

A Medieval Christian View of Islam: Dante's Encounter with Mohammed in *Inferno* XXVIII

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Dante's attitude towards Islam has been a highly controversial topic ever since Miguel Asín Palacios in 1919 shocked the world of Dante scholars and Dante lovers with his thesis that Dante borrowed the central idea, as well as numerous details, of his *Commedia* from the Islamic tradition of the *Al-mirag*, that is, of Mohammed's first-person narrative of his journey through Hell and Paradise. The suggestion that Dante knew this tradition was not entirely new. Yet it was not an occasional and vague knowledge based on passing references and brief summaries in Latin sources that Asín claimed to prove for Dante, but a profound and perhaps even direct familiarity with the Arabic tradition, and an attitude of admiration which, according to Asín, led Dante to conceive his *Commedia* as an adoption and Christian response to the Islamic model. Critical reactions to this thesis were often biased by religious, cultural and even nationalistic prejudice, but they nevertheless touched upon several weak points of Asín's demonstration, and the most obvious problem was, of course, the question how Dante could possibly have gained such a detailed knowledge of the Arabic tradition. This question was answered, at least in part, in 1949, when Enrico Cerulli and José Muñoz Sendino independently from each other published the *Livre de l'eschiele Mahomet* or *Liber scalae Mahomet*, giving the French and Latin translations of one of the most detailed Arabic accounts of Mohammed's Ascent. The author who wrote these translations in 1264 was Bonaventura da Siena, an Italian notary at the Castilian court of Alfonso el Sabio, and he did not translate them directly from Arabic, but had at his disposition an earlier Castilian version supplied by a Jewish physician Abraham. These translations from Alfonso el Sabio's court, although they never gained much diffusion, provided at least a possible link of textual transmission and could have served as a source for many of the parallels which Asín had observed by comparing Dante's *Commedia* directly with Arabic sources. Especially Cerulli's thorough research of the diffusion and reception of these translations, and his own willingness to accept the intertextual evidence in Dante's *Commedia* as still inconclusive, contributed considerably to take some of the edge off the debate. But the philological question of Dante's textual dependence is still open to investigation, and also the understanding of his mental attitude towards Islam continues to be controversial.

Notwithstanding the broad public attention which the whole debate has attracted, there has always been a certain neglect in the treatment of the specific episode in the *Inferno* where Dante encounters Mohammed in Hell. Asín and his followers probably had reasons to regard this episode as being only of marginal interest, because it is by no means appropriate to prove Dante's sympathies for Mohammed or for the Islamic world in general. Whereas for Asín's critics this episode required but a passing glance to make it clear that Dante severely condemns or even despises Mohammed and, as one may infer, his religion. Perhaps those commentators who were not primarily concerned with sustaining or with denying Dante's indebtedness to Islamic sources

should have risked more than a passing glance and should have been able to offer some relevant insights. But the on first sight cruel and emphatically vulgar elements of this episode and of the whole canto somehow have failed to attract much scholarly interest.

In the following, I will try to improve our understanding of the episode in question, by demonstrating how it relates to some previously unnoticed doctrinal and biblical subtexts. My demonstration will have to be very selective, but I hope it will help us to understand that Dante was far from sharing the attitude of emotional hatred coupled with ignorance, which many commentators have found expressed in this episode and taken to be the typical medieval Christian attitude. On the other hand, it should also help to clarify that Dante was equally far from the kind of indulgence or even admiration which Asín and some of his followers postulate. What we are dealing with is in fact one of the most deeply learned and most carefully designed episodes in the *Commedia*, if not in medieval literature in general, and while it is at the same time firm and unambiguous in its critical attitude towards the historical topic it treats, it nevertheless extends this critical attitude also to its reader and requires learning, thought and -- maybe most important -- critical insight into his own prejudice from him.

2

The encounter with Mohammed takes place in the eighth circle of Hell, the circle of fraud as opposed to treachery. Mohammed is punished in the ninth ditch of this circle, among the "seminator di scandalo e di scisma", sowers of religious, political and familial discord who are 'split' or mutilated by a devil's sword. As Mohammed explains to Dante-pilgrim, the devil is standing somewhere in the background at a fixed point of the circular ditch, thrusting with his sword at the damned who have to pass in front of him. The wounds which they receive heal while the damned proceed on their way, but only to be stricken again when the damned in the end have to face the devil again. Dante-pilgrim himself, standing first on the rim of the bolgia and then crossing it on one of the small bridges, views only a limited section of the whole scenery. He neither sees the devil at work nor does he see the miraculous healing of the wounds, but he sees, and the narrator reports with precise details, 'the blood and the wounds' of the damned.

