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# “There’s a New World Coming”: The Eschatology of Bruce Springsteen’s *Wrecking Ball*

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Abstract: The economic realities facing the characters on Bruce Springsteen’s *Wrecking Ball* (2012) are so dire that many would rather anticipate a new world order in which society is transformed through humanity’s efforts than continue living in the world as it is. Avoiding apocalyptic language, the new world presented in “Jack of All Trades,” “Rocky Ground,” and other songs closely resembles the eschatological wish famously described in the Pater Noster, or the Lord’s Prayer. This article explores the present-day fears and the future-oriented optimisms underlying these eschatological wishes, including when Springsteen’s vision parallels and departs from Jesus’s Kingdom of Heaven.

Keywords: Bruce Springsteen, *Wrecking Ball*, Jesus, Kingdom of Heaven, rock music, eschatology

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## Introduction

Since his first album in 1973, so many of Bruce Springsteen’s characters have shared the escapist desire to leave town in search for a promised land that they have become as cliché in his songs as the cars that these characters use to drive away. Some characters run from the problems that they created (e.g., “From Small Things [Big Things One Day Come],” 2003), and some look to build a community (e.g., “Across the Border,” 1995), but they all share the same goal of getting someplace else.<sup>1</sup> Nowhere is this desire to escape more apparent or more famously well known than in Springsteen’s first top-forty hit, the appropriately titled “Born to Run” (1975). In this rock anthem, the singer aches to leave his home “and never go back,” and he promises his girlfriend Wendy that, if she would accompany him, they will soon get to “where we really want to go,” a dreamy utopia where they will one day “walk in the sun.”<sup>2</sup> In contrast to his home, which he designates as both a “death trap” and a “suicide rap,” their escapist future is described as an “amusement park” overrun with kids on the beach and in the streets. Because most of Springsteen’s songs relate the desires of the characters, we rarely learn if the characters eventually find their personal paradises.

In contrast to Springsteen’s characters in his earlier songs, the realities facing most of the characters are so dire on his 2012 Grammy-nominated album *Wrecking Ball* that the best escape many of them can envision cannot be found in this world as it presently is.<sup>3</sup> If they are going to survive, society must change, and people must treat each other like brothers rather than commodities. For some characters, looking forward to death is the simplest form of escape, which seems to be the case for the blue-collar workers in “Shackled and Drawn” and “Death to My Hometown.” More often, characters longingly anticipate nothing

less than what could be considered the end of the present age and of the suffering our imperfections bring, and they instead envision a new world order in which human society and the natural world are transformed by human action. But this dream of a new world is no utopian paradise like the amusement park in "Born to Run," Peter Pan's Neverland, or the primeval Garden of Eden. Rather, this new world and new society would be the result of people working together as part of a covenant relationship. Springsteen is not alone in this call for a new world order; it is a call that in many ways resembles the Kingdom of Heaven that Jesus preached.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the eschatological thrust of the songs on *Wrecking Ball* resembles not only Jesus's ancient vision and call but also those of Springsteen's contemporary Catholics: Sister Simone Campbell (aka the "Nun from the Bus") and Pope Francis, both of whom acknowledge that the responsible treatment of the unfortunate and oppressed is more important than robust corporate or state finances and traditional theological orthodoxy.<sup>5</sup>

Springsteen largely avoids apocalyptic language that focuses on cataclysmic events as signs of the end of civilization, and this new world he sings about on "Jack of All Trades," "We Take Care of Our Own," and "Rocky Ground" closely resembles the positive eschatological wish described in the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9–13; Luke 11:2–4). Indeed, "Jack's" phraseology, "we'll start caring for each other," echoes Jesus's own eschatological hopes for humanity in this new world, including his vision of seeing God's "kingdom come" and "will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10).<sup>6</sup> This article explores the present-day fears and the future-oriented optimisms underlying these eschatological wishes, as well as the instances where even these eschatological wishes fail the characters.

