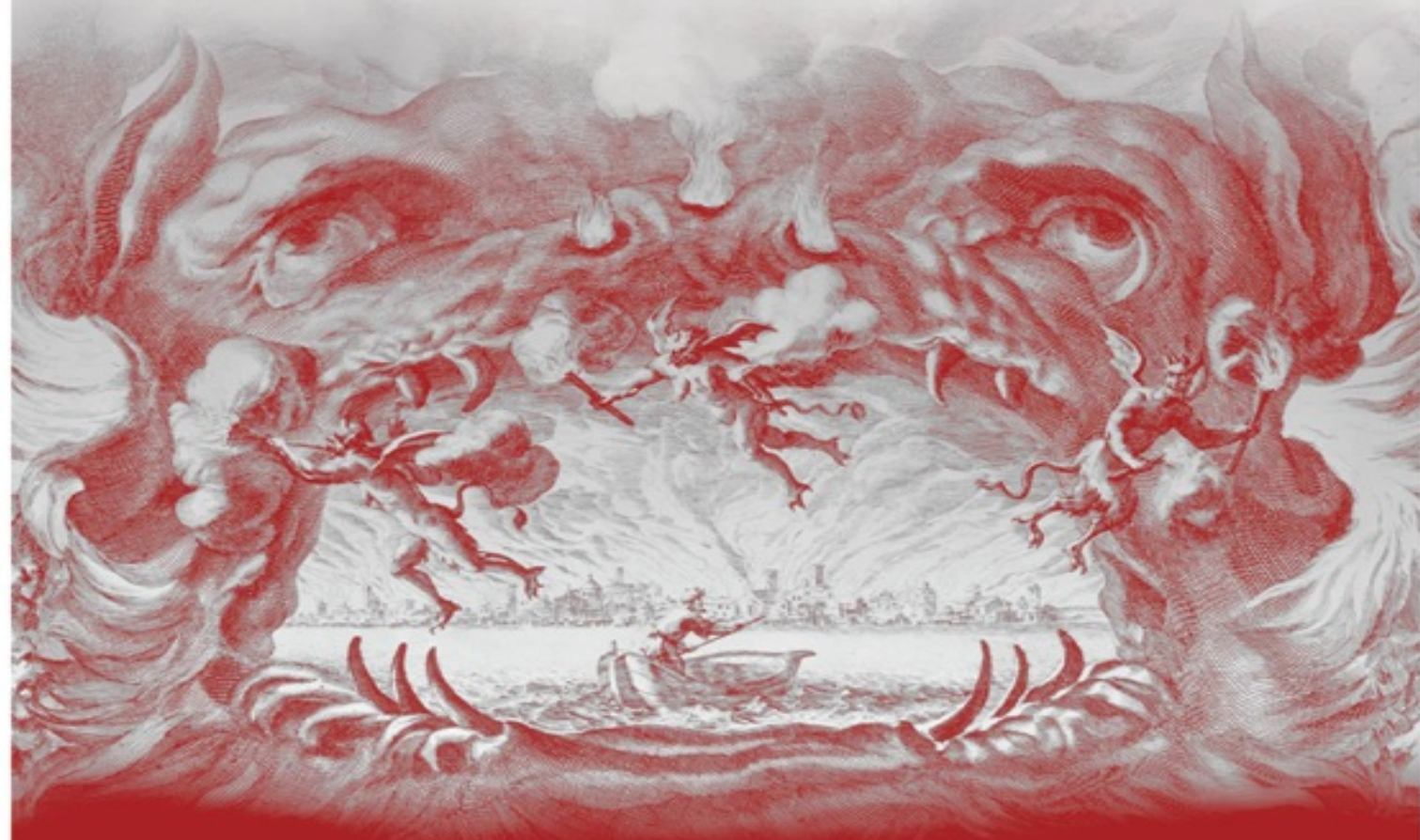


INVENTING HELL

DANTE, THE BIBLE, AND
ETERNAL TORMENT



JON M. SWEENEY

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Quotations from Dante's *Inferno* are most often taken from the venerable translation of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, familiar to many and readily available in the public domain. But for contemporary relevance and verve, you might also check out the new "postmodern, intertextual, slightly slant translation" of poet Mary Jo Bang, published in 2012 by Graywolf Press.¹ It's a kick.—JM

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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Welcome](#)

[Dedication](#)

[A Note About Capitalizing Hell](#)

[Prologue](#)

[A Quick Sprint Through the *Inferno*](#)

[Chapter 1: In the Beginning](#)

[Chapter 2: The Ancient Underworld](#)

[Chapter 3: The Awful Underworld Psalm](#)

[Chapter 4: The God Hades](#)

[Chapter 5: Virgil and the Myth of Empire](#)

[Chapter 6: When the Soul Went Immortal](#)

[Chapter 7: Plato and the Myth of Er](#)

[Chapter 8: Jesus, Hades, and a Pit Just Outside Jerusalem](#)

[Chapter 9: Inventing Holy Saturday](#)

[Chapter 10: Medieval Apocalyptic!](#)

[Chapter 11: Dancing on a Pin](#)

[Chapter 12: Dante with a Qur'an by His Side?](#)

[Chapter 13: The Sublime Order of the Universe](#)

[Conclusion: Is There a Future for Hell?](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Jon M. Sweeney \(partial listing\)](#)

[Praise for Inventing Hell](#)

[Bibliography](#)

[Notes](#)



[**Begin Reading**](#)

[**Table of Contents**](#)

[**Newsletters**](#)

[**Copyright Page**](#)

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*To Michal, my Beatrice,
but way better, cuz
of course, she actually exists.*

[A Note About Capitalizing *Hell*](#)

As Hades was to the ancient Greeks, and Gehenna to first-century residents of Jerusalem, Hell was a real place and a proper noun to medieval Christians, Dante among them. For that reason, the word, which is usually lowercased in the twenty-first century, appears throughout *Inventing Hell* with capital *H*—until the final pages.

