

Climbing the Mountain of the Beatitudes

By Peter S. Hawkins | Volume 4.2 Fall 2018

When Dante's writings are considered as a whole, the Christian Scriptures turn out to be the source of more reference and allusion than any other work. By one count, the poet has a total of 575 citations from the Bible compared to his reliance on the near-contenders Aristotle (395) and Virgil (192).[1] Calculations of this sort, however, cannot begin to suggest the extraordinary degree to which Dante absorbed the world of Scripture and made it his own. This is most notable in the *Commedia*, where the Old and New Testaments, either in Latin or in vernacular translation, so permeate his language as almost to become one with it. Sometimes he quotes the Bible openly or draws attention to its relevance; more often, he allows its presence to go unannounced, relying on the reader to catch the biblical reference and make something of it.[2]

Rather than being a penitentiary . . . purgatory is variously shown to be a hospital for the healing of brokenness, a school for the learning of truth, an incubator where worms grow up to be butterflies, a conservatory where soloists become a chorus and speakers develop a use for "we" and "our" in addition to "I" and "mine."

Given Dante's strong dependence on classical sources in the *Inferno*, along with the rejection of God exemplified among those who have "lost the good of the intellect" (INF 3.18), it should come as no surprise that hell is the least overtly biblical realm of the *Commedia's* afterlife. Nor is it difficult to see why in *Paradiso* biblical allusion is more common than citation, given that the blessed are so completely "in-Godded" (*Paradiso* 4.28) as to pass beyond the mediation of the Scriptures and enter into the reality they point toward.[3] Where the Bible plays its most explicit role is in the middle space of the *Purgatorio*, with its thirty direct citations and roughly forty allusions. In this realm of time and transformation, the penitent souls (unlike either the damned or the blessed) have not yet reached their eternal destination. They remain *in via*, needing guidance and instruction, prayer and praise, a balance of penitential pain and restorative, renewing worship. They are all about change. Scripture informs the entire process of their becoming born-again.

The presence of the Beatitudes on each of the seven terraces of the *Purgatorio* provides a perfect example of how Scripture makes a contribution to the poet's hundred-canto script. But before looking at the way they function in the process of purgation, it is important to have in mind Dante's larger project in the second canticle—his startling transformation of what the medieval church imagined as a terrible (if temporary) underground hell located somewhere within the earth by turning it into a soaring mountain bathed in sun- or starlight, full of music and art, liturgy and pageant. According to the *Commedia*, the mountain formed an island at the antipodes of the inhabited earth, which had Jerusalem at its center. It was crowned by the Garden of Eden, whose whereabouts was much contested in the Middle Ages but was here "resolved" by poetic fiat.

Dante not only gives the middle kingdom a vivid geographical specificity but relates it both to hell, its

mirror image, and to heaven, its sequel. He divides his mountain into three discrete sections, the first of which is an ante-purgatory waiting room. At the base of the mountain he gathers souls not yet ready to begin the hard climb: those who repented only in the last desperate moment of their lives; those who, through sloth, barely repented at all; and those who were so preoccupied with worldly governance that they neglected to prepare themselves for the life to come.

The seven terraces, each devoted to one of the *vizi capitali*, constitute purgatory proper: pride, envy, wrath, acedia or sloth, avarice, gluttony, lust. The most grievous vices are dealt with first, on the bottom terraces—a reversal of the order of sins punished in the *Inferno*, which are ranged from least to most culpable. The terraces themselves lie just inside a massive gateway, with an angel guardian and elaborate entry rite that involves the inscription on the pilgrim's forehead of seven *Ps*. Each is a sign of the residue of a *peccatum* that penance is meant to erase—the gradual cleansing of the penitents who present themselves as “marked men.” Once within the gate, repentance begins in earnest with painful self-confrontation and arduous acts of contrition. Yet as the poet counsels his readers on the first of the terraces, the whole point of the process is not pain but gain: “Don't dwell upon the form of punishment,” he says, “consider what comes after that” (10.109-110).

The “that” on which we are not meant to dwell is a variety of penitential ordeals: the heavy burdens borne on the shoulders of the proud (cantos 10-12), the sewn-up eyes of the envious (13-14), the corridor of purifying fire through which the lustful make their way in (astonishingly, equal!) groups of what we would now call heterosexuals and homosexuals (26). To see each penance enacted, moreover, is to foresee its eventual termination. The proud will cast off their dead weights; the blinded envious will see; the lustful will step out of the purifying fire and into the Edenic Garden that blooms, verdant and welcoming, on the other side of the terrace's “cammino acceso” (burning road, 26.28).

Rather than being a penitentiary, in other words, purgatory is variously shown to be a hospital for the healing of brokenness, a school for the learning of truth, an incubator where worms grow up to be butterflies, a conservatory where soloists become a chorus and speakers develop a use for “we” and “our” in addition to “I” and “mine.” Unlike the *Inferno*, where punishment is eternal, in Purgatory lives are renovated, rewritten for eternity. Vices are not so much expunged as cured. The virtues, therefore, constitute a recovered health.

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The Beatitudes come into play at the very end of the soul's cure on each terrace once the transformed penitent is both ready to leave behind one vice in order to tackle another and, more importantly, ready to acquire yet another virtue as a result of that struggle.

When each successive stage of purgation is completed, the angel who guards the terminus on each of the terraces uses a wing to brush away one of the seven *peccati* inscribed on the penitent's forehead. The proud will become humble, the envious generous, the wrathful gentle. As they move up the mountain they come closer to a knowledge of God's kingdom as revealed by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:1-12 (see Luke's version in Luke 6: 20-38): Blessed are the poor in spirit, the meek, those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, the peacemakers.