In this scene, Mohammed is the first in a series of six who present themselves or are presented with their individual names and the individual form of their bodily mutilations. Compared with a damaged cask which has lost a part of its bottom, he is described as split or 'burst' from the chin down to his anus, "rotto dal mento infin dove si trulla", with the inner organs transpiercing through this wound: the bowels (mingugia), the organs of the thorax summed up as "la corata", and the stomach, circumscribed and highlighted in its digestive function as "il tristo sacco / che merda fa di quel che si trangugia". At the sight of the unknown visitor who is staring down to him from the rim of the valley, Mohammed tears open his split breast with his own hands, and addresses the first of two speeches to Dante. In this speech he presents himself by his name, lamenting his crippled state, and also points briefly to his cousin and successor Ali, the founder of the Shiites, who is cleft in his face from his chin upwards to his forelock and is running, while weeping with this cleft face, in front of Mohammed through the bolgia. Mohammed explains the general arrangement of the punishment in this place, and suggests also a specific sense of this punishment, by associating it as a bodily 'splitting' with the 'splitting' of community punished here. At the end of his speech he asks Dante-pilgrim to introduce himself, suspecting him to be another damned soul who is idly lingering on the rim of this bolgia in order to delay the beginning of his own punishment in a deeper place of Hell. The reply is given not by Dante-pilgrim himself, but by Vergil, who presents his protégé -- without revealing his name -- as a living and innocent man who has been elected to be guided by himself, Vergil, through the circles of Hell in order to gain the "esperienza piena" of this realm. At these words, more than hundred of the damned stand still and stare unbelievably at Dante-pilgrim who, for a short

passing moment, brings them back in contact with life on earth. And from this point on, their attention, which in Mohammed's first speech still was entirely focused on the Other World, is directed to things in the past or future history of This World.

Mohammed, standing with his foot already lifted to turn away, halts his step and addresses Dante-pilgrim once more, before he finally sets down his foot and departs. In this second speech he asks Dante to transmit a prophetic warning to the heretic Fra Dolcino, warning him to arm himself with supplies of food against a siege to be laid by a certain 'Novaresian', if he, Dolcino, should not want to follow him, Mohammed, soon into this bolgia. This prophecy anticipates events which took place several years after the fictive date of Dante's journey. In 1305, Fra Dolcino of Novara, leader of the pauperistic lay movement of the Apostle Brethren, began to gather his followers on mountains first in the diocese of Novara and then in the neighbouring diocese of Vercelli, to organize their military defence against the Inquisition and against the local episcopal and communal authorities. When Pope Clement V called a crusade against Dolcino in the summer of 1306, it still took the crusaders the whole of autumn and winter to besiege Dolcino, before the sect could finally be defeated and Dolcino himself captured and executed publicly in Vercelli. The identity of the 'Novaresian' prophesied by Mohammed as the victorious enemy of Dolcino is not clear, because it was not a Novaresian, but the bishop of Vercelli who took a leading part in the Crusade and in the siege in his diocese. However, the most likely candidate for an historical identification is the Dominican Inquisitor Emanuele Testa of Novara described by a later source as the local Inquisitor preaching the crusade and organizing it together with the bishop, and who in the end also sentenced Dolcino to death.

Unlike other sinners in this canto, Mohammed does not make any remarks about his or Ali's earlier life and does not relate any specific deed for which they are punished here. It has never been very clear what Dante knew about Mohammed's life, but counter to what many commentators state, we can safely rule out that Dante saw Mohammed as a popular legend depicted him: as a Christian cleric or even cardinal, who had first successfully preached and baptized the Saracens, but then became an apostate and founded his own religion with them, because he had been frustrated by the Roman Curia in his ambitions to the Papal See. Although Dante may have known this popular legend, the presence of Ali alone indicates that Dante was familiar with the more learned Latin tradition. With few exceptions most Latin sources describe Mohammed as an Arab who obtained his knowledge of biblical doctrine not as a member of the Church, but through Jewish and heretic Christian teachers. And within this tradition, Dante obviously depends on one of the not very many sources which could supply him also with informations about Ali, as for instance the widely circulated *Historia Orientalis* by Jacques de Vitry, or the doctrinally much better informed work *Contra legem latam sarazenorum* written by Dante's contemporary and Florentine compatriote Rinaldo da Monte di Croce. Sources of this kind present Ali as a relative of Mohammed, who after Mohammed's death caused, or participated in, the doctrinal and political conflicts over Mohammed's succession and then became responsible for the internal Islamic Schism between Shiites and Sunnites.