Prologue

If I had the opportunity to sip a latte with Paul of Tarsus at an outdoor café near the Roman Forum, I would take it in a heartbeat. Of all the people in the history of the world that one might wish to have the chance to meet, Paul would be near the top of my list.

It's way too hot in Rome in the summertime, so I'd meet him on a sunny afternoon in late April or May, at one of the lovely places along the Via del Colosseo right there in the *centro storico* of the ancient city. I would, of course, have to travel back in time. The year would be about 65 CE, and I would come ready with lots of questions.

Paul would probably be in between trips. Recently back from Asia Minor perhaps, or packing an overnight bag for another visit to the Corinthians. I'd probably be a little jet-lagged and more than a little intimidated. I hear he was a pretty formidable guy who didn't like to be interrogated, and certainly not contradicted. Maybe I'd wear my black shoes; I feel more confident when I wear them. Also, from all the pictures I've seen, Paul would surely have a larger forehead, but I'd be taller. That would be a confidence-booster, too.

I would begin by asking questions about his preconversion life. Did you ever attend a gladiatorial match in the Forum over there? Tell me about that. Did Russell Crowe portray it well? Then: Did you ever personally stone a Christian to death, or did you just watch it happen? I'd also want to ask about the whole "Road to Damascus" thing. Did you really hear God's voice? Does God even have a "voice" and if so, what in the world does it sound like? We'd be there together for a few hours, until the late afternoon sun begins to bathe the yellow and red stones of the hotels nearby. We'd start with *caffè*, then move to *caffè Americano*, and probably wrap up by splitting a cannoli with a couple *decaffeinatos*.

When the questions turn to more specifically religious and theological topics, I imagine Paul would have quick and ready answers. You seem to have had a love-hate relationship with circumcision, Paul. Can you tell me about that? What did you really mean by "To live is Christ"? He would occasionally quip, rather sardonically, *Let me also refer you to a letter I once wrote to the church in Galatia (or Ephesus, etc.), where I dealt with that subject in greater detail.*

But here's the thing: If I were to ask Saint Paul what he believes about Hell, I'll bet that he would give an uncharacteristically vague answer. Why? For the simple reason that to the nascent Christian Church, even to Paul, Hell barely existed. All they knew from the Hebrew Bible was *Sheol*, which literally means "grave" and was believed to be the dusty deep place within the Earth itself to which every soul traveled after death, accompanying its body. And, of course, Paul lived, wrote, and was martyred for the faith before any of the Gospels were written.

There were rumblings and speculations of an afterlife in the century of Christ, Philo, and Paul. These came mostly from what was then pop culture: Greek and Roman mythology, which we'll discuss in chapters to come. The rumblings then blossomed briefly in the Gospels, and then at various points throughout late antiquity and the Middle Ages, including in the revelations to the Prophet Muhammad recorded in the Qur'an and again in the writings of the greatest theologian of them all.

Thomas Aquinas.

An Italian poet named Dante Alighieri changed everything with his famous *Inferno*, which he began writing in about 1306 CE. But to read the *Inferno* today is to realize how little it has to do with the Bible. There is far more Greek and Roman mythology—adapted by Dante from classics such as Hesiod’s *Theogony*, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*—than there is scripture in Dante’s nine circles of Hell. The fifth-century church father Saint Augustine referred to these writers as “poets who were called theologians, versifying of their men-made gods, or of the world’s elements, principalities and powers.... If their fables contained anything that concerned the true God, it was intermingled with the rest that God was difficult to find.”¹ But it’s the Roman poet Virgil who serves as Dante’s tour guide through the upside-down cathedral that is the *Inferno*. Cleverly using Virgil and lots of funky myth, Dante is the one who made eternal punishment exotic and real, as well as Christian.

Dante has influenced our thinking in ways that we rarely even notice. His vibrant, dark imagination has left its mark all over Western culture. “All hope abandon, ye who enter in,” is scrawled above the door to Hell in the *Inferno*, and the sentence has subsequently been adopted by many a Goth website, heavy-metal band, T-shirt, video game, and even a few novelists.² One popular Finnish band, for instance, recorded an album a few years ago called *Venus Doom*, in which its nine songs are intended to represent each of the nine circles of Hell. From the lyrics, the band, called HIM, clearly wants to embrace and celebrate what feels like their inevitable damnation. The track “Bleed Well” perhaps says it all, even though it’s an acoustic number.

This notion of the wicked having a raucous party in Hell is of course completely foreign to Dante, but not to some branches of Christian thought. There is the idea that those who are bound to Hell would be miserable were they to spend a day in Heaven, and as it turns out, that’s inspired by Dante, too. Taking a slightly different tack, I’ve always found this comment about Heaven from the twentieth-century Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges to be marvelously suggestive: “I read a book written by an English clergyman saying that there is much sorrow in Heaven. I believe so. And I hope so. For, after all, joy is unbearable.”³

Toward the end of the *Inferno*, Mary Jo Bang, a poet who recently created an entertaining version of the translation full of contemporary literary and pop culture similes and allusions, uses “death metal vocals / With guttural growls” to express how Dante might explain the experience of entering Hell’s lowest circle in a way we’d understand today. She also has lines from the Rolling Stones’ “You Can Always Get What You Want” standing in for how centaurs taunt Hell’s residents in canto 12.⁴

The subjects and titles of graphic novels, written mostly for young people, are also replete with references and inspirations from Hell. Glancing over the extensive collection of these books at my public library the other day, I thought how few vampires, devils, zombies, apocalyptic worlds, undead, and generally creepy and loathsome figures there might be if it weren’t for Dante. Then of course Rick Riordan’s gigantic best-selling Heroes of Olympus series of novels for elementary school kids recently added *The House of Hades* as book 4. Now third and fourth graders everywhere are coming home from school talking with their parents about the river Styx, Tartarus, Mars, and Aphrodite in the same way that I used to come home and tell my parents about—I don’t know—*The Hardy Boys*.

