Dante Alighieri

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Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) was an Italian poet and politician most famous for his *Divine Comedy* (c. 1319) where he descends through Hell, climbs Purgatory, and arrives at the illumination of Paradise. **Dante** meets many historical characters along the way, including his guide, the **Roman** poet **Virgil** (70-19 BCE). It is considered one of the greatest works of **medieval literature**.

An innovative poet, Dante's work became a bridge between medieval and Renaissance **Europe** as the focus of art and thought shifted from religious affairs to those of humanity. Active in politics in his home **city** of Florence, he was eventually exiled for his views against what he saw as the abuse of power and corruption of the popes. Another of Dante's lasting contributions to Italian **culture** was his promotion of the Tuscan dialect, which ultimately became the standard for the Italian language.

Political Life

Dante Alighieri was born in Florence in 1265, the son of a moderately wealthy landowner. His mother died when he was just seven years old and his father, when he was a teenager. As a young knight, Dante actively participated in the 1289 **Battle** of Campaldino between the rival **cities** of Florence and Arezzo and their respective allies. The two sides in this battle were divided over their support for either the Pope (the Guelphs) or the Holy **Roman Emperor** (the Ghibellines), a rivalry that would cause a chasm in Florentine politics that lasted over half a century.

Back in Florence, Dante worked as a municipal official and was involved in politics between c. 1295 and 1302. In 1300 he was elected to the prestigious position of prior of the city (one of seven). Contrary to the government of Florence, Dante wanted to see his city free from papal interference, which he saw as a morally corrupt institution. He was further disillusioned with **Rome** following the Pope's enforced exile to Avignon in 1309. Dante began to support, instead, the ambitions of the Holy Roman Emperor, although his political allegiance shifted depending on circumstances. Dante nurtured hopes that the **Holy Roman Empire** would restore Christian order to Europe. In this, he was hopelessly wrong, but he did at least correctly predict that the bickering between the different Italian city-states would only lead to the downfall of all.

Dante was effectively exiled for his political views in January 1302. As the translator D. L. Sayers notes in her introduction to *Hell*, part I of the *Divine Comedy*, Dante had "three gifts hampering to the career of the practical politician: an unaccommodating temper, a blistering tongue, and an indecent superfluity of brains" (xxxii). Dante was duly charged with massive corruption by officials belonging to a rival political faction. The charges were fake but the sentence was real enough: to be burnt at the stake. Understandably, Dante, then on his way back from Rome, chose to avoid Florence. Never settling in any one city thereafter, Dante first went to **Verona**, then moved around central and northern **Italy**. Meanwhile, Dante's wife Gemma Donati and their three sons and daughter remained in Florence. It was during this wandering exile that he wrote his masterpiece, the *Divine Comedy*. Dante never did return home, and he died of malaria in Ravenna on 13 September 1321.

Prose Works

Dante's written works are a heady mix of philosophy, politics, and literature. They show in their panoramic inclusion of many fields of knowledge such as classicism and biblical studies, an influence from his one-time mentor Brunetto Latini (c. 1220-1294), the celebrated Florentine scholar and statesman. Dante wrote political treatises like *Monarchy* (*De Monarchia*, c. 1313), which speculated on the nature of God, and for this, he was labeled a heretic by some. *Monarchy*

criticized the corruption and immorality in the Papacy and proposed that a secular imperial power should govern the world, which would then witness a new spiritual age. Dante, himself a devout Christian, quoted the **Bible** in support of his belief that the Pope should have nothing to do with government and so had no power to choose who would be emperor of the Holy **Roman Empire**. As **Jesus Christ** himself had said in the scriptures, "my kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). The Pope was the spiritual leader of the **medieval Church** but was not, said Dante, the head of an **empire**.

The Divine Comedy

Dante's greatest contribution to medieval literature was his *Divine Comedy* (*La divina commedia*) which was written between 1304 and 1319 but not printed widely until 1472. The name 'comedy' derives from the label then used for a genre where works have a positive ending (or in this case not a negative one, at least). 'Divine' was added to the title in the mid-16th century because of the high esteem which the work continued to command. The epic poem is divided into three parts or *canzoni*: Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise (*Inferno*, *Purgatorio,* and *Paradiso*). Each part is comprised of 33 *canti* or episodes, and there is one introductory *canto*, bringing the total to a perfect 100. Each of the 14,233 lines therein consists of precisely eleven syllables and the rhyme follows the following pattern over each group of three lines: aba, bcb, cdc, etc. The structure of the work alone is a remarkable creation of symmetrical poetic **architecture**.

Dante is himself the central character of his work as he embarks on a "journey through a civic Hell, a rural, mountainous Purgatory, and a mystical astral Paradise" (Hutchinson, 122). The story is set in 1300 at **Easter** time, and Dante describes the characters he meets along the way on his pilgrimage, usually real historical people, and their deeds when alive.