Jesus's Sermon is in many ways at odds with the realities that what we daily observe firsthand, where the meek, for instance, typically inherit nothing. It bears out the truth of what Jesus tells Pilate in the Gospel of John: his kingdom "is not of this world" (18:36). What he points to, however, is another world order than our own, one perhaps experienced to some extent on earth (or in paradox) but known fully and perfectly only in heaven, where Mary, for instance, is at once "umile e alta," humble *and* exalted (*Par.* 33.2).

Exiting from each terrace, souls receive a particular beatitude that is appropriate to their new level of understanding. The proud, who were rich in self-regard, learn the freedom that comes with being "poor in spirit" (Matt. 5: 3); the envious become capable of mercy and compassion. The verse of Scripture they hear in song, therefore, signals indirectly the capital vice that has been purged—painfully dislodged sometimes over centuries, but finally erased by the easy brush of angelic feathers. But the beatitude not only speaks to the past; it also heralds a new reality, a future in glory. Vice has been turned into the inclination toward virtue. Step by step along the ascending terraces the penitents anticipate the blessedness that awaits them perfectly in the City of God.

In all cases but one, the beatitudes are indicated by a single Latin word or catchphrase that recalls the entire saying in the Vulgate. In effect, the listener (or reader) supplies the whole verse, which is otherwise recalled only in part. The souls, therefore, complete what the angel pronounces: they are becoming the fulfilled promise of the beatitude. After the purgation of pride, for instance, Dante notes that "'*beati pauperes spiritu*' was sung so sweetly as no words could tell" (*Purg.* 12. 110-111). Only the initial phrase of the beatitude is given, but in keeping with the common liturgical practice of versicle and response, the proclamation, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," effectively elicits the remainder of the verse: "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." All responses are left unvoiced on the mountain because each is embodied in the person of the penitent now entering into a new stage of beatitude. The angel sings the versicle, the renewed penitent *is* the response.

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Dante offers the simple citation of a word or phrase of the Latin beatitude on both the first terrace (the poor in spirit, "'*beati pauperes spiritu*' was sung so sweetly") and the final seventh (the pure in heart, "he sang, '*beati mundo corde*,' with a voice more radiant than ours" 27.8). Otherwise, he varies his practice. Sometimes Vulgate quotation gradually dissolves into the vernacular, as on the terrace of sloth when "the angel moved his feathers and fanned us, declaring, '*Qui lugent*' to be blessed, for they shall have their souls possessed of consolation" (19. 49-51). Elsewhere Latin is dropped entirely, as on the terrace of gluttony, where the angel does not so much translate the Vulgate's "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness" as paraphrase it almost beyond recognition: "And then I heard, 'Blessed are those whom grace/ illumines so, that in their breasts, the love of taste/ does not awake too much desire -/whose hungering is always in just measure'" (24. 151-54).

The biblical beatitudes are so lapidary in form, not to mention familiar to Christians, that one might think that Dante could have given a Latin *incipit* in the received language of the Church and simply left it at that. Instead, he chose to translate the Scripture into his poem's vernacular speech, and bring it into his *terza rima* rhyme scheme. He decided not only to translate but to expand and interpret—all in

order to bring the Word of God into his own words. Of course, what we “hear” on the terraces is biblical appropriation voiced by angels, who offer the kind of elaboration of sacred text routinely given by ordained preachers speaking Italian from the pulpit (which is no doubt how Dante learned the practice in the first place). Nonetheless, Alighieri is responsible for everything on the page: all the voices ultimately are his. It would be wrong to accuse him of presumption in acting as if he could improve upon scripture by reworking it as extensively as he does throughout the *Commedia*. And yet, to offer him the caveat of a beatitude, blessed is the poet whose love of his own genius does not kindle pride, and whose hunger for artistic brilliance goes only so far as is just.



Peter Hawkins’ work has long centered on Dante in essays, chapters, and books: *Dante’s Testaments*, *Dante: A Brief History*, *The Poets’ Dante: Twentieth-Century Reflections*, and *Undiscovered Country: Imagining the World to Come*. He has also published on American fiction (*The Language of Grace*, *The Bible in the American Short Story*), and with Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg edited volumes on biblical reception (*Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs*, *From the Margins: Women of the Hebrew Bible and Their Afterlives*).

Further Reading

Stanley Benfell, “*Una nuova legge: The Beatitudes in the Purgatorio*,” *The Biblical Dante* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 107-142.

Patrick Boyde, *Human Vices and Human Worth in Dante’s ‘Comedy,’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 108-111.

Marc Cogan, *The Design in the Wax: The Structure of the ‘Divine Comedy’ and its Meaning* (Notre Dame, IND: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), esp. 94-96 and 124-126.

Hawkins, Peter S. *Dante’s Testaments: Essays in Scriptural Imagination* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 1999).

_____. “Handling Sin: The Religion of the Mountain,” *Sin in Medieval and Early Modern Culture: The Tradition of the Seven Deadly Sins*, eds. Richard Newhauser and Susan J. Ridyard (Rochester, NY: Boydell and Brewer, 2012), 223-238.

Leonardi, Anna Chiavacci. “Le beatudini e la struttura poetica del *Purgatorio*,” *Giornale Storico della Letteratura Italiana* 161 (1984): 1-29

Notes

[1] Aldo Manetti, “Dante e la Bibbia,” *Bollino della Civica Biblioteca* (Bergamo: Studi di storia, arte e letteratura, 1984), 122.

[2] See Peter S. Hawkins, “Old and New Parchments,” *Dante’s Testaments. Essays in Scriptural Imagination* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 1999), 36-53.

[3] Citations of the poem are based on Allen Mandelbaum's translation of the *Commedia* (1980–82) available online at <http://www.worldofdante.org>.

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