

Spiritual Roots

GOD. and FEAR.

The album *DAMN.* is littered with biblical references that showcase Kendrick's religious background and his commitment in using to forward Black identity. Although not directly comparable to the references of African spiritual roots commonly found in the Black Arts Movement, a majority of African-American are religious and, of those, most are Christian which allows Kendrick's music to be more identifiable with his American audience ([Pew Research Center](#)). By using religion, he is able unite and guide Black people towards progress, similar to Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, and also unite across racial boundaries with those that have similar religious experiences. Of all the songs in the album, two stand out for their use of religion: *GOD.* and *FEAR.*

At first in *GOD.*, Kendrick flaunts his success as an artist as being Godlike but then transitions in the second verse to how he is religiously Godlike. Throughout the this verse, he showcases different religious mentions of how God could destroy someone, and by extension how he can destroy his haters.

Fuck is you talkin' to?
Ayy, do you know who you talkin' to?
Slide on you like fallen drapes
God toss full of carnivals
I kill 'em with kindness
Or I kill 'em with diamonds
Or I put up like fifteen hundred
Get yo' ass killed by the finest
...

The lines “Slide on you like fallen drapes, God toss full of carnivals” are a direct reference to the Tearing of The Temple Curtain from Mathew 27, where upon Jesus death earthquakes occurred and tore the curtain in the temple that separated humanity from God. With this, Kendrick is saying that he could kill his opponents with the might of his power which is shown again by the lines “Or I put up like fifteen hundred, Get yo' ass killed by the finest”, where he contemplates getting a hitman. He then advocates for death by kindness which is similar to Proverbs 25:21, “If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat”...”For you will heap burning coals on his head”, but also with his haters succumbing to their jealousy with the line “Or I kill 'em with diamonds”. But in the first two lines of the verse, “Fuck is you talkin' to? Ayy, do you know who you talkin' to?”, Kendrick creates a connection with the audience that this next verse is a universal perspective, with his performance at Coachella in 2017 where he first pointed at the audience and then back at himself ([Lyric Genius](#)). In doing so, Kendrick takes the ideas laid out in the second verse and applies them to his audience, that they too can be Godlike in this way if they step up to be leaders of their own. And in the process, his audience is lifted up in being able to share their own lived experiences. This is also found in the the first verse with,

Look, look... hol' up!

Don't judge me! My mama caught me with a strap

Don't judge me! I was young, fuckin' all the brats

Don't judge me! Aimin' at your head for a stack

Don't judge! Don't judge me! Now my home got a Valley peak

Don't judge me! If I press your line you a freak

Don't judge me! Won't you tell a friend? Y'all gon' see

The repetition of “Don't judge me” is a reference to the Tupac song “Only God Can Judge Me” where both songs highlight the religious idea that God is a constant witness in one's life and only He can attest to who one truly is. With this part of the verse, Kendrick asks his audience not to

judge him for the choices he made in his past because they can't understand what he's been through but also encourages them to do the same for their own lives and stand up for their individual lived experiences, instead of letting others define them with stereotypes or confining them to a statistic. By leading his audience with religious messaging, Kendrick is able to effectively advocate for the Black community and push them to take charge of their lives.

In *FEAR.*, the song is introduced by a voicemail sermon from Kendrick's cousin, Carl, who is a Hebrew Israelite, believing that people of color are decedents of Jacob and are the lost tribes of Israel. This belief that Black Americans are God's chosen people is also shared by Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam and was used in order break people free from stereotypes and give African-Americans something to rally behind. Carl quotes Deuteronomy 28 as the reason behind why African Americans are made to suffer and that until they follow God's commandments that they will be cursed, saying

*I know you been havin' a lot on yo' mind lately
And I know you feel like, you know
People ain't been prayin' for you
But you have to understand this, man, that we are a cursed people Deuteronomy 28:28 says, "The Lord shall smite thee with madness And blindness, and astonishment of heart"
See, family, that's why you feel like you feel
Like you got a chip on your shoulder
Until you follow His commandments, you gonna feel that way*

The phrase "Ain't nobody praying for me" is repeated throughout the album by Kendrick but Carl explains in his voicemail that these people Kendrick would rely on are also broken. This furthers the idea that salvation comes from one's own faith and not the faith of others and that if people in the Black community want to achieve progress then they have to stand up for them-

selves as individuals, instead of relying on one central leader or presidential figure to create change. Kendrick also views himself as a prophet or religious leader, with the first bridge questioning

Why God, why God do I gotta suffer?

Pain in my heart carry burdens full of struggle

Why God, why God do I gotta bleed?

Every stone thrown at you restin' at my feet

Why God, why God do I gotta suffer?

Earth is no more, won't you burn this muh'fucka?

Lamar is saying that people cast stones at him when he is only trying to give the message of God, which is a similar theme throughout the Bible. He also references this idea in *GOD.* with “Everything I say is from an angel”, where he directly compares himself to being a prophet. Kendrick considers his music to be as impactful to others as a religious leader might be and, in the process, uses *DAMN.* to help people find their path towards progress. Despite this, Kendrick still fears that all his wealth and progress might be taken away, wondering

All this money, is God playin' a joke on me?

Is it for the moment, and will he see me as Job?

Take it from me and leave me worse than I was before?

Kendrick compares himself to Job and how his faith was tested by God if He took away all that Job had. Lamar attributes his success to God throughout *GOD.* and *DUCKWORTH.* in how his faith and actions, as well as those of his father, manifested in his career. Since Job was faithful to God in the end, his family and wealth was restored and in referencing the story Kendrick attempts to teach his audience that faith is eventually always rewarded.