Because both Springsteen's and Jesus's interests lie in the realization of a transformed world wherein everyone "take[s] care of each other" ("Jack of All Trades"), we can categorize these visions as eschatological in nature. Both men envision an imminent end to our current way of living and the arrival of another, better way. This is a new world that we ourselves transform; we cannot sit back and let it happen by itself or wait for divine fiat. For this reason, the term *eschaton* is preferred to *apocalypse* in describing these two views. Greek for "end" or "last," *eschaton* and *eschatology* differ from the more well-known *apocalypse* and *apocalyptic*, which mean "reveal" or "uncover," because these latter two terms encompass a vision that has been revealed by the divine and typically involves actions taken by the divine to rectify the evils presently encountered, which includes the punishment of the seer's opponents (Crossan 1995, 52–53). Whereas apocalyptic tales (e.g., the Revelation of John in the New Testament) are filled with natural catastrophes as signs of divine judgment and justice, eschatological visions need not involve wars, rumors of wars, earthquakes, and the falling skies (see Matthew 24:6–8).<sup>7</sup> Rather, eschatological visions of the future offer humanity a new way of living that is created by a way of behaving, acting as a responsible member of a covenant community.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, a divine being need not reveal the *eschaton* to humankind, but it could still serve as inspiration. The sage proposing the new world simply needs to envision a moment where we as a society redefine and implement our ideals for humanity's sake. To be sure, Jesus considered himself close to the divine and referred to the divine by the intimate title "Father" (e.g., Matthew 6:26; 7:11; 12:50), and he saw his message as an attempt to institute the proper rule of God in our world through a series of selfless acts, but his message and vision of a perfected society are radically different from those of John in his famous Revelation, who presents his vision of the impending future as God's means of punishing his enemies and rewarding his faithful.

## “Jack of All Trades”

This eschatological understanding of the new world, which is exemplified by Jesus’s message about the coming Kingdom of Heaven, serves as the undercurrent of Springsteen’s *Wrecking Ball*, and it is especially felt throughout the album’s fourth song “Jack of All Trades.” In this song, the presumably only recently unemployed narrator, whom for convenience commentators call “Jack,” acts as a comforter and begins listing various odd jobs he could do to earn money in the future. Be it performing yard work or carpentry or serving as a farmhand or mechanic, Jack has the know-how and willingness to provide for himself and his family in the new economic recession. They will live on a shoestring budget, but they will survive as long as he is able to work. In the penultimate verse, he reflects on the nature of our present world and all of its trials and tribulations:

There’s a new world coming  
I can see the light  
I’m a jack of all trades, we’ll be all right. (“Jack of All Trades,” 2012)<sup>9</sup>

This world is tough, and yet individuals like Jack somehow struggle and survive. Restating the hook that closes each verse, he reminds the listener that not all is lost, that “we’ll be all right.”

But given the economic downturn, how does Jack know “we’ll be all right”? He answers this question by referencing his own insight, “I can see the light.” At first glance, this statement could be dismissed as nothing more than an optimistic cliché, but it has long been observed that Springsteen’s use of “light” (and “water”) indicates rebirth. For instance, as Father Andrew M. Greeley (2004, 162) observed of Springsteen’s 1987 album, *Tunnel of Love*:

In the final verse of the song [“Valentine’s Day”]—and of the album—Springsteen closes the circle of sacramentality: Light (God’s light again) and the river and the bride and God become one, an irresistible symbol and story of the rebirth and renewal of life and love. He wakes up from a nightmare and finds “God’s light came shinin’ on through.” He is scared and terrified and also born anew.

“Valentine’s Day” is not the only song from *Tunnel of Love* in which Greeley observes light as a signifier of rebirth. The somber “Cautious Man” and the rocking “Spare Parts” maintain this symbolism (161). In “Cautious Man” the lonesome Billy returns to his sleeping wife after a nightmare causes him to go out for a midnight walk. When he gets back to their bedroom, he sees the moon shine on her as evidence of God’s light, and Billy apparently realizes that for him, like Jack, everything will “be all right.”<sup>10</sup> In “Spare Parts” the single mother Janey tells her mother that she regrets choosing to keep and raise her newborn after her fiancé Bobby left, and she later decides to get rid of her son. In a very biblical moment, Janey learns of a nearby woman who let her baby drown in a river, and she prepares her own son for a similar fate. However, as she readies herself to let the water take her child, she stops, observes the sun and its light, and returns home with her child. In the form of the sun’s rays, light is present at the moment that Janey recommits herself to her child, just as the moon’s reflection off Billy’s wife’s face was present when he recommitted himself to their marriage.

Following Greeley’s observations about the numerous uses of light on *Tunnel of Love*, the fact that Jack has seen the light in “Jack of All Trades” suggests to us a rebirth and recommitment. Moreover, the first half of the line, “There’s a new world coming,” with its religious overtones is not the only portion of the song that points to rebirth in typical Springsteen fashion. For Greeley, light and water together are “profoundly Catholic symbols” of rebirth and, of course, baptism.<sup>11</sup> The pairing of light and water is not limited to these *Tunnel of Love*

tracks; they are found within “Jack of All Trades” as well. In his vision for transformation in the new world, he may have seen the light, but Jack also mentions water as the metaphorical medium for cleansing our current world: a hurricane and its rain. After this cleansing, society will be ready for its transformation because people will finally act according to the words of Jesus. Jack tells us, “And we’ll start caring for each other / Like Jesus said that we might.” Specifically, Jack’s hope is that when the storm is over and the light shines through the clouds, people will finally enact Jesus’ famous Golden Rule: “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31).

