DANTE, THE BIBLE, AND ETERNAL TORMENT

Inventing Hell

JON M. SWEENEY

Foreword by Richard Rohr

SECOND EDITION

inventing HELL

DANTE, THE BIBLE, AND ETERNAL TORMENT

SECOND EDITION

JON M. SWEENEY

Foreword by Richard Rohr

acta

CONTENTS

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

Hell has remained all too present in the years since this book first appeared. The twentieth century, surely the most humanly-created hellish one to date, has been followed by one that is thus far no better, and perhaps worse. Also continuing are the ways in which religious fundamentalism feeds the violence that we perpetrate upon one another.

The audience for *Inventing Hell* has been as diverse as I'd hoped it would be when I first wrote it. For example, a distinguished professor of New Testament reviewed the book favorably in *The Christian Century*. But then, the Catholic-raised writer of horror classics, Anne Rice, also recommended it to her Facebook fans, and then more than 3,000 of them shared Rice's posting with friends of their own. She wrote, in part, "Why do we have such a fascination with the Hell of Dante's imagination? The sad truth is that Dante's hellish vision has been useful in promoting colonizing, crusades, and 'conversions.'" In all, people seemed to catch the humor in my book. And most of them—also as I'd hoped—understood it to be deeply serious.

Just as in the conclusion to the first edition, I continue to want to replace the ancient and medieval Hell that has been the darling of so much Christian preaching—the Hell that is debunked in these pages as an extra-biblical fantasy—with a new and improved Christian version of the afterlife. I have hope for a future in which we can imagine the reality of sin, the necessity of forgiveness, as well as the grace

of God, without all the ancient and medieval entrapments, gods, and tortures. If the ancient prophet was able to foresee our transforming swords into plowshares (thereby debunking even more ancient ideas of justice), then surely we also can see our way toward an afterlife that does the same.

The ancient Greek poet, Aristophanes was never mentioned in the first edition of this book, but his play, *The Frogs*, which is a comedy in the sense that the Inferno is a comedy, contains themes that became essential to Dante's understanding of Hell. *Frogs* is a play of adventure, an epic story of drama and satire. It is a romp through Hades, just as Dante's epic, much later, was a serious-sometimes-ridiculous romp through Hell. In *The Frogs*, Dionysos, the son of Zeus and god of the theater, decides to descend to Hades in search of the dead Euripedes, a lost and much-loved poet, in order to return him to Athens and the stage. As Dionysos rows across the river Styx on Charon's ferry, a chorus of frogs serenade them. This is the heart of the satire and the source of the title of the play. It is also the essence of what's wrong with any vision of the afterlife that centers on hellish places of vengeful punishment: They are designed to be, simply put, wicked. They aren't holy by any definition. Singing frogs put the ultimate lowliness on the ultimate dread, and they mock it.

Both that fifth-century BCE play and Dante's thirteenth-century *Inferno* are theological, and it is their theology that has always drawn audiences to their awful-cum-ordinary visions. For both Dante and Aristophanes, Hades is not just the ancient location of the dead: It is a geographically distinct place, set apart for pain and alienation, with scenes that are tantalizingly similar to what the dead find on earth

when they were alive: meadows and mountains, lakes and rivers, all turned to hellish ends. For both Dante and Aristophanes, a journey through Hades is intended to be real. The similarly between what Dionysos sees in *The Frogs* and what we read in canto VII of the *Inferno*, where the Wrathful and Slothful are seen to writhe miserably along the river Styx, is disgusting. When faced with that vision, anywhere, I intend to keep singing like a frog.

One last thing. It has become clear to me since the first edition of this book appeared that the preachers of the Hell debunked here are not the only culprits in miscommunicating a true vision of God. Also to blame are those who, closer to my own theological position, are the self-proclaimed progressives who tend to see a world without evil anywhere, without anyone to really blame for hellishness, and hence without much to fight against. For progressives like me, too often the existence of evil is discounted and diminished. We (for I include myself in this group much of the time) might be pointing just as many people to awful ends as are those who stand on street corners spewing garbage about the literal existence of a literary construction.

So, I asked my friend, Franciscan Friar Richard Rohr, to write a Foreword to the Second Edition about the nature of a forgiving God and the threat of eternal damnation. Please read what he has to say before we begin.

