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Visions of Gehenna: The Biblical and Apocryphal Underworlds and Hells behind the *Inferno*

Scott Cameron, Huron University College

Abstract: This paper argues that Dante's *Inferno* should not be read exclusively in the Classical humanist tradition by contextualising his work within a long history of apocryphal Christian representations of Hell. Jerome's Vulgate Bible rendered Hell as an abstract site for the realisation of theological principles, rather than a physical place readily comprehensible in human terms. In failing to describe Hell in literal terms, the Vulgate invited curiosity, and apocryphal visions of Hell proliferated to fill this gap. Dante's *Inferno*, then, should be read as the culmination of a long history of attempts to reconcile the principle of divine justice with eternal damnation and to reveal theological principle in its literal form.

Keywords: Dante, *Inferno*, Divine Comedy, Apocrypha, humanism

There is not just a single sense in this work: it might rather be called *polysemous*, that is, having several senses... The first is called literal, while the second is called allegorical, moral or anagogical. (Dante, "Letter" 189)

Dante's own reading of his *Commedia*, as explained in his reputed letter to his patron Can Grande della Scala, is notable in that it privileges neither the literal meaning nor the narrative's emergent polysemous interpretations. In as much as he teases from the literal reading a threefold division of allegorical, moral, and anagogical readings, he also groups them together as a Trinitarian three-in-one. Rather than placing them in a hierarchy, with the anagogical meaning being the highest level, Dante sees each level of meaning as legitimate and equal:

The subject of the whole work, then, taken literally, is the state of souls after death, understood in a simple sense, for the movement of the whole work turns upon this and about this. If on the other hand the work is taken allegorically, the subject is man, in the exercise of his free will, earning or becoming liable to the rewards or punishments of justice. (Dante, "Letter" 189)

Dante groups together the cluster of emergent allegorical senses, arguing that they are produced in parallel to the literal narrative, but do not displace them. Both senses of the narrative are interdependent and essential to each other – like its meaning, the subject of a story "must also be twofold" (189). Dante's *Inferno* places far greater importance on the literal aspect of the 'state of souls after death' than, for instance, Saint Augustine's position. For Augustine, the literal is subservient to the allegorical. It guides the reader to the correct scriptural truth – and by no means is the literal narrative a reliable guide. Augustine's *On Christian Teaching* includes a veritable catalogue of the missteps one may make while interpreting scripture: "the ambiguities of metaphorical words [...] require no ordinary care and attention" (160). The literal is essential, yes, though not the purpose of reading. Even Jesus, for whom parables served to spread the Word, saw the parable's narrative as merely a necessary concession to safeguard the Word of God from those unworthy of it (Luke 8:1-15). By contrast, Dante prioritises narrative just as highly as he does

allegorical meaning. This essay seeks to explore the Biblical and Apocryphal roots of Dante's Hell. It argues that a consistent subservience of literal narrative to theological doctrine in the Vulgate Bible and the thinking of the Church Fathers discouraged descriptions of Hell. The curiosity provoked by the vague descriptions of Hell in the latter invited literal description, and apocryphal accounts took up the demand. Dante's *Inferno* is on one level the culmination of a long history of attempts to reconcile the principle of divine justice with eternal damnation and to reveal theological principle in its literal form.

Dante's *Inferno* is too often read as somehow exceptional from the Christian tradition in which it is rooted for the extent to which it responds to and is shaped by Classical and vernacular literatures. Teodolinda Barolini reads Dante's *Comedy* as strongly influenced by the courtly love poems of Provence, an influence manifesting itself in the tension between the poet's love for his lady (Beatrice, in Dante's case) and his love for God (14-15). Kevin Brownlee characterises Dante's engagement with the Classics as "altogether exceptional" in medieval literature, as Dante both interacts with Classical heroes even as his hero becomes a "new, Christian Aeneas" (100). It would be nonsensical to claim that these scholars are unaware of the biblical origins of Dante's Hell. Indeed, in the *Cambridge Companion to Dante*, Peter Hawkins elaborates upon Dante's relationship to the Bible, but sees it as only a minor influence in the case of the *Inferno*: "it comes as no surprise that Hell should include the fewest direct citations of Scripture" of the *Comedy* (125). Yet Hawkins claims that Dante, who had declared that he would undergo "a 'looking again' at" the Bible and other ancient texts, aimed not to reimagine and revise the Bible as he had the Classics, but "to see it again and to see it anew" (128). From what sources Dante aimed to see the Biblical Hell anew, given that few direct Biblical references to it exist, Hawkins leaves unsaid; perhaps we are meant to presume he draws upon the Classics. Here, I argue, is where the Biblical

and apocryphal Christian origins of the *Inferno* become important to our reading. Dante's Hell is one imagined in response to and drawing upon previous Christian thinkers, rather than one which leaps over these predecessors in favour of the Classics.