It has caused some consternation that Dante places Mohammed at this specific place of Hell, together with historically less important sowers of political and familial discord, and not in the sixth circle with the heretics and heresiarchs in their red-hot glowing tombs. For Asín this was a sign that Dante did not see Mohammed as a heretic, but that he condemned him only for the political and military conflicts which he had caused in the world. Asín even regarded this as an indulgence on the part of Dante, as "significant of Dante's sympathies for Arabic culture". But other commentators have justly pointed out that the punishment in a place deeper in hell implies, quite to the contrary, a more severe condemnation. And this more severe condemnation does not imply an exculpation from the less grave sin of heresy, because according to the general rule each soul is punished at the place of his (or her) gravest sin, by a punishment comprising also all his (or her) minor sins. It was commonly held by medieval Christian writers that Mohammed was a

heretic, and his religion a heresy like Arianism or Nestorianism, but even worse than them, yet not a heresy because Mohammed himself had been a Christian, as the popular legend portrayed him, but because he adopted and changed elements of Christian and biblical doctrine, and also because he did so under the influence of heretic Christian and Jewish teachers. There is nothing to indicate that Dante did not share this view. Quite to the contrary, as we shall see.

3

If allegory can be described, roughly, as a mode of textual presentation, where the things described in a text are arranged as signs of their own right, as things which by certain of their properties point to other, partially similar things, then the episode in question contains some more or less obvious elements of allegory, in so far as significant properties of the punishment refer to significant properties of the punished sin. Allegorical explanations of this punishment, which make relations between this punishment and the punished sin explicit, can be found mostly in early Dante commentaries of the 14th and 15th century, and I will give a brief summary of some of them.

The devil driving the sinners with his sword has been interpreted as a refiguration of the diabolical instigation to which the damned had succumbed in their lives, and which they had transmitted to their next by instigating discord. The devil's sword as instrument of the punishment was occasionally associated with the human tongue instigating discord, but more often it has been associated less metaphorically with the sword as the instrument of the wars and violent conflicts which the sinners had caused. Following Mohammed's own suggestion, the bodily 'splitting' or wounding uses to be related to the splitting of the 'body' of religious, political or familial community, and in Mohammed's own case the splitting of his body has been seen as referring to a splitting of humanity in general, or more specifically to a schism in the strict sense, that is, to a splitting of the Church, the mystical body of Christ. This more specific notion can be applied here in so far as Islam had separated from the Roman (and Byzantine) Church not only Pagan nations, but also the formerly Christian churches in Asia, Africa and in parts of Europe.

Particularly rich with detailed interpretations of Mohammed's punishment is the commentary Benvenuto da Imola's commentary, written in the second half of the 14th century. Benvenuto points out that the cleaving of Mohammed's body from the chin downwards necessarily splits the throat, organ of the voice which diffused Mohammed's doctrine and committed the religious schism. As to Mohammed's inner organs, Benvenuto explains that the circumscription of his stomach, albeit its vulgar phrasing, can be understood as referring metaphorically to the 'food of doctrine' swallowed by Mohammed but turned by him into repulsive faeces, an explanation which seems to be given with specific regard to the parts of biblical doctrine which Mohammed had incorporated into his Koran. Not in his explanation of Mohammed's punishment, but in his historical excursus, which is mainly based on the Golden Legend and on Jacques de Vitry, Benvenuto reproduces the common medieval view that Mohammed was a lascivious and adulterous person, who, in order to attract followers, permitted polygamy and other 'turpia' and promised that the just would enjoy sexual rewards in Paradise. In modern times, commentators have suggested that the hanging of Mohammed's bowels "tra le gambe", between the legs, might refer to these doctrines. But if such a reference were to be detected, one should rather follow the example of Benvenuto's interpretation of Mohammed's throat: because the splitting of the body 'from the chin' down to the anus necessarily not only splits the throat, but also the membrum virile and the testicles. And since we are at it: one of the accusations which medieval Christian authors brought forward against Mohammed was the reproach that he had permitted his followers to have unnatural sexual intercourse with their wives and concubines, encouraging thus a practice which allegedly also helped to spread sodomy among the Saracens. This accusation in fact would give a very precise sense to the bodily splitting "dove si trulla"., as a punishment inflicted to the receptive organ of unnatural intercourse.

