

The Notions of Space and the Other World: Comparisons between Dante's Comedy and Jewish Medieval Thought¹

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Lecture at "Dante's Rhetoric of Space(s) Contemporary Dante Research" Conference, Tallinn.

My lecture consists of three parts. In the first part I analyze a special aspect of Dante and the Hebrew Culture; namely, Dante's opinion on the Hebrew language. In the second part I highlight a few ideas on space in Jewish philosophy. In the third part I focus on the analogies and contrasts of the Other World's representation in Dante and Jewish authors, principally in Immanuel of Rome's *Ha-Tofet ve-ha-Eden*.

I. Besides the numerous Biblical characters found at different places in the *Divine Comedy*, we also find a few Hebraisms which may play opposite roles. In canto VII and XXXI of *Hell*, the Hebrew language is the basis of *glossolalic* parody², while in the first *terzina* of canto VII of *Paradise* two sacred languages, Latin and the Hebrew, are mixed.³

Specific references of the Hebrew language occur in the *DVE* and the XXVIth of *Paradise*. In the *De vulgari eloquentia*⁴ (I, vi, 4-5) Dante writes that the first language on Earth was Hebrew. It was spoken by Adam and his descendants until the presumptuous sin of building the tower of Babel (and this form of language was inherited only by Hebrews.) Two chapters earlier⁵ we read that – although in the Bible it was Eve to say the first word – for an intelligent man it isn't doubtful that the first to speak had to be Adam, and his first word had to be *El*, name of God.

In *Paradise* XXVI Adam gives a palinode of this theory⁶ which contrasts with the statements of the *DVE* in three major aspects. Firstly, in *Paradise* Adam says that the language spoken by him had already been extinct when they started to build the tower of Babel. The second difference results from the first: while in the *DVE* Dante declares that the

¹ The presentation is supported by the European Union and co-funded by the European Social Fund. Project number: TÁMOP-4.2.2/B-10/1-2010-0012

² „Papè satàn, papè satàn, aleppe” e „Raphèl mai amèche zabi et almi”.

³ «Osanna, sanctus Deus sabaòth, / superillustrans claritate tua / felices ignes horum malacòth!».

⁴ *DVE* I, vi, 4 ...certam formam locutionis a Deo cum anima prima concreatam fuisse. ...:qua quidem forma omnis lingua loquentium uteretur, nisi culpa presumptionis humane dissipata fuisset, ut inferius ostendetur. 5. Hac forma locutionis locutus est Adam; hac forma locutionis locuti sunt omnes posteri eius usque ad edificationem turris Babel, que "turris confusionis" interpretatur; hanc formam locutionis hereditati sunt filii Heber, qui ab eo dicti sunt Hebrei.

⁵ iv, 3. Quid autem prius vox primi loquentis sonaverit, viro sane mentis in promptu esse non titubo ipsum fuisse quod "Deus" est, scilicet El...

⁶ *Pd.* XXVI, 124-138.

La lingua ch'io parlai fu tutta spenta/ innanzi che a l'ovra inconsumabile / fosse la gente di Nembròt attenta: // ché nullo effetto mai razionabile, / per lo piacere uman che rinovella // seguendo il cielo, sempre fu durabile. / *Opera naturale è ch'uom favella; / ma così o così, natura lascia // poi fare a voi secondo che v'abbella.* / Pria ch'i' scendessi a l'infernale ambascia, // **I s'appellava in terra il sommo bene** / onde vien la letizia che mi fascia: / **e El si chiamò poi:** e ciò convene, / ché l'uso d'i mortali è come fronda/ in ramo, che sen va e altra vene.

name of God was *El* in the time of Adam in Paradise; Adam says that in his time the name of God was *I*, and only later they called him *El*. The third difference is while in the DVE the changes of the language (i.e. the disappearance of a single language and the appearance of many others) are due to divine punishment, according to the recantation of canto XXVI the changing nature of language is a natural effect of man's rational activity.