Jack recognizes that the present economic system is rigged and that those with money are not suffering as he is, and they probably never will. Despite this, Jack envisions a new world that will be populated by individuals who may be scraping by but who still give as they are able. They do this because they know that but for the grace of God they would be in Jack’s position, or worse. Indeed, they may currently be in Jack’s position, yet they give what they can, too. In sum, this is Jack’s “new world,” the realization of the Golden Rule.

### **Jack and the Lord’s Prayer**

While this song alludes to the Golden Rule, it and several others on the album embrace more deeply Jesus’s guiding vision and hope for our world. I must clarify that this eschatological message encapsulated within the Golden Rule and the Lord’s Prayer is emphatically different from the traditional message attributed to Jesus within Christianity. Neither Jack nor any of the other narrators or characters on *Wrecking Ball* describes an otherworldly vision of eternal heavenly life as is championed within traditional Christianity. Traditional Christianity focuses on what John Dominic Crossan calls “the confessional Christ” and Marcus J. Borg refers to as “the Christ of faith” (Crossan 1995, xi; Borg 1995, 10), which revolves around the image of Jesus as saviour and second member of the divine Trinity. Instead, much of *Wrecking Ball*’s message more closely resembles the this-worldly message proclaimed by the historical Jesus—that is, the message reconstructed by New Testament scholars for a human Jesus who never spoke of himself as the Son of God (Borg 1995, 11)—a message that is quite compatible with the rest of Springsteen’s corpus of work.

The message of the historical Jesus rests on three central tenets that are found in Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer: “When you pray, say: ‘Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial’” (Luke 11:2–4). Simply, the three tenets outlined in Luke’s version are (1) the arrival of God’s kingdom, (2) the availability of food for the hungry, and (3) forgiveness. The first tenet is “Your kingdom come,” which in Matthew’s version is supplemented with the statement “Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). In Jesus’s own well-known words, God’s kingdom is not something that belongs to a distant future and cosmic eternity; it involves implementing God’s rule here on earth now, as evidenced through humankind’s just behaviour. This tenet not only resembles Jack’s vision of the new world but also matches Springsteen’s musical philosophy, which he proclaims during his TV-evangelist-styled speech that interrupts the song “Light of Day” on the DVD *Live in New York City*: “Now unlike my competitors, I cannot, I shall not, I will not, promise you life everlasting, but I can promise you life (pregnant pause) . . . *Right now!*” (Springsteen and the E Street Band 2001, Disc 2, ca. 00:48:30). Both Springsteen and Jesus envision a potentiality in which life can, or at least should, be lived in the moment rather than in the future. As Jack says, the world will change because he “can

see the light.” This vision is not one that fits our current society, but it is the one that society should emulate, as Jack reminds us, “like Jesus said that we might.”

The second tenet in Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer is “Give us each day our daily bread” (Luke 11:3). Significantly, Jesus did not tell his disciples to ask for a lifetime supply of food but just enough to get themselves through the day. Like the Israelites, who were commanded to collect only one day’s worth of manna (see Exodus 16:4), Jesus’s followers were told they should only worry about now. Although Jack is looking for odd jobs and never actually asks for bread, it is noteworthy that he is not looking for a career or profession. He is not asking for an annual or even monthly salary; he is asking for tasks and chores, many of which might be completed in a day or just an afternoon: doing yard work, cleaning gutters, and fixing shingles. Admittedly, harvesting crops like a migrant worker at a large-scale farm does take more than a day, and Jack may need a few days to fix your car’s engine, but the point is that he is only expecting the cash when he completes a task on a given day. As is the case with migrant workers, there are no stock options or medical coverage available to Jack. There is only the dough at the end of the day that will buy him his daily bread. Also, like the daily bread for which Jesus’s disciples ask and like the Israelites with their manna, Jack knows that these jobs are actually gifts from God. This is why he can confidently end each stanza knowing “we’ll be all right.”

The third tenet of Jesus’s prayer asks that God “forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us” (Luke 11:4). Jesus did not mean that God forgives us because or when we forgive others. The point is that people are to imitate God and extend mercy as they are able in the same way that they expect God to extend it to them. Necessarily, if heaven is going to be here on earth, one should expect God’s mercy to permeate it, and this can happen only through action. One must be the force to first extend that mercy to others as one is able, and this is what Jack realizes as he alludes to the Golden Rule: “and we’ll start caring for each other / Like Jesus said that we might.” It is unlikely that Jack would envision a limited reciprocation between just himself and his listener; rather, he sees this new world as a place where everyone takes care of everyone else, or at least they should. For Jack, people should care more about their neighbours’ needs than what their neighbour might owe them. The personal needs precede any economic benefits. This is what treating everyone like a full person in a merciful society would entail.