Of course the gaming industry has jumped into the mix, creating *Dante’s Inferno* for Xbox and PlayStation a few years ago. They reimagined Dante-the-pilgrim as a Knight Templar who has just returned from the Third Crusade in the Holy Land. He is supposed to have committed war crimes and other serious sins there, and now he must travel through all the circles of Hell in order to save the soul of Beatrice, the siren-like girl (more on her later) who inspired the real Dante, and who, in the game,

version of the story, is trapped there. Virgil serves as the Templar's guide, and the ultimate battle at the bottom of Hell, with a whole lot of buildup, is against Lucifer himself. The game's publisher, Electronic Arts, once hired protesters in Los Angeles to picket their offices, shouting that this was the Antichrist, to drum up publicity.

At this very moment, tourists are flocking to Florence hotels for "Dan Brown Packages," and on day trips for "Dan Brown Tours," during which they visit key sites in the life of Dante featured in Brown's *New York Times* number one novel *Inferno*. Literary critics are bickering with the novelist over how and where he's gotten wrong the poet and his great poem. Soon there will be another movie and all of this will happen all over again. The psychologists among us would have a field day analyzing precisely why we seem to have such a fascination with Dante's imagination; but it's certainly due, in large part, to how the world's most dominant faith, Christianity, has embraced and preached it for centuries.

DOING ARCHAEOLOGY ON HELL MADE FAMOUS

We are not going to spend any more time exploring what has become of the Dante phenomenon. Instead, let's uncover how Hell came to be, including the role that Dante played, but most importantly by looking at everything that fed into his crazy imaginings. Think of what follows as the sort of notes Dante Alighieri might have compiled on whatever were the equivalent of late medieval index cards. Each chapter that follows, 1 through 13, fills a need for the script he writes in the *Inferno*.

Like a screenwriter might research a historical movie, Dante pulled from every source he could find. He imagined the setting, characters, emotions, and drama that he wanted to create, and then he set about fleshing it out. Each idea he discovered provided a particular insight, scene, or theme of the story he wanted to tell. That story (next chapter) was frightening, cinematic, and universal—and wouldn't have been any of those things if he'd simply used the Bible.

We could fill multiple volumes with this sort of exploration. To avoid that, the book you are holding deliberately limits its focus to a set period of time. If our subject were the history of Hell writ large, we might begin in prehistory by looking at how ancient people like the Babylonians and Persians seemed to comprehend the afterlife, and not end until the present day with the ideas of various theologians and philosophers. But we won't do that. Our focus is narrower. We will begin with the Hebrew Bible (written from roughly 1200 to 150 BCE), which summarizes the views held by ancient Israel and is the Holy Scripture that was inherited and appropriated by Christianity beginning in the first century CE. We will wrap up promptly with the death of Dante in 1321. Now that is still about twenty-five hundred years of history and thought, so needless to say, we'll tread lightly over the tops of all these peaks, hitting only the most salient points of each!

Along the way, *Inventing Hell* will probably surprise you at times. You will encounter little-known biblical phrases such as the "witch of Endor," "shades of dead ancestors," and "the underworld." You will also see how the world of Sheol puts the popularity of certain twenty-first-century preoccupations—like zombies—in a whole new light. The author of Ecclesiastes knows how right he was by saying there's nothing new under the sun every time he looks at what's current fantasy in Hollywood and popular fiction.

Full of the mysteries of Greek mythology, philosophy, and ancient religions, *Inventing Hell* will:

- Show you that there was little agreement among Christians, before Dante, about the nature and

extent of what we call Hell.

- ~~Illuminate for you the concepts of afterlife that existed before Dante, from ancient Judaism, Virgil and Plato, the teachings of Jesus, the early church, Islam, and medieval theologians.~~
- Demonstrate that Dante had various medieval apocalyptic sources to help him create the elaborate architecture of Hell that most people know today.
- Shine a clearer light on the sort of Hell that Dante created.
- And reveal that Hell has nine descending circles, just like the devil has hooves and a tail.

Before we're done, you may be shocked to realize that for seven hundred years we've simply taken Dante's word for it!

It has been said that Dante's *Divine Comedy*—the complete tripartite poem, including *Hell*, *Purgatory*, and *Paradise*—contains the world, tells us about the other world, and is a world unto itself. All of that is true. People will also tell you that it isn't divine and it's not really a comedy. That's true too. Dante himself titled the poem *Commedia*, or *The Comedy*, because it ends in paradise with happiness; it was Boccaccio who added the adjective *Divine*, perhaps sarcastically. The whole thing is like another scripture, and has functioned that way for Christians for centuries.

Hopefully, you will begin to see the many sources of this complex picture of the afterlife and how Dante's Hell is a patchwork creation. You will be better able to dissect and appreciate what a magnificent and fantastic world it creates, and why it made sense to the people of the late Middle Ages. The world of Dante's *Inferno* is revealed to be mythical not because Dante made it up. He didn't. It's mythical because it was intricately woven in the imagination of a great poet, using a variety of sources, replete with legend, upon which Western civilization once built its most basic understandings of itself.⁵ With any luck, you will also find that it does not ring true in the twenty-first century.