FOREWORD

To be frank, I think that perhaps no single belief has done more to undercut the spiritual journey of more Western people than the belief that God could be an eternal torturer of people who do not like him or disobey him. And this after Jesus exemplified and taught us to love our enemies and forgive offenses 70 x 7 times! The very idea of Hell (with a capital 'H'), as Jon Sweeney explains in this magnificent book, constructs a very toxic and fear-based universe, starting at its very center and ground. Hatred, exclusion, and mistreatment of enemies is legitimated all the way down the chain of command.

I do understand why some people feel they need some notion of Hell, or at least Purgatory, to live inside of what they feel is a coherent world-view, but they are not usually reminded that such "coherence" is maintained by a very low level notion of retributive justice and allows God to be conceived and feared as a narcissistic sadist, at least in the unconscious—while the wonderful and central biblical message of God's infinite mercy, love, patience, and endless capacity for forgiveness is fully sacrificed.

This cannot, and does not work, in my opinion, and I say this after directing individual souls and spiritual retreats for most of my life. Just a little honest observation of any inner dialogue of prayer tells a sincere seeker Hell does not exist in the way Dante imagined it.

It is even strange to respond to the question, "Do you believe in Hell?" This question, as stated by many well-meaning people, perverts

the core meaning of belief itself and the saving message of the Gospels. You cannot "believe" in Hell. Biblical "belief" is simply *to trust and have confidence in the goodness of God or reality* and cannot imply some notion of anger, wrath, or hopelessness at the center of all that is. You cannot have confidence in hatred or negativity as an attribute of the divine, unless you inhabit some kind of unparalleled parallel universe from mine!

Yet many sincere Christians (and some of other faiths as well) think they can "believe" in Hell. I think that is a completely negative and unstable foundation for any religion, especially a religion concerned about healing—which is just about all Jesus did while on Earth and presumably continues to do through the actions of his followers. So why posit the unlikely and unsubstantiated idea that all growth must end at the moment of our physical death? "Life is not ended, but merely changed" the Catholic funeral liturgy proclaims.

I suspect this before-and-after-death conundrum is what the very poorly formulated idea of Purgatory was trying to assert. It refused to limit Infinite Love to this finite world, and now neuroscientists are saying that the human brain cannot even form operative ideas of eternity, infinity, or limitless anything—which are basically other words for God.

Now you are beginning to see the problem. We have been trying to pull infinity and abundance into our scarcity model, where all things human operate. No wonder Jesus spoke almost constantly of the "kingdom of God." He knew our small *quid pro quo* kingdoms had too small a capacity for what he was trying to present and offer. He was always insisting on a much larger frame: absolute truth instead of

smaller relative truths.

No pun intended, but when you begin so deep in the pit that you can imagine God to be so petty and insecure as to tolerate nothing but correct worshippers, it is very hard to ever fully climb out of such a deep hole and ever allow yourself to enjoy the "wedding banquet." This is clearly Jesus' primary and recurring metaphor for the afterlife, mimicked in the Eucharist—a banquet to which "good and bad alike" are invited (see Matthew 22:10). And remember that line is from Matthew's Gospel, where most of the threatening metaphors of urgency, finality, and bad consequences are also found. (Poor Matthew, for all his inspiration, just could not let go of his vendetta against his own Jewish compatriots, and thus ends up using a lot of vendetta language to describe God.)

In terms of the Christian Scriptures, neither John nor Paul seem to need "lakes of fire" nor "weeping and gnashing of teeth" to communicate their message of ultimate concern. But I prefer Mark and Luke, who seem more concerned with healing and forgiveness in this world instead of trying to motivate us by threat and fear of punishment later. Does Jesus have two different policies? Forgiveness and unconditional love before death, and punitive vengeance afterwards? That would truly lead to incoherence, which is why so many early church leaders could not allow it.

When you start with threat of punishment, the lowest level of motivation—not even largely effective with children—you create a system that gathers people who operate at the basic fear level. And in my opinion, the vast majority of people who buy into the fear of Hell never move beyond it. In all sincerity, I think believe in Dante's Inferno

might be called the religious form of PTSD, and it is the only way I can explain highly educated people who still operate at a primitive and danger-filled fear of God. They are terrified of God and of death and of themselves, and are often—in practice if not in creed—atheists or agnostics, not out of bad will but for the sake of their sanity in what they perceive as a scary world.