The explanations reported or given so far are based on a more or less close reading of the description of Mohammed's punishment, on the one hand, and on some data regarding his historical person, as it used to be portrayed by medieval Christian authors, on the other. But they are not yet explanations requiring a specific knowledge in philosophy, theology or biblical exegesis, although some of the imagery which they apply -- as the notion of a schisma in corpore Christi --- derives from the Bible. Yet we know from Dante's explicit statements about his intended audience that he did not only expect a majority of readers still in need of doctrine and doctrinal guidance, but also a distinguished minority of 'happy few' already in possession of doctrine, because they had reached out early, like himself, for the 'bread of the angles', which means that they had acquired a specific mastery of theology and other sciences. It is their understanding what I am after. To approach it today may appear difficult or even presumptuous, but it is not impossible with the help of the sources on which Dante relied.

4

It means already a first step towards a different understanding if we simply try to determine the function of the organs affected by Mohammed's punishment: the "corata" in the thorax comprises organs responsible for the circulation of blood and for respiration; the stomach is sufficiently stressed in its nutritive and digestive functions; the bowels hanging between the legs are organs of excretion; and the same applies to the anus, stressed in this function. If we include those organs which are not mentioned explicitly, but are necessarily affected by the vertical bodily splitting, there is the throat, not only related to the articulation of the voice -- as Benvenuto interpretes it --, but at the same time also necessary for nutrition and respiration; and there are the genitals, necessary for procreation.

Within the Aristotelian system of the three faculties of the human soul, as discussed by Dante extensively in the *Convivio* and also in *De vulgari eloquentia*, all these organs and their functions are characteristic for the lowest faculty of the soul, the vegetative faculty, which is responsible for the maintenance of life -- nutrition, digestion, excretion, and so on -- and for the preservation of the species, that is, procreation. The specific appetites of the vegetative faculty are also manifest in Mohammed's message to Fra Dolcino, where he expresses his preoccupation with food and with the maintenance of life, when he suggests that Dolcino should 'arm' himself with food ("vivanda") to preserve his life in his fight against the Church. And in a certain sense, which will become more clear later, this message also exhibits Mohammed's desire to preserve his species, given that Fra Dolcino can be regarded as a brother in spirit of Mohammed, a heretic who raised the sword against the Church.

This interpretation, relating Mohammed to the vegetative faculty of the soul, is further confirmed by the composition of the entire canto, because all the sinners presented in this canto are carefully arranged in accordance with the Aristotelian hierarchy, with the exception of Ali, where the splitting of the face seems difficult to determine in its precise relation to this hierarchy. Mohammed and Ali are followed by three sowers of political discord, punished by perforation or truncation of organs which are once more -- but this time named explicitly in the text -- the throat as connected with the tongue, the nose, the ear, and the hands, and these organs, representing the gustative, olfactory, auditive and tactile senses and thus four of the five senses, can be related to the sensitive faculty. And the whole series is closed by the trobador Bertran de Born, sower of familial discord, who carries his severed head 'like a lantern' in his hand: clearly a reference to the intellectual and highest faculty, notwithstanding that the sword severing the head necessarily also cuts through the poet's throat. This simplifying schematic interpretation, which relates Mohammed to the vegetative faculty, the three sowers of political discord in the middle group to the sensitive faculty, and Bertran de Born, the poet and sower of familial discord to the rational faculty of the soul, is based only on the predominant and most obvious aspects of their

punishments, whereas a more thorough analysis would have to investigate how in each individual case also the two other faculties of the soul might be involved.

I have to leave aside the sense of this arrangement with regard to the other sinners, but want to point out its relevance for the understanding of Mohammed's punishment. Scholastic theologians discussing Islamic views of the Other World, in some cases were particularly concerned with refuting the belief that the just in Paradise enjoy unlimited food and drinking, have sexual intercourse with beautiful women and can generate as many sons with them as they desire. These corporal activities and joys were discussed in terms of Aristotelian terminology, in the form of questions whether the blessed in Paradise exercise their vegetative and sensitive faculties, and the answers were, of course, negative, stressing with regard to the vegetative functions the lack of necessity for nutrition and procreation, the incompatibility of corruptible food and corruptible sperm with eternal life, and the irresolvable problems which in a world without death unlimited procreation, or unlimited food with ensuing unlimited excretion, would create.