[A Quick Sprint Through the *Inferno*](#)

Before we begin this journey of discovering what led and fed Dante's vision of Hell, it's worth exploring his understanding of that awful place for sinners via the book that made it famous. Quick! Just what the doctor ordered for eternal misery, so here goes: the thumbnail nickel tour. As we go, keep in mind that there are two Dantes. There's the Dante who wrote the *Inferno*, and there's Dante the-pilgrim, the book's subject and narrator. They are really one and the same.

Line 1 (for it is a poem, after all) opens with Dante suddenly finding himself a middle-aged man lost in the middle of a strange, dark forest. "Midway upon the journey of our life / I found myself within a forest dark, / For the straightforward pathway had been lost" (canto 1, 1–3). Let the metaphors begin! We find out later that the time is supposed to be Maundy Thursday, the year 1300 CE. But for now, he is disoriented and has lost his way.

As Dante-the-pilgrim ponders what to do next, three ravenous animals saunter by, a leopard, a lion, and a she-wolf, and he's quickly more than a bit frightened. At that moment, along comes the famous dead, ancient Roman poet Virgil, who tells Dante that he'll show him the way out of the forest. He'll be his trusted tour guide. Virgil explains that a girl Dante knew as a youth, Beatrice, actually left Heaven for Limbo to find Virgil and ask him to help her old friend. Next, Virgil explains that the best way out of the quagmire they're in, and the surest path to seeing Heaven eventually, is to follow him through the various circles of Hell. In other words, the way out is through.

Dante agrees to follow Virgil, but hesitantly, because just as they enter Hell's gates they read inscribed above their heads a series of pronouncements, like ones etched into stone in large capital letters across a Roman archway.¹ These sound like warnings to turn back: "Through me the way leads among the people lost." *Why did I listen to Virgil?* the pilgrim must be anxiously wondering. And then, "All hope abandon, ye who enter in."

As he enters Hell's vestibule, Dante apparently needs time for his eyes to adjust to the lack of light because, he tells us, he first encounters horrible sounds. He recounts screams, cries of rage, shrill wailing, even a variety of accents in speech, and then Dante himself begins to weep. He'll have to learn to keep his emotions in check. After this initial assault, as his pupils enlarge, Dante meets the first characters among Hell's unfortunate residents whom he recognizes. He sees Pope Celestine V and Pontius Pilate, who were cowardly in life, the same emotion that Dante is feeling at that very moment. He then watches as they and others like them are forced to mill around Hell's gate, never tasting it the worst, and yet chased by stinging wasps for eternity.

This begs a question that perhaps you've had before: If these are merely souls in Hell—in other words, shades without bodies—how is it that they experience pain, or anything for that matter, without their corporeal senses? The answer is: They just do! You'd think that once the body is discarded, without its five senses and live organs and tissue, what's left wouldn't feel anything. The answer to the question is Dante's and Hell's special twist: In the afterlife, every soul is a corporeal one, complete

with every sensory device that the body/soul once had up above. By Hell's seventh circle, you'll even see centaurs firing arrows at shades that are trying to climb out of a river of boiling blood. Is it even possible to hit a shade with an arrow? Allow yourself to live with the imaginative contradiction. The souls in Dante's Hell are rid of their bodies, but they aren't rid of any of their ability to sense what's happening to them.

Next, Dante and Virgil cross a river into Hell itself, ferried by Charon, one of many characters from Greek and Roman mythology that will appear. Witnessing more souls in agony, Dante faints, and when he comes to, he's standing in Hell's first circle: Limbo. There he finds those who die unbaptized, as well as "virtuous pagans," people like Plato and Homer who died without knowing Christ because they lived before Christ was on Earth. For this reason, he is told that the sounds he hears are "sorrow without torment." Virgil reminds Dante that this is where he, too, resides.

Next is circle two. There they see those who were dominated by their lust in earthly life, women such as Helen of Troy, and men (even godlike men) such as Achilles. Circle three is for the gluttonous, and these souls are guarded by the notorious three-headed dog, Cerberus. One might see the gradation from Hell's second to third circles is "sin which began with mutual indulgence," lust leading to "solitary self-indulgence," gluttony.² These are judgments made by Dante the writer, though the latter sin is worse than the former, and so are the punishments he is to hand out. Meanwhile, Dante the pilgrim, the subject of his own tale, is horrified and frightened by it all.

Each remaining circle is worse than the one before it, and each is a narrower funnel toward Satan and ultimate evil at the bottom. In circle four they find the greedy; and in circle five, after crossing the famous river Styx, they see angry souls fighting one another for eternity in fiery waters, while the pouty and sullen are drowning forever. The sixth circle holds heretics, and the seventh contains those who were extremely violent in life—to others, to themselves, and toward God, through blasphemy and scorn. Flaming sand and fiery rain fall down on their heads, and a fierce minotaur guards them from leaving—which sounds bad, I realize, but it is the suffocating crowding of these hellish rooms that is the most frightening aspect of the place.

The eighth circle is where every sort of fraudulent soul is kept, including panderers, seducers, hypocrites, astrologers, and thieves. A big part of Dante's appeal when the *Inferno* was first published in Italy—and, believe me, it was a smash hit from the beginning—was the *National Enquirer* or *Daily Mail* quality of his storytelling. Sprinkled throughout thirty-four cantos are salacious tales of contemporary crimes, rumors, and innuendo. They may as well have been accompanied by blood-soaked photographs, the poetry was so revealing and personal. The faces of many a shade are revealed by Dante to be those of people who recently, in Dante's own adult lifetime, made headlines. It is as if someone were to write a description of Hell today and place Leona Helmsley, Silvio Berlusconi, and Anna Nicole Smith in it.

