It was filmed by director Martin Scorsese, who turned it into a documentary of the same name in 1978. In this video, we see the gospel group The Staples singing along with them. And it is in this video that I think we can find the answer to how such a mediocre song with a such chaotic background could be so influential.

The song speaks of the American ideal: a country built on the tenants of Christianity, a country meant to include everyone, a country where hope for a better future could be realized, but still a

country with problems. In the video we see blacks and whites celebrating God together (something still quite novel in 1976). We see the song fitting a variety of music genres (the video explicitly shows rock and roll, country and gospel, but it has been sung in almost all styles). This song certainly is not what one *expects* when looking for a representation of either the United States or Christianity, but it is certainly what one *finds* when looking at both the United States and Christianity. And I think that is its secret to success. It is so much like an answer to a prayer: not what we want, but rather what we need.

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