Allusions to this third tenet may also be found in another verse. It should be noted that Springsteen wrote “Jack of All Trades” and most of *Wrecking Ball* two or three years after the housing bubble burst in 2008, when the so-called too-big-to-fail banks and Wall Street were bailed out by the government.<sup>12</sup> In the eyes of many US citizens, these institutions were guilty for failing to do their part after they received their massive bailouts because they quickly stepped up their efforts to foreclose on houses. Armed with illegal robo-signers, the banks sped up millions of foreclosure proceedings, which “resulted in millions of errors that resulted in untold numbers of premature foreclosures” (Taibbi 2012, para. 6). Like many of his fellow citizens, Jack saw that the bankers’ debts were forgiven, but—if he could ever have afforded a mortgage in the first place—his debts would not have been forgiven by those same bankers. In Jack’s mind, the bankers received their rewards here on earth, an idea that is reinforced in “Shackled and Drawn,” *Wrecking Ball*’s third song, wherein the singer proclaims:

It’s still fat and easy up on banker’s hill  
Up on banker’s hill, the party’s going strong  
Down here below we’re shackled and drawn. (“Shackled and Drawn,” 2012)

The bankers were willing to gamble with their riches, knowing that they could not lose. Even if they did lose, they knew that they would not be the ones paying the incurred debts. That responsibility would fall to the poor, Jack and his cohorts. This notion is reinforced elsewhere in "Shackled and Drawn": "Gambling man rolls the dice, workingman pays the bills." Not only do the bankers not forgive other people's debts as they have already been forgiven, but they also shift the cost of their received forgiveness onto others, that is, the American taxpayers.<sup>13</sup> The new world is yet to come, and these bankers do not seem interested in its arrival.

## **Jack's Disappointment**

Before moving to other *Wrecking Ball* songs and leaving Jack, it should be noted that the song's final verse turns this hopeful song into a major theological disappointment. Not to be misunderstood, the verse does not ruin the song, and I readily concede that this verse fits in the world populated by Springsteen's downtrodden characters, both here and elsewhere in his corpus of songs. Rather, this verse is a disappointment primarily because this is the moment in the song where Springsteen's (American) audience gets excited. After Jack "see[s] the light," he adds one more stanza and again promises "we'll be all right" because he has so many skills. Of course, this sense of optimism fits the hopeful attitude that Jack has kept throughout the song, but the problem is found in the final lines, where he vows to kill the bankers. If only he can get a gun and the opportunity, then he'd "be all right." Rather than turning the other cheek like Jesus suggested (Matthew 5:39), and rather than waiting it out until the hurricane passes and the world does change, Jack's focus regresses into vengeance, a vengeance that Jack surely sees as a form of vigilante justice.

The bankers do not forgive as they were forgiven; they are not caring for others; and they are definitely not offering daily bread, much less a decent day's wage, which was all that Jack wanted in the first place. The fact that these bankers refuse to play by Jesus's and Jack's rules has its effects on Jack. As Dave Marsh and Danny Alexander (2012, para. 13) wrote in their blog, "the fairness is understood to be that of yet another rigged game." Jack realizes that a rigged game produces zero-sum results: if the bankers play, they win, and then Jack cannot. This realization seems to break his spirit because this continued reality is in conflict with Jesus's prayer and with Springsteen's own gospel, which can be summarized by his introduction to the "Born to Run" video: "And remember, in the end, nobody wins unless everybody wins" (Springsteen 2001, Disc 1, ca. 00:56:15). Ultimately, Jack fails to live up to his own vision.

On the album, this verse is just a part of the song, and it represents an unfortunate end to the story of a man struggling to survive. However, this verse is bigger than this song because this verse resonates so well with those willing to hear it but not listen to it or learn from it. Whereas Marsh and Alexander (2012) lament that no one—within the United States, at least—listens to this song in concert because this slow-paced piece is used as a toilet-break song, the lamentable fact is that the majority who do stay to hear the song erupt into wild applause in response to the last verse. After Springsteen sings Jack's promise to shoot the bankers, the once seemingly contemplative atmosphere of the concert hall is transformed into a moment reminiscent of a home team's crucial touchdown during the playoffs. American audiences fail to understand that this verse signals Jack's own failure. Instead of being disappointed in the fact that Jack himself cannot live up to the standards of his new world, they loudly celebrate his vengeful desires. Marsh and Alexander note, in contrast, that among European audiences "the song is accompanied by a stillness and silence so deep it

carries a jolt” (para. 14) with the implicit hope that the stillness and sadness embedded in this verse would be fully understood by audiences in the United States.<sup>14</sup>