Childhood conditioning and fearful images of God and eternal torture are imprinted on their brain forever—partially, as Jon Sweeney demonstrates, based on one medieval piece of literature by a very great poet. Unless and until a much larger and safer frame—authentic experiences of totally unearned love, for example—intervenes. And then their fear of Hell and expectation of retribution all disappear in one personal moment of *unearned forgiveness*. Of course, all forgiveness is unearned and, as Jesus points out, even we finite humans are often capable of it: "And if you, wicked as you are…then how much more…." (this from Matthew 7:11). It turns out that human beings can discover in ourselves a share in the Infinite Mercy and Eternal Faithfulness we Christians call God. Eternal damnation cannot be part of that discovery. Our soul knows God's love at its deepest level, and it is the bedrock of our faith. We dare not dislodge it, even as we enjoy and learn from Dante's delicious vision.

Richard Rohr, OFM
Center for Action and Contemplation
Albuquerque, New Mexico

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 a capital H—until the final pages. I'll do the same for the word Heaven, just to keep the two places even, at least punctuation-wise.

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 have a 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'd come ready with lots of questions.

Paul would probably be 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's a confidence-booster, too.

I would begin by asking questions about his pre-conversion life. Did you ever attend a gladiator 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 *caffe*, then move to *caffe Americano*, and probably wrap up by splitting a cannoli with a couple of *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 theo-

logian 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, or principalities and powers.… If their fables contained anything that concerned the true God, it was so 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 several 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 tact, 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 her translation of the *Inferno*, Mary Jo Bang, a poet who recently created an entertaining verse 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't 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 four. 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 several 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, I'm sure that tourists are filling hotels in Florence for "Dan Brown Packages," and one-day "Dan Brown Tours," during which they visit key sites in the life of Dante featured in Brown's recent *New York Times* number one best-selling novel, *Inferno*. Literary critics have bickered with the novelist over how and where he's gotten wrong the poet and his poem. Then came the movie, and all of this happened 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 is certainly due, in large part, to how the world's most dominant faith, Christianity, has embraced and preached it for centuries.

Doing Archeology 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, one through thirteen, 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 them 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 it 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 (in the same way that 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.

My hope is that 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 should become better able to dissect and appreciate what a magnificent and fantastic world Dante creates, and why it made sense to the people of the late Middle Ages. The world of his *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. 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 his ideas famous. Quick is 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 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 its 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, with their corporeal senses? The answer is: They just do! You'd think that once the body is discarded, what with 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 corpo-

real 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 died unbaptized, as well as "virtuous pagans," people such as 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 say 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, that the latter sin is worse than the former, and so are the punishments that are his 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 Ita—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 bloody 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 Donald Trump and Valdimir Putin 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 saw 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 questions 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 and 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, and his head thrust into Satan's 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 in salvation? Being a coward or a thief or a traitor is not enough to be condemned

to Hell, and if it is, may God help us all. But if you're asking such questions, don't be such a ninny!

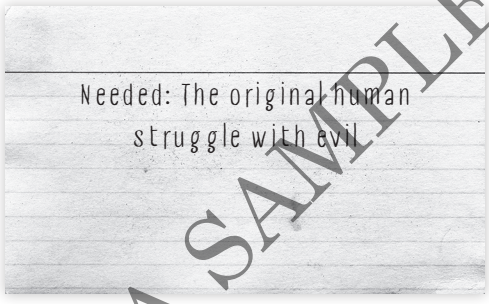
Dante's point is this: We receive in the afterlife what we have desired in this life, and grace doesn't overcome a human nature that's unaccommodating to it. As Thomas Aquinas puts it at the beginning of the *Summa Theologica*, "Grace doesn't replace nature, but perfects it." That's Dante's perspective, 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 1