By the time we reach the ninth and lowest circle of Hell, our stomachs are completely sickened by what we've seen, heard, smelled, and felt. For instance, in the penultimate canto we witness one sinner devouring the head of another, pausing to wipe his mouth on the other's hair. In another scene, we see a shade attacked in the neck by a serpent and the shade immediately catching fire and burning to ashes, only to quickly regenerate and become himself once again. Virgil asks the shade for his name, and it turns out to have been one of Dante's contemporaries.

A short while later, Dante feels a breeze in the air that seems to be inspiring the horror. He asks questions of Virgil about it, only to be told that it's a blast from the nostrils of Satan himself—a perverse comparison to the breath of the Holy Spirit. There are many inverse relationships between God and Heaven, and Satan and Hell, throughout the *Inferno*. Nine circles of Hell, for instance, compare to nine

choirs of holy angels.

At the bottom, circle nine contains the gravely treacherous. Writers of horror films, take note. This is also where Satan himself, Hell's emperor, is found. His appearance is like nothing anyone has ever seen. He has three faces, six wings (remember: Lucifer was supposed to be a "fallen angel"—more on that to follow), and he's weeping, buried waist-high in ice. In his left and right jaws are Brutus and Cassius, the two men who murdered Julius Caesar. Then, Dante and Virgil recognize the figure of Judas Iscariot, his head thrust into the dripping center jaws for eternity.

WHITHER GRACE?

Depending on your theological or denominational persuasion, you may be wondering right about now: *What about grace?* Why is it that all these souls in Dante's Hell stand outside of God's love and salvation? Being a coward or a thief or a traitor is not enough to be condemned to Hell, and if it isn't, may God help us all. But if you're asking such questions, don't be such a ninny!

Dante's point is this: We receive in the afterlife what we have desired in this life, and grace doesn't overcome a human nature that's unaccommodating to it. As Thomas Aquinas puts it at the beginning of the *Summa Theologica*, "Grace doesn't replace nature, but perfects it." That's Dante's perspective, too. Even more, some people come to actually desire a hellish eternity by what they have done and what they have not done; and those desires that drove them are the same ones that will continue to drive them in death as in life. It is in that light that Virgil explains to Dante-the-pilgrim in canto 3:

*"My son," the courteous Master said to me,
"All those who perish in the wrath of God
Here meet together out of every land;*

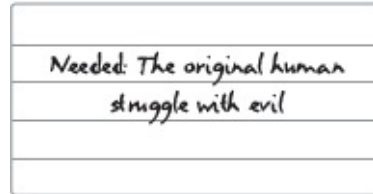
*And ready are they to pass o'er the river,
Because celestial Justice spurs them on,
So that their fear is turned into desire."*

(lines 121–26)

CHAPTER ONE

In the Beginning

FROM DANTE'S INDEX CARDS...



I remember the first time I saw a hummingbird. I was a high school student washing dishes at our family cabin in the Michigan woods. It was a warm summer evening. Standing beside me was a friend who was doing the drying. He quietly whispered, “Look! A hummingbird!” I paused, my hands still under the water, looking straight ahead out the window in front of me. There I saw a levitating little wonder bobbing gently in the air, staring right back at me. “She probably likes your yellow T-shirt,” my friend whispered again.

Up until that moment, I would have told you that a hummingbird had never crossed my path. In every meaningful respect, I hadn’t lived in the same world as hummingbirds. I’d never seen one, so they might as well not have existed.

But then the funniest thing happened. I started seeing hummingbirds everywhere, all the time. Each day of my summer vacation, after that first evening glimpse, hummingbirds zipped by near wherever I was standing, whether it was while walking on the rocks by the shore, sitting reading a book on the deck of our cabin, or, again, the next evening, as I washed dishes standing in front of the kitchen window. I even heard the faint buzz of their fast-beating wings as they hovered nearby, and before they disappeared once again. I found this to be really bizarre. How amazing it was that hummingbirds suddenly populated my world! And what a coincidence—since they had been so scarce only moments earlier!

Let me suggest that our minds are not trained to see hummingbirds—that is, until they learn to see them. And in the same sort of way, all of our previous experiences, knowledge, study, training, schooling, habits, and sight lines have taught us to see certain aspects of faith in set ways. Until an actual living hummingbird zips into our view for the first time and broadens our experience and understanding.

This was what happened to me when I first read some of the texts discussed in this book. I imagine that, at first glance, they sound like the sort of “classics” you may have tried your best not to read in high school or college. Me too. In many cases, these are *just* those sorts of books. I’m talking about fables, tomes like Homer’s *Iliad*, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Plato’s *Republic*, the Qur’an, Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica*, and the Torah—what Christians most often call the Old Testament. You probably won’t

find an endorsement on the back cover of any of these that reads “I couldn’t put it down. Compulsively readable!” Thick and weighty, all of them, but to me, postcollege, when no one is telling me that I *have* to read them, these books have been like hummingbirds. They have enlightened me to what I hadn’t known existed. They have caused me to see the world, this life, the Christian tradition that I love and grew up with, and even the afterlife, in startling new ways.