In the context of this scholastic discussion, it is obviously Mohammed's doctrine of the Other World as a doctrine based on untenable physical or bodily notions that Dante condemns when he shows him in Hell with a punishment uncovering or splitting organs of the vegetative faculty, stressing especially the organs of nutrition and excretion and -- if we are right to assume an implicit splitting of the genitals -- the procreative functions of the soul. This observation is of importance also for the identification of Dante's sources, because the scholastic discussion in question in its specific Aristotelian character was not particularly diffused, but can be found in several scholastic authors and also -- maybe most likely as a source for Dante -- in the aforementioned *Contra legem latam saracenorum* of Dante's compatriote Ricoldo da Monte di Croce.

5

We can take a next step towards a more learned understanding of Mohammed's punishment, if we also see how it is related to the death of Judas the traitor, as reported by Petrus in the Acts of the Apostles: "suspensus crepuit medius, et diffusa sunt omnia viscera eius" (*Act* 1:18), 'hanging, he burst open in the middle, and all his viscera were effused'. Like Judas, also Mohammed's body is 'burst', and burst 'in the middle'; and as in the case of Judas, the inner organs emerge through this bodily aperture. But while medieval representations of the death of Judas in figural arts usually confine the aperture of body to the belly below the thorax, in the case of Mohammed the splitting begins 'at the chin'. And while Judas is hanging with his head in a noose, in figural arts also hanging more specifically from a tree, Mohammed is standing on his feet -- at least on one foot - and walking on the ground of Hell. There is partial similarity, and also partial dissimilarity to be noted, of the very same kind which in allegorical exegesis used to constitute the relation between the signifying thing and the thing signified. Dante's adoption of the death of Judas in fact is more than only an adoption of a literary model, because it indicates a specific typological understanding of Mohammed's role in history, and at the same time it also takes into account the traditional exegesis of the death of Judas as a divine retribution for his sin. A useful summary of the medieval exegesis is given by Bede the Venerable, who takes up earlier patristic explanations, and whose own gloss became itself a standard one in the following centuries:

"And hanging he burst open in the middle: the demented traitor found himself a fitting punishment, because the knot of the noose brought death to the throat from which the treacherous voice had come. He also found a fitting place for his death, for he who had delivered the master of men and angels to death and therefore was hateful both to the heavens and the earth, died in in the middle of the air, to be associated with the spirits of the air, following the example of Achitophel and Absalom who had persecuted David. Fitting also was the way in which his death arrived, because the viscera which had

conceived the crime of treason burst and fell down to fly in the empty air. It was a punishment very similar to the death to which also Arius is said to have been condemned: Judas had conspired against the human nature of Christ, whereas Arius had tried to extinguish His divine nature, and so both who had lived void of sense also died with an empty belly."

["Et suspensus crepuit medius" (*Act* 1:18). Dignam sibi poenam traditor amens invenit, ut videlicet guttur quo vox proditionis exierat laquei nodus necaret. Dignum etiam locum interitus quaesivit, ut qui hominum angelorumque Dominum morti tradiderat coelo terraeque perosus, quasi aeris tantummodo spiritibus sociandus (cf. *Eph* 2:2), juxta exemplum Achitophel et Absalom qui regem David persecuti sunt, aeris medio periret (cf. *II Rg* 17:23, 18:9). Cui utique satis digno exitu mors ipsa successit, ut viscera quae dolum proditionis conceperant rupta caderent, et vacuas evolverentur in auras. Cujus simillima poenae mors Arium haeresiarcham damnasse refertur, ut quia ille humanitatem Christi, iste divinitatem exstinguere moliebatur, ambo sicut sensu inanes vixerant, sic quoque ventre vacui perirent.]

The key for the understanding of Dante's adoption is obviously, apart from the moral interpretation of this death as a punishment, the typological understanding of Judas as a prefiguration of future Christian heretics like Arius. As a related aspect not mentioned by Bede, but current in exegetical tradition, we have probably also to include the notion that Judas was a representative of the unbelieving Jews. Adopting the death of Judas for Mohammed's punishment in Hell, Dante characterizes Mohammed typologically as a continuator or successor of Jewish and Christian heresy, who, if we may see the logic of Bede's gloss at work, had denied the divinity of Christ, like Arius, and had brought destruction, if not to the human person of Christ as Judas had done, yet to the mystical body of Christ, the Church. It is not a simple equation of sins that is indicated here, because otherwise Mohammed would have to be punished in the last and deepest circle of Hell, together with Judas, but only an analogy of sins, and therefore punished in Dante's Hell with a punishment analogous to the one which the Bible had attested to be appropriate. To pursue and to confirm this interpretation further, it would again be necessary to analyse Mohammed's judaslike punishment in its context with the other punishments presented in this canto. Because the deaths of Achitophel and Absalom, which Bede, taking up a well established patristic tradition, explains as Old Testament prefigurations of the death of Judas, have served Dante in the closing episode of this canto as a similar point of reference for the punishment of Bertran de Born, so that Old Testament prefiguration and its fulfillment in the New Testament are purposefully juxtaposed -- though in temporally inverted order -- in the opening and in the closing episode of this canto. But within the given limits of this lecture, I have confine myself once more to the Mohammed episode.