### **“We Take Care of Our Own”**

If Jack longs for the new world whose light he can see but simultaneously fails to implement it, he is not alone on the album. The singer on the opening track, “We Take Care of Our Own,” has also found that the world benefits the likes of the bankers. The difference between the two songs is that whereas Jack criticizes or hates the bankers for their financial hypocrisy, this singer’s frustration is focused on religious hypocrisy. Those who most loudly claim to be Jesus’s followers and spiritual heirs are the object of the song’s derision.<sup>15</sup> The singer begins by stating he has “been knocking on the door that holds the throne,” which recalls the words ascribed to Jesus in Revelation, “I am standing at the door, knocking . . . and to the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne” (Revelation 3:20–21). In this light, it becomes difficult not to interpret the “map” in the second line as a reference to the Bible. However, the singer lacks access to the throne, and his map has not worked. Instead of finding help along the way, he has “been stumbling on good hearts turned to stone” whose intentions yield no results. Despite this, the people whom the singer encounters claim that they have taken care of their own, even though they ignore the singer’s pleas.

Most commentators and music critics note the song’s title and ask whether we as a nation do, in fact, take care of our own. Have we done everything we can to ensure our soldiers’ safety abroad as the refrain challenges with its reference to the unfurled US flag? Do our veterans receive proper medical, mental, and job-training services to help them upon their return home, where this flag also flies? Responding to the media in February 2012, Springsteen commented that we are supposed to but that “we often don’t” take care of them (Springsteen 2012, para. 13). Fewer commentators ask in response to this song whether “tak [ing] care of our own” entails providing for those Jesus called “the least of these” (Matthew 25:40)—the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, or those in prison (vv. 31–45)—even if they never served in our armed forces under our flag.

It is one thing to take care of one’s own, and maybe most people try, but Springsteen is really asking a bigger question here, a bigger question than he seems to realize, as artists often do. The implicit eschatological question he asks in this song closely resembles that of the historical Jesus: “Is it *enough* to just take care of our own?” In more familiar terminology, the question becomes the one that inspired Jesus’s famous parable about the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:29: “Who is my neighbour?” Upon hearing the tale of the Good Samaritan, Jesus’s audience concluded that the true neighbour was “the one who showed . . . mercy” for someone who did not belong to the audience’s ethnic group (v. 37). According to Jesus, a true neighbour is not one who takes care of his own; he is one who takes care of anyone in need or, perhaps, anyone at all. Jesus’s eschatological kingdom envisions a society where everyone is included, or, as Springsteen says, one where “everybody wins.”

Comparing Springsteen’s definition of “our own” with Jesus’s “my neighbour” is worth considering, given that people could misinterpret “our own” to be a limiting concept.<sup>16</sup> The second verse of “We Take Care of Our Own” begins cryptically in Chicago and then moves to New Orleans, but when the Superdome is mentioned, we realize that the singer is using New Orleans’s football stadium to introduce us to the problem of US race relations as manifested in response to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. According to Christopher Phillips, the editor of the fan-based Springsteen magazine *Backstreets*, this verse recounts the story of white-militia member and Chicago native Wayne Janak, who moved to New Orleans

prior to Katrina (Phillips 2012; Thompson 2009). In the hurricane’s aftermath, Janak boasted about shooting African American men, assuming that they had been looters. In his mind, he took care of his own because he saw himself as protecting the property of his and his own in a small white neighbourhood on Algiers Point, which is located within the larger, predominantly black Algiers district (Thompson 2009). Apparently, Janak did not consider the black men in his neighbourhood his neighbours and so did not count them among his own in the wake of Katrina.

By incorporating this tragic story, the singer carefully recalls Jesus’s question, “Which of these, do you think, was a neighbour?” (Luke 10:36), as well as its answer, “the one who showed him mercy” (v. 37). The singer uses Janak’s story to demonstrate what happens when people lack mercy and dismiss literal neighbours as thugs not deserving care. The song’s bridge again stresses the potential consequences that actions like Janak’s can cause. In the same troubled voice as in the first verse, the singer seeks from others “hearts that run over with mercy” and “love that has not forsaken me,” asking where (or if) these can be found. It is no coincidence that both Jesus and Springsteen stress mercy because being merciful is as much a hallmark of the new world as is forgiveness. Offering mercy to a neighbour demands the end of society’s boundaries, allowing life on earth to resemble life as it is in heaven. The questions that Springsteen poses in the bridge call for a new world populated by those who take care not only of their own but also of those whom Jesus referred to as “the least of these” (Matthew 25:40). Those who constitute the “least of these” are exactly the people who populate Jesus’s Kingdom of Heaven: the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and those in prison (vv. 42–43), the poor and those weeping (Luke 6:20–22), and, of course, the meek and the persecuted (Matthew 5:5, 10), as well as the prostitutes, drunks, gluttons, and tax collectors that Jesus regularly associated with.