SO LET’S GO BACK TO THE BEGINNING

Every bird, from the greatest winged creatures to the tiniest of buzzing nymphs, populated the original Garden that God created, and ultimately the story of how Hell came to be begins way back in the original paradise. But this happens only by centuries of reading into the story and adding to it. For although there was evil lurking in the trees in that otherwise ideal and perfect Garden, it was ambiguous at best. And as you will soon see, Dante’s medieval idea of Hell was never really about death, but about the devil, damnation, and eternal punishment—and none of these things existed in the Garden of Eden.

A very long time ago, God created the first human being from the dust of the Earth. *Adam*, God called this creature, placing it in a lush place called *Eden*, which in Hebrew means “delight,” and Aramaic “well-watered.” The ancient sages who first told this story had no idea how long Adam lived in such a state of paradise. Maybe a few days, perhaps weeks, years, or millennia. One anonymous late medieval poet wrote, “For a thousand winters he thought not so long,” which beautifully captures how the first human may have experienced time and seasons. The sages also were not clear on whether *Adam* was a noun or a proper noun, for when God first creates Adam, in Genesis chapter 1, *adam* actually means humankind itself. As the first human being, adam was a sexless creature.

Then God creates Eve, a definite female, out of the rib of what is, by this point in the story (Genesis chapter 2), a definite human male named Adam. Together in the Garden they reside for some time before anything goes wrong. They may have been together “naked, and... not ashamed” (v. 25) in this well-watered mysterious place for a period longer than we have been living on Earth since the great fall.

What caused that “fall” after all? We all know the story, even if we never went to Sunday school. Was it the free will God gave to the first human beings that caused them to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, even after God had forbidden them to touch it? Or was it the presence of evil in their midst? Perhaps it was both—free will *and* evil—combined together as an essential part of their very makeup. Sages have pondered for thousands of years how creatures that God pronounced as made in God’s own image could do anything other than praise him.

Then a mysterious creature walks into our story, and it isn’t really evil. Imagine the rectangular frame of a cartoon strip in which Adam and Eve are lounging upon a tree, naked as the day they were formed. They are eating all of the good fruit and their bliss is evident. In the next frame of the strip the blank face of a serpent enters from stage left. And by the third frame, this new creature is fully in the picture with the lovely couple. It is more of a trickster than any sort of devil. Its name is usually given as Satan, but that, too, is to get way ahead of ourselves. Not until the fourth century Christianity, in the thought of Augustine of Hippo, would it become common to identify this tempter in the garden serpent with the larger-than-life, death-loving devil.¹

Still, the serpent—a mythical creature full of Freudian implications—screwed everything up for the man and the woman. Without that wily beast—who in Genesis can reason, talk, and trick humans

beings—would sin have ever taken place? Would Adam and Eve have ever considered touching the one tree that was forbidden? We don't know. But despite its magical abilities, far beyond its species, the serpent was not a character called Satan. In the opening line of one of his most famous poems, Dylan Thomas refers to the “incarnate devil in a talking snake,” a sentiment shared by most inheritors of Judeo-Christianity; but that's just not right—not then, not yet. In the Garden of Eden, evil is not the work of a single malevolent character.

There is a Hebrew word that is translated as “Satan” in the Jewish Bible, but the word is not meant as the name of a personality or person. To give this Satan too much agency would be to diminish the power of the one and only God, according to ancient Judaism. This is true outside the Garden as well. The transliteration of the Hebrew word is quite literally *ha-satan* and we see it again in Job chapter 1 when *ha-satan* convinces God to allow Job's faith to be tested. The text says that “the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them” (Job 1:6). But don't let the capitalized pronoun in our English translations fool you. This “Satan” is an *impersonal* force, that's most accurately called “accuser” or “adversary.”

Nevertheless, the story of the curse put upon Adam and Eve for eating the forbidden fruit has been used for millennia by human beings trying to imagine why they often desire to do what's bad, or bad for them. How did Saint Paul put it two thousand years ago? “I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (Rom. 7:15). A puzzle, that is, even when we know better. Can we blame it on the devil? Not according to Genesis, or the Hebrew Bible, for that matter. The ancient, biblical world was one in which there were lush opportunities outside and evil inclinations within, but no Satan poking you in the ribs. Some have actually suggested that the “serpent” is a metaphor for our innate inclination toward doing wrong and that we should interpret the text that way, as opposed to reading the tale as a literal serpent talking to two human beings.

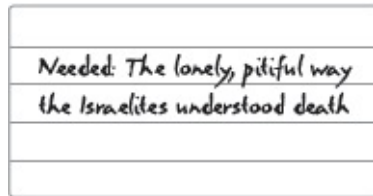
Regardless of how you slice it, according to the story that begins every other story, we have lived amid evil either in our capacities or in what's around us since time began. According to the ancient worldview, every person had to be on guard to do what is right and to turn away from what is wrong. And as you will see in the next chapter, what they did on Earth had nothing to do with where they went after they stopped breathing.

Just as there was no personality or person named Satan in the original creation, there was also no real eternal life. In the Garden, as well as after those first inhabitants were kicked out, there was no mention of an afterlife at all. The Torah makes no mention of a life beyond death. (The written Torah, that is. The oral Torah of the Mishnah, developed in the third century CE after Judaism and Christianity parted ways, tells a different story of afterlife, judgment, and sometimes even bodily resurrection when the Messiah comes—but Dante wouldn't have known it.)² For millennia life after death seemed completely unnecessary. Adam, Eve, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are simply said to gather with “their people” after death—meaning like dust, and perhaps ghosts, in the ground.

CHAPTER TWO

The Ancient Underworld

FROM DANTE'S INDEX CARDS...