6

The Aristotelian implications of Mohammed's punishment and also its biblical subtext in the death of Judas are primarily relevant for the understanding of Mohammed's bodily punishment, the 'poena sensus'. In a next and last step of interpretation I want to introduce another biblical subtext, the tale about the beggar Lazarus and the rich man in Hell, and this biblical subtext will also add some new aspects for the understanding of Mohammed's mental punishment, the 'poena damni'.

You are probably all familiar with the biblical tale in question (*Lc* 16:19-31), but for the following it will be helpful to refresh our memory (I cite the Douai version, because it is closest to the Latin Vulgate):

There was a certain rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine linen; and feasted sumptuously every day. And there was a certain beggar, named Lazarus, who lay at his gate, full of sores, Desiring to be filled with the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table, and no one did give him; moreover the dogs came, and licked his sores. And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom. And the rich man also died: and he was buried in hell. And lifting up his eyes when he was in torments, he saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom: And he cried, and said: Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, to cool my tongue: for I am tormented in this flame. And Abraham said to him: Son, remember that thou didst receive good things in thy lifetime, and likewise Lazareth evil things, but now he is comforted; and thou art tormented. And besides all this, between us and you, there is fixed a great chaos: so that they who would pass from hence to you, cannot, nor from thence come hither. And he said: Then, father, I beseech thee, that thou wouldst send him to my father's house, for I have five brethren, That he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torments. And Abraham said to him: They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them. But he said: No, father Abraham: but if one went to them from the dead, they will do penance. And he said to him: If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they believe, if one rise again from the dead.

[Homo quidam erat dives / et induebatur purpura et bysso / et epulabatur cotidie splendide (19) / et erat quidam mendicus nomine Lazarus / qui iacebat ad ianuam eius ulceribus plenus (20) / cupiens saturari de micis quae cadebant de mensa divitis / sed et canes veniebant et lingeabant ulcera eius (21) / factum est autem ut moreretur mendicus et portaretur ab angelis in sinum Abrahae / mortuus est autem et dives et sepultus est in inferno (22) / elevans oculos suos cum esset in tormentis / videbat Abraham a longe et Lazarum in sinu eius (23) / et ipse clamans dixit / pater Abraham miserere mei / et mitte Lazarum ut intingat extremum digiti sui in aqua / ut refrigeret linguam meam quia crucior in hac flamma (24) / et dixit illi Abraham / fili recordare quia recepisti bona in vita tua / et Lazarus similiter mala / nunc autem hic consolatur tu vero cruciaris (25) / et in his omnibus inter nos et vos chasma magnum firmatum est / ut hii qui volunt hinc transire ad vos non possint / neque inde huc transmeare (26) / et ait / rogo ergo te pater ut mittas eum in domum patris mei (27) / habeo enim quinque fratres ut testetur illis / ne et ipsi veniant in locum hunc tormentorum (28) / et ait illi Abraham / habent Mosen et prophetas audiant illos (29) / at ille dixit / non pater Abraham / sed si quis ex mortuis ierit ad eos paenitentiam agent (30) / ait autem illi / si Mosen et prophetas non audiunt / neque si quis ex mortuis resurrexerit credent (31)]

This tale, told by Jesus himself, was the most important biblical testimony of the punishments in Hell, and also of the state of the just souls in the Other World before the Descent of Christ. It was regarded not as a parable, to be understood only metaphorically, but as a true 'historia', because the names of Lazarus and Abraham are given, whereas the characters in biblical parables usually are nameless. This tale certified the punishment in Hell as beginning right after the death of man, not delayed to the day of the Last Judgement; it certified the bodily punishment in the fire of Hell, presenting this punishment as a counterpass, because the torments of the tongue were interpreted as a punishment for the abuse of food and also for the abuse of speech. This latter understanding may surprise us, but according to the Christian fathers, sumptuous feasting necessarily goes along with idle talk. In addition to the bodily punishment or 'poena sensus', this tale certified also the mental punishment, the 'poena damnis': awareness of the damnation, enhanced by the sight of the just; persistence of individual memory, as indicated by the fact that the rich man recognizes Lazarus, and the persistence of the individual concerns and inclinations, as indicated by the concerns of the rich man for his brothers in hell.