Before looking at the tradition Dante builds upon, it is worth outlining the logic underlying his underworld. Hellish punishments are twofold. Deprivation of God is the first punishment, suffered by all and including the virtuous pagans condemned to a painless but melancholic eternity in the pastoral "green-enamelled sword[s]" of Limbo (Dante 8.4). The second punishment of eternal suffering compounds the first for those in the inner circles of Hell. Indeed, the geography of the next eight circles of Dante's Hell reflects the principle that the suffering of each damned soul is determined by the extent and character of its earthly sin (see Pertile). As Dante's guide Virgil explains, the outer four circles of Hell are for sinners of "incontinence," whose self-restraint simply proved lesser than their earthly passions (19.11). The next four circles, separated from the outer circles by a wall, contain those whose sins were committed out of active malice and are thus more offensive to God. The eighth circle, a great crater called 'Malebolge,' contains ten types of lesser frauds, punished especially since they used their God-given intelligence to deceive (Dante 30-32.18; Pertile). The final circle contains the greatest frauds, whose deception betrayed the bonds of love and trust (19.11). At its centre, buffeted by cold winds owing to his distance from the warmth of God's love, Dante finds a three-headed Lucifer frozen into a block of ice. Each of his mouths chews eternally the three archtraitors, Cassius, Brutus, and, worst of all, Judas Iscariot. To leave the *Inferno*, Dante and Virgil climb down Satan's back, and thus through the centre of the Earth. They climb back up through "a vast dungeon in the rock" and return to the surface of the earth before continuing through Purgatory and Paradise (60-61.34).

Dante posits that the literal structure of Hell is a creation of God and the incarnation of His divine justice. As the “characters obscure” over Hell’s gate tells us, “JUSTICE IMPELLED MY MIGHTY ARCHITECT” (4.3). Any brief description of Dante’s Hell must gloss over the specificity of the punishments each sinner receives in Hell. A rain of fire, for instance, falls down upon the violent, mirroring their own fury (23-24.14). The literal and allegorical meanings of the *Inferno* are thus inextricable – the physical geography of Hell is simply a logical fulfilment of a theological truism. Where does Dante pick up his ideas for the physical form of Hell then? The Vulgate Bible would have naturally been his first source. The Vulgate, translated from the Hebrew and Aramaic into Latin by Saint Jerome around 400 CE, incorporated the Old and New Testament’s multivalent notions of ‘Hell’ into the singular Latin ‘*infernus*,’ an abbreviation of ‘*locus infernus*,’ or “the place beneath” (see Kelly 121). The Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts use five terms to denote what became Jerome’s *Infernus*. Sheol, a Hebrew word for the place of the dead, was roughly equivalent to the also-used Greek Hades. Both referred to “the grave” – a resting place for the dead, with no or little consideration of their mortal virtue (see Papaioannou 234-235). Gehenna is differentiated from Sheol/Hades in some Old Testament books, referring to a valley of flame for sinners only (see Bernstein 167-168). The New Testament introduces two concepts of ‘Hell’ without immediate literary relations to the Old Testament: the Greek terms for the “Abyss” as well as the “outer darkness” where there is “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Young’s Literal Translation,³ Luke 8:31; Rev. 9; Matt 25:30). The ‘Abyss’ is similar to the Old Testament’s ‘Tartarus,’ both “places of incarceration for fallen angels” (Pappaioannou 238-239) being deep within Hades. The “outer darkness” described by Jesus is apart from God and defined by its resentment and sorrow at the separation. Chronologically, the New Testament presented

³ Future references to Young’s Literal Translation will be abbreviated as “YLT.”