Take another walk with me, now through the various and mysterious occasions in the Hebrew Bible when the dead are discussed after their lives are over. We will see where they go. To the underworld that is: a place beneath the topsoil known as Sheol, pronounced “SHEE-ohl.”

Sheol is a legendary place, which, like the Garden of Eden, was made real by the Bible. Our ancestors feared it as much as they idealized Eden, while we probably give neither any notice today.

Were the dead still considered to be somehow alive under the dirt in Sheol? No, that’s what was so frightening about it. Is there any way to communicate with one’s dead friends and ancestors once they’ve gone under? In ancient Israel, definitely not. Ancient Near Eastern religions practiced ancestor worship, but not Judaism. In Greek mythology, Odysseus, the hero of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, would be the first and most famous instance of the living visiting the dead; and after Odysseus, visiting the underworld became a common theme in Greek mythology, reaching its pinnacle in the story of Hercules learning the Eleusinian mysteries of immortality before undertaking his last adventure to the underworld to capture Cerberus, the three-headed dog. But the Israelites opposed any form of necromancy or communicating with those who had died.¹ The teaching of ancient Israel was firm: Try to talk with the dead and you make yourself an enemy of God (see Deut. 18:9–13).

The first time Sheol appears in the Bible is in Genesis 37. If you remember your Sunday school, this comes in the story of Joseph, before he became second in command over all Egypt. Joseph’s brothers have left him in a pit, wishing that he were dead. Then they return to their father with Joseph’s famous multicolored coat, sans Joseph, as if to say, he’s gone. This is what happens next:

[Jacob] recognized it, and said, “It is my son’s robe! A wild animal has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces.” Then Jacob tore his garments, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and all his daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and said, “No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.” Thus his father bewailed him. (verses 33–35)

The son has gone to Sheol and his father wails, *Now I might as well die, too!*

It is Jacob who also utters the next instance of the word several chapters later (the Joseph story long; some have called it the first novella in world literature), when the brothers are headed to Egypt to see the man they still don't yet realize is their brother Joseph. They are about to take Benjamin, Jacob's youngest son, with them on the journey when Jacob says, "I am the one you have bereaved of children: Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more, and now you would take Benjamin... If hardship should come to him on the journey that you are to make, you would bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to Sheol" (Gen. 42:36, 38). Five chapters later we see the patriarch wishing yet again that his sons were dead, begging to be buried among his ancestors. He wanted good company for eternity. That was what Sheol was.

THE WORLDVIEW OF ANCIENT ISRAEL

HEAVEN

(residence of God above the clouds)

EARTH

(all of creation from Earth's surface to the clouds)

SHEOL

(subterranean place of the dead, in Earth's belly)

Sheol literally means "a subterranean cavern." It is what was believed to exist under the soil, where the dead make their resting place together. There they are gathered, bodies, bones, souls, and all, like shipwrecks long abandoned under water that has iced over. Trapped underground, whatever soul there is in a human being barely has an existence, making them like ghosts, or what we often call "shades."

Still, the ancient Hebrew poets were able to imagine an emotional life in Sheol. This is how King David prayed to God: "If I make my bed in [Sheol], behold, thou art there" (Ps. 139:8 KJV), imagining a place made less dreadful, perhaps even downright restful, if the Divine could be there, too. Spiritually, to be in Sheol meant to be unseen, despite David's prayer/plea for reassurance otherwise. It was a place of disembodied spirits, or dead bodies that had lost their identities, the meanings they had on Earth.

Now, since Christians have always had a hard time waiting in their eagerness to rename Jewish ideas toward Christian purposes, Sheol erroneously became "Hell" in the earliest Christian Bible (just as Satan was identified with the Garden serpent, and Christ was "discovered" in the Psalms). In fact, by the time of the 1611 Authorized Version of the Bible, thirty-one of the sixty-five uses of the word *Sheol* had been rendered as "Hell." The others became "Pit" or "Grave." Much earlier, the Septuagint (the pre-Christian Hebrew Bible translation into ancient Greek) almost always rendered Sheol as "Hades"—which is similarly misleading, and we'll explore that later.

There is no belief in a future state or eternity with Sheol. When God tells Moses that he will "lie down with [his] fathers" (Deut. 31:16) in death, it is not meant as a heavenly picture. It is not even a planned burial in a place where Moses' fathers lie in state, for Moses would end up being buried in an unmarked, anonymous grave far from any of his family. God's promise was simply a reference to Sheol, where all the dead had gone and all will continue to go—like a dead letter office. It was one enormous, uniform, subterranean gathering center. Similarly, the Bible speaks of King David "[sleeping] with his ancestors" (1 Kings 2:10; also see 1 Chron. 17:11). All of these expressions simply mean that it was believed there was one place where bodies went after death.

Sheol is for everyone, whether they be wicked, godly, or somewhere in between. Sheol bears no

preference and makes no judgments. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, in sixty-five references to Sheol is described as having fires, entangling cords, great depth, bars, power, even a belly.² Some of these qualities emphasize the importance of separating the living from the dead, for even the ancients knew that dead bodies would contaminate the living. It is also made crystal clear that no one can escape death—hence the cords and bars. Sheol is also described as consuming, swallowing, and silencing everyone, including the pompous, and those who make war.³ All of this forms the essential background of Jewish ethics to this day: Your life now, in the flesh, is vitally important. Make the most of it by doing good and helping to repair the world. Death will come, and if there is anything after death, no one really has a clue. Don't even think about that. Do what is right—right now.