And now the woeful sounds of actual pain
begin to break upon mine ears; I now

am come to where much wailing smiteth me.
I reached a region silent of all light,
which bellows as the sea doth in a storm,
if lashed and beaten by opposing winds.
The infernal hurricane, which never stops,
carries the spirits onward with its sweep,
and, as it whirls and smites them, gives them pain.
Whene'er they come before the shattered rock,
there lamentations, moans and shrieks are heard;
there, cursing, they blaspheme the Power Divine.
I understood that to this kind of pain
are doomed those carnal sinners, who subject
their reason to their sensual appetite.
(*Hell* V, 53)

Inferno and *Purgatorio* both contain criticism of what Dante saw as the corruption of papal authority, indeed, several popes find themselves in Dante's version of Hell, accused of being shepherds who have favored gold over their flocks. Down there in the pit with the popes are clergy who sold ecclesiastical positions and privileges for personal profit.

Hell

Dante's guide through the various levels of Hell is the Roman author Virgil, chosen perhaps because he represents classical reason and because he, too, foresaw the rise of Rome, a blossoming that Dante hoped to see happen in Europe under the Holy Roman Empire. Also finding themselves in the quagmires of *Inferno* are, of course, sinners of all kinds, and, besides popes, more expected villains like Cain, the first murderer, and **the assassins** of **Julius Caesar** (c. 100-44 BCE). There is even a delicious description of a huge Satan with his six eyes and three mouths, gorging on **Judas Iscariot**'s head.

Ah, Italy, thou slave, thou inn of woe,
ship without pilot in a mighty storm,
not queen of provinces, but house of shame!
(*Purgatory* VI, 69)

Purgatory

Dante moves on to Purgatory, the Christian waiting room of the afterlife, where those not evil enough to be detained in Hell nurture hope of one day reaching Heaven. Here, Dante the character begins his process of spiritual rehabilitation while Dante the writer continues to show a breathtaking conceit in placing his villains and his heroes where he thinks they belong according to their deeds in this life. It is a ruthless attack on Dante's political rivals and the poor political and moral health of Italy at the time of **writing**. However, in the end, it does not really matter if Dante's assessments are accurate, the point of this section is really for the reader to more clearly identify the consequences in eternity of one's actions in this life. The condemnation of real people in a fictional tale certainly adds to the power of Dante's message but it was a strategy not without its consequences. The banker Reginaldo Scrovegni of Padua, for example, was a notorious moneylender, and he is mentioned by Dante as the worst example of the sin of usury. This unflattering appearance perhaps led Reginaldo's son Enrico to build the Scrovegni chapel and have **Giotto** (b. 1267 or 1277 - d. 1337) decorate its interior as a sort of penance.

Before me now, with wings outspread, appeared
the lovely image, which in sweet fruition
those joyous interwoven spirits made.
Each one of them a little ruby seemed,
wherein a ray of sunlight burned so brightly,
that it was mirrored back into mine eyes.
(*Paradise* XIX, 217)

Paradise

Finally climbing to the peak of Purgatory, Dante reaches the end of his journey of illumination by finding himself in Paradise, where he is now guided by his lost-love Beatrice. In this section, Dante speculates on the physical aspects of heaven and **muses** on history, theology, and cosmology. Heaven is full of light, swirling orbs, and sparkling jewels. Ultimately, Paradise is a place of hope as Dante reminds his reader of the point of the whole poem: that he or she, too, will reach this lovely place, if only they embrace 'the Love that moves the sun and other stars'.

The *Divine Comedy* was immediately popular as hundreds of manuscript copies were made and distributed across Europe. There were many commentaries written on it, and the work was praised and promoted in public lectures by such literary luminaries as **Giovanni Boccaccio** (1313-1375) and **Petrarch** (1304-1374). In the end, the *Divine Comedy* became inseparable from the author and was simply known as *Il Dante*. Another boost to its popularity came around 1472 when it was printed for the first time. The success continued, and by 1600, 50 editions had been printed.

Legacy: the Renaissance & Beyond

The printed revival of Dante's work led to him becoming known as the 'first Renaissance poet', even if there was not really very much connection between the medieval Florentine's writings and those of 15th- and 16th-century authors.

Today, the *Divine Comedy* continues to be studied at colleges and universities worldwide and continues, too, to perplex scholars with its breadth of language and depth of themes and characters. As the historian M. Wyatt states, it is "a poem that resists classification in its employment of classical, medieval, and proto-Renaissance literary conventions in a wide variety of linguistic registers" (4). Perhaps here lies the key to the continuing fascination of Dante and his work.

Question: "Is The Divine Comedy / Dante's Inferno a biblically accurate description of Heaven and Hell?"

Answer: Written by Dante Alighieri between 1308 and 1321, *The Divine Comedy* is widely considered the central epic poem of Italian literature. A brilliantly written allegory, filled with symbolism and pathos, it is certainly one of the classics of all time. The poem is written in the first person as Dante describes his imaginative journey through the three realms of the dead: *Inferno* (hell); *Purgatorio* (Purgatory); and *Paradiso* (heaven).

The philosophy of the poem is a mixture of the Bible, Roman Catholicism, mythology, and medieval tradition. Where Dante draws on his knowledge of the Bible, the poem is truthful and insightful. Where he draws on the other sources, the poem departs from truth.