One possible explanation for the change of the Dantean thesis concerning the name of God and the language is given by Umberto Eco in his *Ricerca della lingua perfetta*. Eco suggests that Dante may have been familiar with the ideas of Abraham Abulafia, a mystical Jewish author, who spent more than ten years in Italy after 1260.

According to Abulafia, even the elementary parts of the text, the letters have an independent meaning. Therefore, each letter of God's name, the Tetragrammaton YHWH, can function as a divine name. In fact, the only convincing interpretation that the divine name *I* mentioned by Dante is the Hebrew letter YOD. Of course, these two letters have the same origin: from the old Phoenician yod developed the Hebrew yod, the Greek iota and the Latin "I".

Another argument of Abulafia can give a key to the speech of Adam in *Paradise*, where he distinguishes the language spoken in the Garden of Eden and the language spoken in the time of the confusion at Babel. A disciple of Abulafia states that originally two languages existed. One was the language of creation, first only known by Adam, who passed it on to Seth and later to Noah. The other was a consensual language of Adam, Eve and their children. The confusion of tongues at Babel only affected the second language.

To understand the importance and role of the two names of God (*El* and *I*) mentioned by Dante, we should also consider other Cabalistic explanations, mostly from commentaries on *Sefer Jetzirah*, 'book of formation' or 'book of creation', or related to the circle of Abraham Abulafia.

Researching God's names is the most ancient topic in Jewish philosophy as it precedes researching language itself.⁷ Creation was possible due to one of God's secret names⁸ and Creation is sealed with and bounded by the limits of this name.⁹ In mystical thought, a divine name is a concentration of divine power. The words of God as creator are identified as the

⁷ Gershom Sholem, *A kabbala helye*, 113-115.

⁸ nem biztos, h ez a tetragramma.

⁹ Hai Gaon, *Rashi* (XI-XII.sz.).

divine name.¹⁰ Mystical thinkers concluded that everything in the world is established from the combinations of the letters of the divine language.¹¹

El is the oldest Semitic term for God and it is probably an abbreviated form of Elohim.¹² This name of God is present in the first chapter of Genesis (Gen. 1,1-2,3). In the original version of the second chapter (Gen. 2,4-22) God's name was Yahweh which was changed to 'Yahweh Elohim,' thus identifying the God of Genesis I with that of Genesis II, and giving the versions an appearance of uniformity.¹³

The first two most important attributes of God (*middoth*) were symbolized by the letter Yod and the letters of El: Yod as the measure of the Creator's mercy, and El as the measure of the Judging God.¹⁴ These two attributes will characterize Dante's as well as Manoello's image of God.

A follower of Abulafia's (the anonymous author of Sha'arey Zedek) says that the letter Yod may even represent Man, the last of the complex creatures. He argues that Yod, as a semicircle, is the half of something greater, which Man can reconstruct. The form yod itself comprises two yods: one symbolizing the human, the other the divine part. Each of these is represented graphically by a semicircle, the shape of the yod in Hebrew alphabet. The cleaving together of these semicircles results the formation of the complete circle.

Therefore, the letter yod in mystical Jewish thought in Dante's time, does not only refer to God and the act of Creation, but also to Man, and his mystical union with God.

Devekut, Man's clinging on to God, is pointing to a complete mystical union between the human and the divine intellect. This notion is central in ecstatic Kabbalah and is represented in the writings of Abraham Abulafia.

II. The relationship of God and space in medieval Jewish thought

The word *maqom* (מקום 'place', 'space') appears in the Hebrew Bible over 300 times and in the Torah, over a hundred. It is first mentioned in Genesis, chapter I, when God creates the world and collects all water to one "place" (I,9). The location of two basic elements is the subject of Dante's *Questio de Aqua et Terra*. This Dantean work has a precedent in the

¹⁰ Zsolt.33.6 „JHWH szava alkotta az eget.”

¹¹ Scholem, 116.

¹² GOD – EJ, 7, 763.

¹³ Graves-Patai, 15.