Anyone who has ever gone deep underground has likely experienced what it feels like to be in the silence of the Earth. When coal mining was invented in early nineteenth-century England, metaphors such as the ones mentioned above took on new meaning in the lives of many. Miners were often conscious of how they were mingling with the underworld. They discovered noxious gases, the danger of caverns, the colorlessness of everything down under, and the utterly pitiful feeling that can come with being subterranean. There were fears of going too far down, so well did most people know the Bible. They knew that Hell was in the belly of the Earth, and they were hesitant to get too close to it. D. H. Lawrence depicts the terrifying daily experience of miners in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* when he writes of “the utter, soulless ugliness” that they witness, “the stench of this sulphurous combustion of the earth's excrement,” and the “utter negation of natural beauty, the utter negation of the gladness of life.”

Even earlier, there were dozens of theories as to what the interior of the Earth looked like. Maps were drawn and people imagined how it might be possible to enter the Earth's interior via the poles or through some sort of occultic passage. Since the late seventeenth century, scientists have been suggesting that a hot nucleus is at the innermost core, and surrounding it are concentric hollow spheres. A theologian and pseudoscientist named Thomas Burnet wrote a book in 1681 suggesting that the Great Flood took place when the oceans filling the Earth released their waters, leaving caverns behind that would support the storied Sheol passageways. Isaac Newton seems to have held Thomas Burnet in some esteem.⁴

Sheol also doesn't tally faults or make decisions. *Sheol* is a proper noun. Sheol represents the grave. It does not represent anything any more elaborate than that. It's not an afterlife per se. The dead may remember life above-ground, various Hebrew scripture texts intriguingly offer, but they will have no access to it. This was in stark contrast to the thought and practices in almost every other ancient religion. Which is not to say that the spirit (*neshamah*) of a dead person did not roam and wander the Earth, in popular Jewish belief, after its body and soul (*ruah*) were buried in the Earth. Oral Torah offered many things that the written Torah hadn't. The Talmud discusses how the dead might be conscious of the goings-on of the living, and Jewish folklore from ancient and medieval days is full of wandering spirits. All of this persists today in many people's imaginations of what after-death is like. Witness the essayist John Berger, who is not Jewish and not necessarily speaking allegorically when he writes, “The Dead live, of course, beyond time and are ageless; yet, thanks to the constant arrival of newcomers, they are aware of what happens in history, and sometimes in general.”⁵

WHAT ABOUT DEM BONES?

The book of Ezekiel tells a slightly different story by the time of the later prophets. This is a sixth century BCE vision of the bones of the dead—those who were in the underworld—actually rising again:

The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord GOD, you know.” Then he said to me, “Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD.”

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Then he said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act,” says the LORD. (37:1–14)

The Christian interpretation of this passage usually says that it is all about Heaven, about the resurrection of the body. The Jewish view is, although just as metaphorical as the Christian one, quite different. The Jewish view is that those bones coming out of their graves are referring to a resurrection that is altogether much easier to comprehend: a coming to life of the people Israel, in the land Israel, after the Babylonian captivity, when the life and spirit of God’s people will be most evident once again.

There is one more passage from the Hebrew Bible that we have to consider. It is from the youngest book in all of those scriptures, Daniel. Look at what it has to say will happen one day in the future to those who have died:

At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever. (12:1–

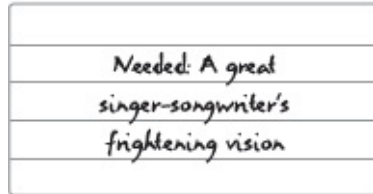
“Those who sleep in the dust of the earth” is definitely a reference to Sheol. But now, suddenly, we discover that they will “awake, some to everlasting life”! And, “some to shame and everlasting contempt”!

There is a lot in Daniel that is odd and doesn't fit, and, frankly, this passage is a shining example of that. I draw attention to it in order to present all the facts, because this one, single passage from the Hebrew Bible is the exception to the rule, and yet there it is. But this vision of Daniel reflects Greek thinking much more than it does Hebrew. Daniel marks an interesting point along the way from Sheol's being turned, eventually, by Greek philosophy and Christian theology, into Hell.

CHAPTER THREE

The Awful Underworld Psalm

FROM DANTE'S INDEX CARDS...



Let's not leave Sheol entirely, at least not yet. Centuries after the Torah was composed, the Psalms were written and sung. It is in Psalm 88 that we see the first sustained Hebrew vision of the afterlife and, like many, I find very little comfort in the reference. Perhaps you've purchased Hallmark greeting cards with lovely passages from the book of Psalms on them. I doubt that they included this one. The message of Psalm 88 is frightening, to say the least.

Give this ancient poem a close look and you will see that God simply forgets those who have passed from view. Which wouldn't be so bad, if the dead weren't also conscious of it:

O LORD, God of my salvation, when, at night, I cry out in your presence, let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry.

For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol. I am counted among those who go down to the Pit; I am like those who have no help, like those forsaken among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom you remember no more, for they are cut off from your hand.

You have put me in the depths of the Pit, in the regions dark and deep.

Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and you overwhelm me with all your waves. *Selah*

You have caused my companions to shun me; you have made me a thing of horror to them. I am shut in so that I cannot escape; my eye grows dim through sorrow. Every day I call on you, O LORD; I spread out my hands to you.

Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the shades rise up to praise you? *Selah*

Is your steadfast love declared in the grave, or your faithfulness in Abaddon?

Are your wonders known in the darkness, or your saving help in the land of forgetfulness?

(verses 1–12)

We see here the themes that were first introduced in the last chapter. For instance, Sheol is a place unknown, for the easily forgotten. The worries of the psalmist are that he has become like a dead person, meaning one who has gone, as all do, to this Sheol-place, to be gone and forgotten forever.

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