One extra-biblical source Dante drew upon was Islamic tradition (*Hadiths*) as depicted in Muhammed's "Night Journey." According to one scholar, Islamic eschatology has exercised "an extraordinary influence on Chinese and Christian thought. Among numerous popular eschatological works written by Christians, Dante's *Divina Commedia* is an example of Islamic influence" (*Islam* by Solomon Nigosian, Crucible, 1987, page 152).

In fairness to Dante, however, it should be noted that his work is intended to be literary, not theological. It does reflect a deep yearning to understand the mysteries of life and death and, as such, has generated tremendous interest over the centuries, remaining extremely popular even today.

When comparing the poem to the Bible, many differences surface. Apparent immediately is the third of the work devoted to Purgatory, a doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church having no foundation in the Bible. In Dante's poem, the Roman poet Virgil guides Dante through the seven terraces of Purgatory. These correspond to the seven deadly sins, with each terrace purging a particular sin until the sinner has corrected the nature within himself that caused him to commit that sin. After the sinner has been "purged" of all sin, he is enabled to proceed at some point to heaven. Aside from the fact that Purgatory is an unbiblical doctrine, the idea that sinners have another chance for salvation after death is in direct contradiction to the Bible. Scripture is clear that we are to "seek the Lord while He may be found" (Isaiah 55:6) and that once we die, we are destined to judgment (Hebrews 9:27). Judgment is based on our earthly lives, not on anything we do after we die. There will be no second chance for salvation beyond this life. As long as a person is alive, he has a second, third, fourth, fifth, etc., chance to accept Christ and be saved (John 3:16; Romans 10:9–10; Acts 16:31). Furthermore, the idea that a sinner can "correct" his own nature, either before or after death, is contrary to biblical revelation, which says that only Christ can overcome the sin nature and impart to believers a completely new nature (2 Corinthians 5:17).

In the other two parts of *The Divine Comedy*, Dante imagines various levels of hell and heaven. He describes the Inferno in great detail, vividly describing the torments and agonies of hell; these descriptions, however, do not come from the Bible. Some come from Islamic tradition.

"The Qur'anic basis for this account is Qur'an 17:1, and Muslims commemorate annually 'the night of ascension' (*lailat al-miraj*) on the 26th of Rajab—the seventh month of the Islamic calendar. It is assumed that the general plot as well as the many small details of Dante's *Divine Comedy* reflect a fanciful treatment of this Islamic theme" (*op. cit.*, p128).

Some have speculated that perhaps the terrible images of the *Inferno* spring from Dante's doubt about his own salvation. In any case, the major differences between the *Inferno* and the Bible's depiction of hell are these:

1. Levels of hell. Dante describes hell as comprised of nine concentric circles, representing an increase of wickedness, where sinners are punished in a fashion befitting their crimes. The Bible does suggest different degrees of punishment in hell in Luke 12:47–48. However, it says nothing of concentric circles or varying depths in hell.

2. Different types of punishment. Dante's vision of hell involved such eternal punishments as souls tormented by biting insects, wallowing in mire, immersed in boiling blood, being lashed with whips. Lesser punishments involve having heads on backwards, chasing unreachable goals for eternity, and walking endlessly in circles. The Bible, however, speaks of hell as a place of "outer darkness" where there will be "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 8:12; 22:13). Whatever punishment awaits the unrepentant sinner in hell, it is no doubt worse than even Dante could imagine.

The final section of the poem, *Paradiso*, is Dante's vision of heaven. Here Dante is guided through nine spheres, again in a concentric pattern, each level coming closer to the presence of God. Dante's heaven is depicted as having souls in a hierarchy of spiritual development, based at least in part on their human ability to love God. Here are nine levels of people who have attained, by their own efforts, the sphere in which they now reside. The Bible, however, is clear that no amount of good works can earn heaven; only faith in the shed blood of Christ on the cross and the righteousness of Christ imputed to us can save us and destine us for heaven (Matthew 26:28; 2 Corinthians 5:21). In addition, the idea that we must work our way through ascending realms of heaven to approach God is foreign to the Scriptures. Heaven will be a place of unbroken fellowship with God, where we will serve Him and "see His face" (Revelation 22:3–4). All believers will forever enjoy the pleasure of God's company, made possible by faith in His Son.

Throughout *The Divine Comedy*, the theme of salvation by man's works is prevalent. Purgatory is seen as a place where sins are purged through the sinner's efforts, and heaven has differing levels of rewards for works done in life. Even in the afterlife, Dante sees man as continually working and striving for reward and relief from punishment. But the Bible tells us that heaven is a place of rest from striving, not a continuation of it. The apostle John writes, "Then I heard a voice from heaven say, 'Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.' 'Yes,' says the Spirit, 'they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them.'" Believers who live and die in Christ are saved by faith alone, and the very faith that gets us to heaven is His (Hebrews 12:2), as are the works we do in that faith (Ephesians 2:10). *The Divine Comedy* may be of interest to Christians as a literary work, but the Bible alone is our infallible guide for faith and life and is the only source of eternal truth.

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