“souls after death,” in Dante’s phrase, as going first to Sheol/Hades, where they unconsciously await their fate. After the resurrection, individuals go to Gehenna, a place of destruction and not the eternal torment of the Christian Hell, or to heaven (see Pappaioannou 238-239). The Bible Jerome worked with had not one Hell, but many intersecting ones, reflecting even in the New Testament the anthological character of the text.

It is important to understand the difference between these Hells if only to understand the extent to which Saint Jerome’s Vulgate revised the Biblical tradition. In place of a variety of underworlds, there was a singular infernus, which contained ‘Gehenna’ and ‘Tartarus,’ both terms left untranslated. ‘Infernus’ largely fulfilled each of the functions of the five Hebrew and Greek ones. Dante, in merging Classical and Christian traditions, was following a tradition already blending the Hebrew and the Greek. And, indeed, some of the cross fertilisation is evident in the New Testament – the underworlds do not always fit neatly within the outlines delineated above. For instance, in the Gospel of Luke’s ‘Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus,’ in which a rich man finds his earthly power useless after death, compared to a beggar who is taken up into heaven, Jesus describes Hell in the terms of Sheol or Hades. Leaving the original Greek ‘underworld’ term untranslated, the passage reads: “the rich man also died, and was buried;/and in the hades having lifted up his eyes, being in torments, he doth see Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom” (YLT, Luke 16:22-23). The Vulgate translates ‘hades’ to ‘inferno,’ and has the rich man lament to Abraham, “I am tormented in this flame” (Clementina Vulgate,⁴ Luke 16:23; Douay-Rheims Translation,⁵ Luke 16:24). It is entirely possible to dismiss this tale’s literal description of Hell, since it is couched within a parable whose broader purpose is both to devalue earthly wealth and to discount the possibility of earthly visitations from the dead such as that which the rich man

⁴ Future references to the Clementina Vulgate will be abbreviated as “V-G.”

⁵ Future references to the Douay-Rheims Translation will be abbreviated as “D-R.”

requests of Abraham in order to reform his family to a virtuous life. The use of ‘Hades’ signifies the Greek tradition that the latter tales often came from. Given that Hades was understood as the place where the dead rested before Judgement Day, this makes more logical sense than the soul’s immediate departure to ‘inferno,’ as the Vulgate translates it. Its Hades does seem to borrow from some Greek iterations in making it a place of torment – and it remains possible that the rich man’s soul could go to Gehenna after Judgement Day, following temporary torture in Hades (see Pappaiouannou 134-135; 119-120; and Bernstein 245-247). The ‘Infernus’ used by Saint Jerome conglomerates each of these Hells into one, greatly simplifying a far-reaching and multitudinous concept and offering Dante the possibility that souls go immediately to Hell.

Indeed, notwithstanding the different terms used to describe eternal punishments, the Gospels of the New Testament each possess distinct notions of damnation. The Gospel of John and the letters of Paul especially emphasise man’s natural unity with the divine and Christ’s desire to bring men and women into His Kingdom. John does not mention any notion of Hell. The fate of souls after death seems to either be eternal salvation or simple destruction: “whosoever believeth in [Christ], may not perish, but may have life everlasting” (see Bernstein 224-227; D-R, John 3:16). This notion of the afterlife is as far removed from Dante’s Hell as one might find in the New Testament.

These examples illustrate that the tradition Dante drew upon was a highly selective one, and one which favoured harsher notions of Hellish punishment. Luke’s ‘Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus,’ with the revision of ‘Hades’ to ‘inferno,’ illustrates a Hell that can be read as suggesting that sinners arrive immediately following their death, as in Dante’s *Inferno*. Similar coincidences of translation in the Book of Revelation can account for this difference too. Whereas the literal translation of the ‘judgement of the dead’ has sinners go from “the death and the hades”

to “the lake of the fire” in a second death (YLT, Rev. 20:13-15), following the logic of Hades as a temporary repository, the Vulgate reads, “And *mors* [death] and *infernus* were cast into the pool of fire. This is the second death” (VG, D-R, Rev. 20:14). Dante’s *Inferno* describes this too – after “the sound of the angelic trump,” each spirit will reunite with its physical body, and “hear his sentence / Reverberating through eternity,” receiving the ultimate, eternal, and just punishment (11.7).