### **“Rocky Ground”**

One final song that embraces this new world should also be considered, “Rocky Ground.” For many fans, this song was initially among the most hated, in part because of Michelle Moore’s prayerful rap (also written by Springsteen). Fans may accept the song’s hip hop-styled sampling of a southern black preacher declaring himself a “soldier” (for Christ), but her rap seems to represent the stylistic limit for many of the middle-aged, middle-class white Americans who constitute Springsteen’s stereotypical core fans.<sup>17</sup> In defence of the song, Marsh and Alexander aptly reckon “Rocky Ground” one of Springsteen’s “most musically dramatic and emotionally lavish productions ever” (2012, para. 30). The song and its message are not just beautiful, as Marsh and Alexander note, but also infused with eschatological overtones.

Unlike “Jack of All Trades” and many other songs on the album, “Rocky Ground” does not assign blame for problems to other people. Here, the shepherd’s own flock are to blame, given that his “flock has roamed far from the hill.” The listeners are not told specifically what sins or crimes the flock has committed, but they are left to assume that this happened when the shepherd left the members of the flock to tend to themselves. The singer further states that they have strayed and roamed, and their culpability is comparable to that of those living before Noah’s flood (Genesis 7–9) and the money changers whom Jesus drove out of the temple area (Mark 11:15–17; Matthew 21:12; Luke 19:45; and John 2:15). Effectively, the flock, which includes the listeners, is a group of murderers and thieves when left to itself. Immortality is the human predicament when people are not under the direct supervision of the

shepherd, and the singer's call for the shepherd reminds the listeners that they are currently alone, which also means that they are currently causing hurt in this world.

Throughout the song, the singer urges the shepherd to "rise up" and return so that the flock may get to higher (moral) ground in order to be saved from its collective guilt. Despite these repeated calls, there is no answer, only sheep left to themselves traveling over the rocky ground. The shepherd's absence is stated explicitly only at the end of Moore's rap. She laments that after a hard night's prayer, "The morning breaks, you awake, but no one's there." The flock must traverse the rocky ground, and it must traverse it alone.

If the shepherd, either God or the traditional Jesus of Christian faith, is constantly called on but never arrives, how exactly—one may ask—does this song relate to the coming Kingdom of Heaven that Jesus proclaimed? How does this song fit with the other two songs discussed above? This connection is found in Moore's rap and the singer's words that frame it. Moore reminds the listeners that they, the flock, have tried to improve the world and have taught their children to do their best, too. She says that humanity has waited for God to act, but she then states that nothing has happened. Despite this, however, the singer maintains that "there's a new day coming." This "new day" echoes what the singer declared prior to the rap: "Sun's in the heavens and a new day is rising." This new day, a mere lexical variation on Jack's "new world," arrives not because the shepherd brings it but because the flock, humanity, has finally learned to transform itself and society in the shepherd's absence.

Visually, this point is made immediately after Moore's rap in the mostly black-and-white video. As the singer repeats the line that "a new day's coming," the black-and-white screen momentarily transforms into a vibrant cityscape with a bright blue sky. This visual transformation occurs when the sampled preacher proclaims once again that he is a soldier, demonstrating that he is taking the initiative to bring the new day with him ("[Bruce Springsteen's Lyrics](#)" 2012, ca. 00:03:39). The new day is coming, and it is not far off, but for now it is a mere a glimpse that quickly recedes to black-and-white. The few full-colour moments in the video represent the fleeting new day. Yes, the flock has committed murder and worse, and they may still pay twofold for what human society has done in the shepherd's absence, but people must still try their best and teach others to try their best.

Springsteen reminds the listener that neither God nor Jesus will do what humanity can and must do. The world will not get better if people sit back idly and wait. Significantly, Jesus says this in the gospels about his coming eschatological kingdom. In Mark 9:38–41, the disciple John complains to Jesus that a stranger had cast out demons in Jesus's name. To John's surprise, Jesus is pleased to learn that others are working to bring about the Kingdom of Heaven by helping the unfortunate. Jesus responds to John by saying, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us" (vv. 39–40). The kingdom will come only when humanity acts in a way consistent with the kingdom. It will not arrive in the company of wars, rumours of war, plagues, and earthquakes as it does in the apocalypse revealed by John of Patmos and the popular *Left Behind* franchise of books and movies. The kingdom will not arrive unless everyone decides to take care of their own—that is, their neighbour—by providing for those hurt in the war, healing those who have fallen ill during the plague, and freely rebuilding each house in between the aftershocks. If everyone took advantage of such a situation and "start[ed] caring for each other / Like Jesus said that we might" like Jack anticipates, the "rocky ground" would eventually be rubble free and everyone's "heart [would] run over with mercy" as the singer of "We Take Care of Our Own" desires.