In addition to this literal and moral understanding, the Christian Fathers had also established a typological exegesis interpreting the the rich man as a figure of the unbelieving Jews, who refuse

to share the food of biblical doctrine with the Gentiles, but only voice this doctrine with their mouth instead of living it and therefore have to suffer the specific torment of the tongue. According to this typological exegesis, the damnation of the rich man figures the rejection of unbelieving Jews who cling to a literal and thereby sensual understanding of the five books of Moses, represented the five brothers, whereas the new Church of Christ is formed by Gentiles and believing Jews, that is, by Gentiles who confess their sins and long for God's word, like Lazarus revealing his sinful state by his sores and longing for the crumbs, and by those Jews who reject Judaic unbelief and charitably embrace the believing Gentiles, like Abraham embracing Lazarus at his bosom and denying help to the rich man.

This typological exegesis, diffused throughout the Middle Ages and codified especially through a very influential homily by Gregory the Great, had been extended by Ambrose of Milan to include also to the heresies of his own times, especially Arianism, as a successor of Jewish unbelief. For Ambrose, the rich man represents not only Judaism endowed with the riches of the Bible, but also the Arians enjoying worldly wealth and political power and suppressing the poor defendants of true Catholic doctrine. And to apply this understanding also to the five brothers of the rich man, usually interpreted as a figure of the five corporal senses and of the books of Moses in their sensual/literal understanding, Ambrose labels these five brothers with the names of five prominent heretics, calling them "Manichaeus, Marcion, Sabellius, Arius, and Fotinus, for these are nothing but brothers of the Jews, to which they are connected as their brothers in perfidy" (*Manicheum Marcionem Sabellium Arrium Fotinumque - isti enim non aliud quam fratres sunt Iudaeorum, quibus perfidiae germanitate nectuntur*).

In Dante's encounter with Mohammed, it is again the typological understanding which offers the clue for Dante's adoption of this biblical tale. Mohammed refigures the rich man, and is by consequence characterized once more, as in his typological parallel with Judas, as a continuator of Judaic unbelief and Christian heresy. Suffering a punishment analogous to the torment of the tongue, in Mohammed the abuse of the food of biblical doctrine is punished in his alimentary and digestive canal. In his torments, he sees Vergil and his protégé Dante standing above him on the rim of the bolgia, as the rich man had raised his eyes and seen Abraham with Lazarus at his bosom. Vergil, the pagan, unlike Abraham is not a believing Jew, not a prophet of the Old Testament, but like Abraham he had lived before the coming of Christ, and as a just Gentile he had been spared the punishments of Hell and had been admitted to the Limbus of Hell, and this Limbus, according to exegesis, is of course nothing but the bosom of Abraham: a realm distinct from the place of torments and where the just souls of the dead in the time before the coming of Christ anticipate the joys of Paradise. Similarly, Dante-pilgrim, unlike Lazarus, is not a Pagan, and is not yet dead, as Mohammed believes, yet like Lazarus in Ambrose's exegesis he certainly is (or wants to be seen as) a defendant of true Catholic doctrine; and like Lazarus he is a just man destined to Paradise. The reciprocal visibility, the exchange of looks between the two just men above and the damned soul below are a very significant element: according to exegetic tradition, the joys of the just are increased by their sight of the torments of the damned, while the torments of the damned are increased by their sight of the just. In Dante's text, we may infer that Mohammed envies the unknown visitor, when he supposes him to be the newly arrived soul of another damned lingering to delay the beginning of his own torments in another, presumably deeper, place of Hell. And he certainly envies him when told by Vergil that the unknown visitor is a living and just man, elected to the vision of Hell already during his lifetimes.