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 in 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 where 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, 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 fat 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, post-college, 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 in 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 a 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 humans have been living on Earth since their 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 of Christianity, in the thought

of Augustine of Hippo, would it become common to identify this tempting 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 human 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 be-

ings trying to imagine why they often desire to do what's bad, or at least 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 inclinations 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 human 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 un-

necessary. Adam, Eve, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are simply said to gather with "their people" after death—meaning like dust, or perhaps as ghosts in the ground.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JON M. SWEENEY is an independent scholar, culture critic, editor, and publisher. He is the author of more than twenty-five books of popular medieval history, memoir, spirituality, and biography, including *The Pope Who Quit: A True Medieval Tale of Mystery, Death, and Salvation*, a History Book Club selection that has been optioned by HBO; and *Francis of Assisi in His Own Words: The Essential Writings*. He writes regularly for *America: The Jesuit Review*, and for *The Tablet*, in England. Raised an evangelical Protestant, Jon was received into the Catholic Church on the feast day of Saint Francis of Assisi in 2009. He is married and the father of four.

MORE PRAISE FOR *INVENTING HELL*

"If you let Jon Sweeney be your tour guide to Hell, you'll love the journey. You'll learn a lot about what you thought was in the Bible, but isn't, and about what you thought you knew about Hell, but now need to rethink. Jon's writing is a delight on every page."

Brian D. McLaren, author, *We Make the Road by Walking*

❧

"Beguiling and totally delicious…solidly crafted and deadly serious. Sweeney has taken on one of the most convoluted and dangerous areas of theology and deftly shown not only its ideational history, but also its human ramifications. His scholarship is impeccable and his sense of humor ubiquitous. Dante himself would have loved this one!"

Phyllis Tickle, author, *The Age of the Spirit*

❧

"Far from a dry, academic discourse, *Inventing Hell* makes for great reading. The book reveals the little-known confluence of theology, culture, and literature that has shaped our notions of the afterlife. Every minister, priest, rabbi, and sheikh needs to read this book, and so do we all."

Rabbi David Zaslow, author, *Jesus: First-Century Rabbi*

MAYBE YOU SHOULDN'T BELIEVE IN THE HELL YOU DO...OR DON'T...BELIEVE IN

Do you think Hell has nine levels, each one worse than the previous? Do you think that Hell is so hot it can burn your skin right off your body? Do you think that God's punishment will fit the sins we commit? If so, you think that because of Dante, not the Bible. Maybe the Hell you do (or don't) believe in is the one the Renaissance literary master Dante Alighieri described in the Inferno section of his epic poem *The Divine Comedy*. This is the Hell of eternal damnation that most of us were raised to fear, the place where, we are told by Dante, "Abandon all hope, you who enter here." But it turns out that Dante's vision of Hell is not based very much on the Hebrew or the Christian Scriptures but on an amalgam of sources from Greek and Roman philosophy to Medieval morality plays to Islam's Qu'ran—all stitched together by an accomplished artist to scare the bejesus out of all of us.

This story of how Hell got "invented" is engaging, erudite, and illuminating. It is also hilarious. Jon Sweeney, convert to Catholicism and married to a rabbi, author of two dozen of his own religious books and editor of hundreds of others, delves into the question of Hell with intellectual curiosity, sincere faith, and good humor. He pretty much proves that it was Dante who gave us the Hell we have, and then he admonishes us to think again about the hell that exists around us every day.

Spiritual guru Richard Rohr contributes an important new Foreword to this updated second edition in which he says, "To be frank, I think that perhaps no single belief has done more to undercut the spiritual journey of more Western people than the belief that God could be an eternal torturer of people who do not like him or disobey him. And this after Jesus exemplified and taught us to love our enemies and forgive offenses 70 x 7 times! The very idea of Hell (with a capital 'H'), as Jon Sweeney explains in this magnificent book, constructs a very toxic and fear-based universe, starting at its very center and ground. Hatred, exclusion, and mistreatment of enemies is legitimated all the way down the chain of command." So, allow this book to help you reflect on what you believe about evil and what happens to bad people and just how merciful your God might be. It could be the most important theology book you ever read.

"I don't recommend a story in hell. But I highly recommend this book on it."
—James Martin, SJ, author, *Jesus: A Pilgrimage*

"How refreshing to read a book which recognizes that fear does not inspire morality and no one faith is given the key to paradise. In fact, it's heavenly!"
—Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, author, *God's Paintbrush* and *Midrash: Reading the Bible with Question Marks*

Christianity/Hell

acta

ISBN 978-0-87946-596-4

51595>

9 780879 465964

www.actapublications.com $15.95