## Conclusion

In Jesus's prayers and parables concerning the Kingdom of Heaven, and on Springsteen's *Wrecking Ball* concerning the "new world coming," the principal message focuses on the desperate need for our society's transformation. For both men, this eschatological message may be presented as divinely inspired, but the message demands that humanity act rather than wait for divine action or further revelation. For both men, society can be changed only when people work selflessly to help the needy—regardless of who those in need are and regardless of their ethnicity or race—and this requires human imagination, initiative, and transformation. Jesus's vision of the Kingdom of Heaven is characterized by people who act like a "Good Samaritan" (Luke 10:25–37) and who forgive the debts that others owe them (11:4), and we will know that the kingdom has come when people can afford to eat or are mercifully provided bread each day (vv. 2–3). In Springsteen's vision, as portrayed in the song "We Take Care of Our Own," the singer appeals to our sense of mercy because he has found none in his search, and he condemns those who refuse to show mercy or who show only limited mercy. Similarly, Jack in "Jack of All Trades" wants to work for his daily bread, and he talks as though he would forgive any debts people owe him; however, he continues to harbour resentment against the greedy bankers who profit off the poor and refuse to forgive the debts of the working class. Jack, like the singer in "We Take Care of Our Own," anticipates the new world but is not yet truly ready to live in it, as evidenced by the murderous grudge he holds against the bankers. Ultimately, because Jack is unable or unwilling to let go of his bitterness, he is as responsible for delaying the onset of the coming new world—the *eschaton*—as are the bankers. Jack is unable to help transform the world, which means that instead of welcoming the end of history, he will allow history to repeat itself, and people will continue to suffer.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to helping the needy and forgiving debts, Jesus's Kingdom of Heaven can appear only when people who want to be part of the kingdom act as though they already are part of the kingdom. Despite his willing work ethic and sympathy for his fellow working poor, Jack's hatred prevents him from performing the kingdom's signs and wonders to demonstrate its arrival. In Matthew 10:7–8, Jesus sends his disciples to go on missions without him in order to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons. These are activities that Matthew claims they had already seen Jesus perform. Now Jesus wants them to do this without him, and during their mission they are supposed to proclaim that "the kingdom of heaven has come near" (v. 8). According to Jesus, the miracles he expects of his disciples are the evidence that the kingdom has come; helping those in need is tantamount to bringing the Kingdom of Heaven to us on earth. When Jack is able to perform the miracle of forgiveness, he will then begin ushering in Jesus's kingdom, the new world he sees coming. Significantly, Jesus needs his disciples—and anyone else who is willing, like Jack—to implement this kingdom, his view of the new world coming. Jesus knew that he could not do it alone, and he never tried. Likewise, the singer in "Rocky Ground" calls on the shepherd, but he knows that he, the rapper, and the listener are the ones who will ultimately cause the "new day" to rise, just as Jack understands that the "new world" will come only when everyone treats others the right way, "like Jesus said that we might." Everyone may still be guilty as murderers, but each should be ready to be transformed, if he or she is willing. The *eschaton* is waiting for humanity to usher in the new world on the new day when we take care of our own and our neighbour, too, so that "everybody wins."

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## Notes

1. For a full discussion on Bruce Springsteen’s use of the phrase “promised land” as a metaphor and his evolution on its meaning in his songs, see [Allen 2012](#).  
I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers, my colleagues at the Glory Days: A Bruce Springsteen Symposium, and the Contemporary Theology Class at First United Methodist Church, Rogers, Arkansas, for their generous feedback on earlier versions of this paper. I would also like to thank Mona Okada of Grubman Shire & Meiselas, P.C., for helping me secure permission to use Springsteen’s lyrics in this article.
2. Adding yet another layer to the utopian dream presented in “Born to Run,” Randall E. Auxier suggests that the girlfriend’s name, Wendy, serves as an allusion to Peter Pan and Neverland (2008, 106–8).
3. Springsteen’s *Wrecking Ball* was nominated for Best Rock Album, and the lead single “We Take Care of Our Own” was nominated for Best Rock Song (a writing category) and Best Rock Performance. Springsteen did not win in any category on 10 February 2013. *Rolling Stone* gave *Wrecking Ball* five out of five stars upon its release in March and named it the best album of 2012 later that year ([Fricke 2012](#); “50 Best Albums” 2012).
4. In one of his many TV-evangelist-styled interruptions on the DVD *Live in New York City*, Springsteen playfully explains that individuals must be part of a community in order to receive life at its fullest. During an extended interruption of “Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out,” he states, “Tonight, I want to go to that river of transformation, where you can go and you can be changed. But you got to work at it. That’s right!” ([Springsteen and the E Street Band 2001](#), Disc 1, ca. 01:14:10). He then continues, “But you just don’t stumble onto those things—you don’t find those places—by accident. You’ve got to seek them out and search after them. And that’s why we’re here . . . because you can’t get those things by yourself. You got to have help. But that’s where I want to go tonight, and I want you to go with me because I need to go with you” (ca. 01:15:30). Here, as elsewhere throughout Springsteen’s lyrics, he reminds us that each individual must see himself or herself as a member of a larger society and that that society must work together so that the waters of life, transformation, resurrection, and so on “fall down on me and set me free; set you free” (ca. 01:16:34).
5. In 2012 Sister Simone Campbell critiqued the Republicans’ proposed budget because “their budget goes astray in not acknowledging that we are responsible not only for ourselves and our immediate families. Rather, our faith strongly affirms that we are all responsible for one another” ([Gibson 2012](#), para. 13). Similarly, Pope Francis has stated that even though he is the pope, he is not in a position to judge others, including those who are atheists and gay/lesbian ([Kuriakose 2013](#)).
6. All New Testament quotes are taken from the New Revised Standard translation.
7. Admittedly, Springsteen does sing about hurricanes, droughts, and floods, but these are metaphorical, not literal, catastrophes that represent the economic hardships experienced in the songs. Alternatively, if the hurricanes, droughts, and floods are intended to be understood as literal, they represent the past conditions that caused the singer’s present-day conditions. They do not function as signs of an impending doom in the song.
8. Acting as a responsible member of a covenant community is how we can distinguish this eschatological new world from a utopia, a place that is literally defined as “nowhere.” The individual or community seeking the new world may never actually create that new world by completely