Unlike the rich man recognizing Lazarus, Mohammed does not recognize Dante-pilgrim, and unlike the rich man addressing Lazarus only indirectly, through Abraham, Mohammed himself addresses Dante-pilgrim directly. But like the rich man receiving his devastating reply from Abraham, Mohammed, too, receives his reply from Vergil. And like the rich man reacting with a second begging imploration, Mohammed too reacts with a second speech -- only addressed once more to Dante-pilgrim directly --, paralleling the rich man's bidding to have Lazarus transmit a

warning to his five brothers still living on earth. Mohammed, too, wants a 'brother' still living on earth to be warned, Brother Dolcino, not a brother of Mohammed in the literal sense, but, if we may apply the words of Ambrose, connected to him as a brother in perfidy. And whereas the rich man in hell seems rather motivated by the desire to have his brothers warned against the abuse of food in order to save them from the punishments in Hell, Mohammed himself, his own nutritive and digestive organs gushing from his belly, quite to the contrary even recommends to Brother Dolcino to equip himself with food for his fight against the Church, not in order to save him from the punishments of Hell, but rather to delay the beginning of these punishments, "s'egli non vuol qui tosto seguitarmi", 'if he does not want to follow me here soon', echoing the words of the rich, "ne et ipsi veniant in locum hunc tormentorum", 'so that they will not have to come to this place of torments'.

To resume this interpretation, we again have a display of similarities and dissimilarities between Dante's episode and a biblical model, where this biblical model is refigured in a way which can be detected only by a reader trained in allegorical exegesis and familiar with the traditional patristic exegesis of the biblical text in question. This exegesis, especially the anti-Judaic and anti-heretical understanding of the typological sense, is carefully taken into account by Dante and is extended by him to the more recent heresies of Mohammed and of Fra Dolcino. His episode, in a way, is a dramatization or enactment of the exegetical doctrine, and not only his arrangement of the fictional action, but also the historical properties of the persons serve his purpose, as can be seen best in the way how he, like Ambrose already had done, puts a name to one of the five brothers: Fra Dolcino, in fact, called himself 'Fra', 'brother', although he was probably not a member of a regular order, but only adopted this title as a member of the Apostle Brethren, where it was custom to call each other brother or sister. And his name in fact was Dolcino, a telling name in this context, yet not invented by Dante. As a 'brother', in Dante's arrangement he represents the five brothers of the rich man (or one of them); as a heretic, he illustrates their understanding as a figure for heresy; and as a man named 'Dolcino' he illustrates also their understanding as a figure for sensuality, because his name 'Dolcino' -- to give a bad translation: 'Sweetie' -- is related to the gustative sense, one of the five bodily senses. "Dulcis Dulcinus" he is called also by Benvenuto da Imola, who refers to the alleged sexual pleasures which Dolcino was said to have permitted to his followers and to have shared with them.

Angelo de Fabrizio observed already at the beginning of our century, that Vergil's speech explaining in the face of Mohammed Dante's divine mission to visit the Other World might indicate that Dante, the author, was aware of Mohammed's own, similar presumption to have visited the Other World during his lifetime. This interpretation seems convincing to me, also with regard to the biblical model, because Vergil speaks his painful words as another Abraham. The typological exegesis of Abraham's devastating reply to the rich man used to stress that Abraham is implored by the rich man as 'father Abraham' and addresses the rich man as 'son' when he refuses his biddings -- thus acknowledging him only as his 'son' in the flesh, not in the spirit. Not only Jews, but also Mohammed and his followers derive their descentance from Abraham and call their religion 'faith of Abraham'. Thus Dante could not have chosen a more appropriate person to be figured at this moment by Vergil. Could we be sure that Dante knew one of the Alfonsine versions of the *Kitab al-Mirag*, and not only one of the briefer Latin accounts as given, for instance, in Ricoldo's *Contra legem latam Saracenorum*, we could even read this encounter between Mohammed and Vergil as an ironic reply to the episode in Mohammed's own account where Mohammed meets Abraham in Paradise and receives from him a confirmation of his divine mission to relate his journey to men on earth. Yet another element of Vergil's reply to Mohammed seems also significant: Vergil in his reply to Mohammed stresses not only Dante's divine mission, but also his own mission as Dante's guide: "a me convien menarlo". Given Dante's general tendency to shape the role of Vergil as a metatextual allegory, where the character guiding Dante-pilgrim through Hell also represents the author of the sixth book of the Aeneid guiding Dante-author in his description of Hell, it would be tempting to see the same

logic also in Vergil's reply to Mohammed at work, and to read his words in the sense "a me, non a te, convien menarlo". From the biblical model of this episode, the tale proffered by Jesus himself, we may infer that actually neither Mohammed's nor even Vergil's description of Hell was Dante's primary guide. But Vergil as an ancient Pagan figuring at the same time Abraham, the Prophet of the Old Testament, matches perfectly with the two groups of Gentile and Judaic believers who form or, in the time before Christ, prefigure the Church of Christ, represented later more openly by Beatrice when she takes over from Vergil to guide Dante from earth to heavenly Paradise.

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