

The biblical connection in dante's inferno



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In the epic poem *The Inferno*, Dante conveys the biblical message of paying for your sins with a punishment that fits the crime committed. Essentially the eye for an eye principle can be seen as Dante travels, guided by infamous writer Virgil, through the circles of Hell. The effect religion has on Dante is evident throughout the epic as he mentions people and punishes them to a specific circle he deems fit.

The textual relationship between the Bible and *The Inferno* is what engages the reader to the text and makes this such a timeless piece of literature. The connection between Dante's actual life and then transforming elements into his fictional life engages the reader by allowing them to share a piece of the story through the biblical element that most can relate to or at least understand. The impact of the religious aspect signifies the influence religion had on this time period and how it can enhance a piece of text.

Dante uses an extended version of the Seven Deadly Sins of the Bible as the different circles of hell that categorizes people based on the sin and the extent to which they committed it. He designates how each of the sins should be punished and the order in which to do so (Wenzel 1). The circles of hell begin with the Ante-Inferno; which is where people that aren't bad nor good are because Heaven and Hell rejected their entry. This is where the neutral angels are that did not choose a side in the war that divided Heaven reside. As Dante then travels and arrives at the first circle known as Limbo and he learns that this is where souls that weren't baptized or were alive before the formation of Christianity reside. Tell me, my teacher, tell me, O my master, I began (wishing to have confirmed by him the teachings of unerring Christian doctrine), did any ever leave here? was a novice in this

place when I saw a mighty lord descend to us who wore the sign of victory as his crown. (Alighieri 1065). In this excerpt Dante is questioning Virgil if he knows famous old testament figures were taken out of the first circle because technically, they preceded the founding of Christianity. The biblical characters mentioned include Abel, Noah, Moses, and King David. Virgil confirms that Christ did indeed provide salvation to those of his followers that were in Hell. This brings up a controversial part of Christian theology with a concept known as the Harrowing of Hell. This event describes the time after the crucifixion and before the resurrection of Jesus in which he visited Hell to reclaim his beloved followers from the Old Testament (Burstein 1).

Although there is no specific mention of this event in the Bible, theologians infer from verse Peter 4: 6 in the New Testament, which states "good tidings were proclaimed to the dead", that Christ brought those followers that were dead in Hell up to Heaven. As the circles continue Dante and Virgil go through the second and third circle which comprise of Lust and Gluttony. The fourth circle is focused on the sin of Greed. For their punishment, the sinners must push heavy weights around a dug up ring in agony. Dante again ponders about the people that are in the circle and Virgil reveals that most of them are Clergymen and Popes in the Catholic Church. The Bible describes the sin of Greed as a sin of desire and the pursuit of material possessions. There is an obvious criticism of the Catholic church and can even be extended to include universalizing religions as being corrupt. By placing the Clergymen in this circle it shows his perspective of Church officials being too consumed with power and material possessions instead of focusing on the religious aspect itself. Since they do hold power in the

church, it is interesting to see them placed in Hell and it must signify that the sins they committed overcame their good works and was still enough to land them in the fourth circle. When he reaches the Fifth circle, which is comprised of the wrathful, people here are again punished for their sins in a way that fits the deeds they committed. This biblical theme of justice for your wrong doings is an outlet for Dante to articulate that there are consequences for the crimes committed in their life. As an example Dante mentions the character Filippo Argenti, who he knew in his actual life. Filippo Argenti was a prominent Florentine politician who confiscated Dante's property after his expulsion from Florence. By placing him in Hell, Dante is essentially getting revenge for the wrong that he did against him. Since Dante couldn't physically do anything to harm Argenti literarily, he could tarnish his reputation for generations to come. Again, going back to the principle of justice for those who sin, Dante expresses through the story how he believes certain people should get punished according to the wrongdoings they committed against Dante himself.

As the story continues, the circles of Hell continue to match the sins committed. These include the sins of Heresy, Violence, Fraud, and Treachery. Each have an important impact on the journey and reveal Dante's interpretation of the sin and the punishment to fit. The aspect of Christianity and what it means to Dante and how it is portrayed to him is what the whole epic consists of. Because Dante was such a strong believer in the Christian/Catholic faith (Lowell 20), Inferno can be viewed in the perspective of a faithful Christian and what they imagine the journey through Hell to consist of. Dante uses his knowledge and actual biblical text as an integral part of

his own text and to enhance by a consideration the referential context of the Bible and the Inferno (Kleinhenz 1). But this also opens up the possibility that although Inferno is representative of the Christian faith it is also a criticism of it. By making Hell so extreme and the punishments so obscure and savage it shows the different side of Christianity that is not often portrayed. The extremity of the aspects of Hell is what can be viewed as preposterous. Again going back to the area known as Limbo. According to Dante, anyone that wasn't baptized was sentenced to be in Limbo. This is a perfect example of exceedingly critical view of Christianity and the people allowed to go to Heaven. Essentially, the viewpoint is that only morally correct Christians are allowed into Heaven, which obviously upsets Dante and could possibly why he placed important Biblical figures in this circle to show how the rules would have to apply to all (Quinones 3).

The pronounced use of Biblical references in Inferno enhances the theme of afterlife and what damnation actually consists of. By using real biblical events and people it allows readers to have textual example of the justice that comes when a person commits a sin and the punishment they must endure. But at the same time, the undeniable use of extreme consequences opens up the possibility that Dante is insulting the corruption of the Catholic church's principles. Overall, Dante's connection made between the Bible and the Inferno gives the text a more integral meaning and sets up the rest of the Divine Comedy, continuing with his path to Heaven.