- transforming ours (at least no group has so far), but their attempts to bring a new world order through their other-focused, selfless action (e.g., feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for the stranger) can influence some form of mild transformation in the larger society.
9. Lyrics have been taken from the “Music” tab on Springsteen’s official Web site, and song titles drop down when the cursor is placed over the letters at the top of the Web site (Springsteen 2014).
  10. Earlier in “Cautious Man,” during Billy’s most difficult moments, his desperate struggles took place in the dark, thereby heightening Springsteen’s dark–light contrast.
  11. “Even if he is not aware of the Catholic symbolism of light and water (and I suspect that he may know what he is doing, but not quite know that he knows), he is using in Catholic fashion these profoundly Catholic symbols of his youth: He is using light and water as symbols of rebirth” (Greeley 2004, 161).
  12. In the *Rolling Stone* interview with Jon Stewart, Springsteen comments that the “record was pretty much done” a week before saxophonist Clarence Clemmons’s fatal stroke in June 2011 (Stewart 2012, para. 17).
  13. In *Wrecking Ball*’s fifth song, “Death to My Hometown,” the singer condemns the bankers’ partners in crime. He condemns the businessmen who had once been heavily invested in the city and had employed the locals in their factories and other low-paying jobs but who are now relocating the jobs, leaving the town in economic ruin.
  14. The observations made by Marsh and Alexander took place five months into the tour, when Springsteen and the band were performing in Europe during the summer, so there was hope at the time of their writing that American audiences would learn to appreciate the deeper meaning of this verse when Springsteen returned home for another American leg in the coming months. Unfortunately, I noticed that the American audience was no more reflective or less vengeful on 19 September 2012 when the song was performed at MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, New Jersey, than it had been at the tour opener six months earlier on 18 March at Philips Arena in Atlanta, Georgia.
  15. During the *Rolling Stone* interview, Stewart commented that a *New York Times* writer referred to the song as “jingoistic” (because the song’s title “We Take Care of Our Own” serves as a refrain and appears to be celebrating the idea to an unthinking observer). Springsteen dismissed the idea and replied, “Whoever said that, they need a smarter pop writer” (Stewart 2012, para. 21).
  16. Such a potential misunderstanding recalls one of Springsteen’s most famous songs, “Born in the U.S.A.” (1984), which was repeatedly misunderstood as a mere patriotic celebration, as opposed to an indictment of our nation’s treatment of our Vietnam veterans. Among those who misunderstood or misappropriated this song were President Ronald Reagan as part of his bid for reelection and conservative commentator George Will in his column for the *Washington Post* in 1984 (“Random Notes” 1996, 149; see also Cullen 1997, 3–5; Carlin 2012, 316–19).
  17. This statement is derived primarily from private, fan-based discussion boards on the page [Backstreets.com/btx](http://Backstreets.com/btx), which is the online counterpart to the magazine *Backstreets*.
  18. In addition to “Jack of All Trades,” several other songs on *Wrecking Ball* highlight the repetitive nature of financial disasters or moments of social injustice in American history, including “Death to My Hometown,” “Shackled and Drawn,” and “We Are Alive.” Finishing one of Stewart’s sentences, “They could have been singing in 1840, 1860 . . . Springsteen adds, “Or yesterday” (Stewart 2012, para. 13).

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