Dante draws upon the Church Fathers’ early defense of Hell as a place of eternal and unlimited punishment. Origen, for instance, argued that divine punishment purifies earthly sins, and thus cannot be eternal. Both Jerome and Augustine offered rebuttals to Origen’s position, affirming eternal punishment as commensurate with divine justice: if limited Earthly sins could lead to eternal punishment, then so could limited virtues lead to eternal reward. Augustine’s rebuttal used scripture unscrupulously, again combining references to ‘fire’ (in the Vulgate, ‘everlasting fire’), the specific valley of Gehenna, and to a ‘lake of fire and sulfur’; the specific references became a monolithic and eternal ‘Hell’ (see Bernstein 272; 314-333). In making sense of scripture, doctrine trumped the specificities of individual literal descriptors.

While Augustine’s text justifies the eternity of Hell, his descriptions remain vague and theoretical. Apocryphal descriptions increasingly confronted the problem of depicting theological principles in literal terms. The Gospel of Nicodemus, likely based on a lost oral or manuscript tradition, was written down circa 350 CE and became very popular in the Middle Ages (see Elliot). Nicodemus describes the Harrowing of Hell, by which Christ, following the crucifixion, descends to Hades and frees all those held there. The personified figure of Hades says to Satan after Christ leaves, “turn and see that not one dead man is left in me, but all that you gained through the tree of knowledge you have lost through the tree of the cross” (*Nicodemus* 7(23).1); *Nicodemus* implies

here that, following Christ's sacrifice, sinners lost the relative peace of the Greek Hades in favour of the new *infernus*. The Harrowing changes the underworld: where once Satan and Hades were partners, Satan's gullibility leads Hades to despise him. At Christ's bidding, he resolves to torture Satan for eternity – a punishment extended, by implication, to those dying without knowledge of Christ. As Hades promises, "you shall learn by experience what evils I shall do to you" (*Nicodemus* 6(22)-7(23)). Nicodemus resolves latent tensions between the New Testament's different iterations of Hell. According to Nicodemus, Jesus' coming rewards the righteous more quickly, but it increases the stakes of punishment for sinners more rapidly.

Nicodemus aimed to account for the differences between the older notions of Hades and the New Testament's 'infernus,' the immediate destination of sinners. The Apocryphal Apocalypses of Peter and Paul display even more prominently the impulse to render a literal sense to theological principles. Peter witnesses in Jesus' palm a direct vision of Hell, in which sinners recognise that "we are recompensed according to our deeds" (*Peter* E 13). Blasphemers, for instance, are suspended over a lake of fire by their tongues. In a great pit filled with sewage stand women who have aborted their children, while their aborted fetuses shoot lightning towards their mothers who destroyed them "for fornication's sake" (*Peter* E 7-8, A 22-26). Peter's Hell is nowhere near as sophisticated as Dante's; the sins are not ordered in their severity, and the sins it catalogues tend to be more in the nature of sex and violence than of the more complex ethical and theological categories that Dante lays out. Peter's *Apocalypse* was not read widely, however, and in its original form it may have contained the idea of the eventual salvation of all sinners (see Elliot). Though the precision of its punishments presaged Dante by a millennium, he likely never read it.

Indeed, Peter's *Apocalypse* was eclipsed by the later *Apocalypse of Paul*, which was in fact translated into nearly every vernacular language in Europe (see Elliot; and Bernstein 293). Despite being dismissed by Augustine and church theologians, it was certainly known to Dante and readers of popular literature – hence Dante's "I am not Paul, nor am I yet Aeneas" (3.2; see Bernstein 292-293). In the *Apocalypse*, Paul, guided by an unnamed angel, sees first the divine court by which the souls of the wicked are tried; indeed, his emphasis, as Dante's, is on the notion of divine justice (*Paul* 11-14). Upon first seeing Hell, which is located past the ocean's edges on a flat earth, Paul weeps at the sight of so much suffering. The angel retorts, "Why do you weep? Are you more merciful than God? For though God is good, he knows that there are punishments, and he patiently bears with the human race, allowing each one to do his own will in the time in which he dwells on the earth" (33). Even Hell is manifestly just. In the Hell Paul sees, however, each category of sin suffers a punishment evocative of its crime. Each verse follows the same structure:

And again I observed there men and women with hands cut and their feet placed naked in a place of ice and snow, and worms devoured them. Seeing them I lamented and asked, 'Sir, who are these?' And he said to me, 'These are they who harmed orphans and widows and the poor, and did not hope in the Lord, for which cause they unceasingly pay the proper penalties.' (39)

Paul sees sufferers, and sometimes the sufferers call out to him. He asks his angelic guide who they are and receives an answer, much in the same way Virgil guides Dante. And while the punishments in *Paul* do not so aptly fit their crime, there is a sense that, as Paul goes further into Hell, he encounters worse punishments and worse sins. Those who take up monastic lifestyles, but never truly take up the teachings of Christ wear flaming rags and are tortured by dragons and demonic angels (40). The furthest corner of Hell is frozen and contains a "worm that never rests," devouring men and women who deny Christ's resurrection (42). After wishing the sinners were never born, Paul sees the archangel Michael descending from Heaven and proclaims the justness

of divine punishment. After this, Paul and the angel return to Eden and then to Paradise. The blueprints for the *Inferno*, if only in loose form, exist in the *Apocalypse of Paul*.

The *Apocalypse of Paul* demonstrates the importance of the literal in portrayals of Hell. It by no means dismisses theology, as Michael's lengthy explanation of the justness of divine punishment demonstrates. Its chief interest for readers, however, is expository, for it fills in the gaps left in the ambiguous Biblical tradition's ideas of Hell. Its narrative consists essentially of the repetitive formula of describing sufferers, followed by an explanation of their sins. It is little more than an explanation of the physical manifestation of theological principles tacked onto a crude narrative. Though Augustine dismissed the *Apocalypse* as a manifest falsehood, since in describing Hell it went beyond what man could know of the Divine, such objections had little power for the many who did want to know the literal conditions of Hell and who needed more than the vague intimations of description found in the Bible (see Augustine, *Homilies* 8.98).

Indeed, the popularity of narratives such as these increasingly prompted theologians to consider the character of Hell, given that they had little ability to control such narratives without providing their own. Saint Thomas Aquinas in the mid-13th century offered an acceptable answer to this problem, positing a multi-layered Hell. Hell itself contained sinners; outside, one circle of limbo held unbaptised children and another held the Old Testament Fathers, before Christ allowed their entrance into Heaven (Aquinas 69). Dante's *Inferno*, completed shortly after Aquinas' writing, should be understood within a similar scholastic tradition. The *Inferno* sought simply to resolve the many tensions opened up between the Bible's conflicting notions of Hell and its place in the broader Classical tradition. It literalises the principle of divine justice, offering a systemisation unseen before. Invisible earthly sins are made manifest and sorted according to their severity. Dante's *Inferno* is its own book of revelation, uncovering in precise detail what John of

Patmos' *Revelation* left unclear. Indeed, where *Revelation* is often unintelligible *sans* allegorical interpretation, Dante's literal narrative is self-contained and coherent independent of any allegorical reading, being the inheritor of a long tradition of attempts to realise theological principles in human terms. It should be read not just as a struggle to reconcile the Classical corpus with Christian theology, but as an attempt to render coherent a diverse and often internally contradictory body of Christian thought related to the existence, nature and the knowability of Hell itself.

To conclude, the tradition from which the *Inferno* springs is markedly extra-Biblical. While the Vulgate Bible provided the basis for its idea of Hell, by combining several notions of the underworld into one, it also opened up many of the problems that Dante's *Inferno*, and all of its precedents, set out to solve. While the incorporation of Classical sources into Dante's Hell seems at first to be the most innovative aspect of the poem, in reality Dante's attempt reintroduces the Classical influence to a Hell already incorporating aspects of the Greek Hades alongside Hebrew concepts, though in a much more deeply integrated manner. The terrifying aspect of the Hebrew 'Gehenna' was the promise of certain yet unknowable oblivion. The New Testament's emergent notion of an eternal Hell, reinforced by Jerome's translations, was an extension of Hades' temporal duration mixed with Gehenna's flames, and thus a substantial reenvisioning of the Underworld – but one demanding explication. Like air into a vacuum, apocryphal explanations proliferated, and it is firmly within these traditions that Dante rests, as much as with Virgil and the Classics.

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