¹⁴ Battistoni, Introduzione a Manoello, XIX-XX.

discussion between Moses Ibn Tibbon and Jacob ben Sheshet Gerondi on the same subject a century before.¹⁵

The relations between God and space are discussed extensively in theological literature. In rabbinic literature we find three space-related Hebrew names of God: *samayim* (שמים 'heavens'), *sekinah* (שכינה 'presence') and *maqom*. In biblical cosmology *samayim* refers to the upper world; and though Solomon praising God, said 'Heaven itself, the highest heaven cannot contain thee'¹⁶, the Biblical God dwells in Heaven and makes them holy by his presence: and becomes one name of God with the natural process of metonymy. The verbal root of *sekinah* is *sakan* (שכן 'to dwell') and the noun refers variously to God's presence, dwelling, nearness and intimacy.¹⁷

Maqom as a name of God illustrates his omnipresence. From the works of Philo, we are well aware of the difference between God and men also regarding this quality: "When a person comes down he must leave one place and occupy another. But God fills all things ... [and is] everywhere ..." ¹⁸ The omnipresence of God is the notion the Dantean *Paradise* starts with (*La gloria di colui che tutto move / per l'universo penetra, e risplende / in una parte più e meno altrove*) and is explained in detail by mostly biblical and Aristotelian citations in the Letter to Can Grande della Scala (288-411).

Jewish scholars of the Bible and Dante think alike that space and time are God's creations. God is often named Ein-Sof ('infinite') which can refer to spatial as well as temporal infinity. Medieval thinkers tried to harmonize God's omnipresence with the creation of space, for in the Jewish notion of Creation, God first created an empty space, and then he created the whole universe in this space.¹⁹

The Lurianic Kabbalah gives a possible answer to this problem. The **Tzimtzum** ("contraction / self-limitation") is a term of the teaching of Isaac Luria, but partly it was already present in Medieval Kabbalah.

According to Luria's theory, God began the process of creation by "contracting" his infinite light in order to allow for a "conceptual space" in which finite and seemingly independent realms could exist. This primordial initial contraction formed an "empty space" (*Khalal Hapanoi*).

¹⁵ Dante Alighieri, EJ, 5, 430. See also: BATTISTONI, VAJDA, Sandra DEBENEDETTI STOWE, 102-104.

¹⁶ I Kings 8:27.

¹⁷ See: Copenhaver, Brian P., *Jewish Theologies of Space in the Scientific Revolution*, Annals Of Science, 37, (1980), 489-548.

¹⁸ *De confusione linguarum*, 134-139.

¹⁹ Lásd.: pl. Zohar.

God fully withdrew from the empty space he created and contracted within himself. But the Yod of the divine name stayed in this empty space, and Creation started from the power concentrated in this pointwise Yod. This also shows the importance of Yod in Jewish thought. In my opinion, this tradition is relevant to the interpretation of I as the first divine name in Dante.

III. A few words about **Visions before Dante**

There are three important ancient Jewish models for medieval visionary literature, for the *Comedy* included. In the centre of the Torah we find the experience of a journey – the Exodus and the conquest of the homeland – which could have happened due to God's grace and power.²⁰ This is a *metamorphosis supernaturalis*²¹, given that the Jews from the miserable state of slavery escaped miraculously by God's help and revelation. The theophany, revealed after an ascent, to one selected man, who has to return to the people with God's message, will be recurrent elements of the visions of the Otherworld. It is not by chance that this episode becomes the example of the four-levelled interpretation in the *Convivio*.

The second biblical model is the visions of Ezekiel, which greatly influenced the *Merkava* (*merkava* means Chariot) literature: these are mostly hymns heard during ascents to heaven.²² Ezekiel's chariot is explicitly one of the important models for the Carro of the Dantean procession in the Earthly Paradise. Another model is the Enoch-legend, part of the apocryphal literature of the Second Temple period,²³ which mythological motifs continued to exist in oral tradition and influenced significantly Jewish medieval legends and mystical literature.

The most important medieval Jewish visionary author before Dante was Abraham ibn Ezra, who lived in the first half of the twelfth century and spent some time of his life in Italy, at Verona²⁴. Ibn Ezra plays two important roles from our point of view. The first is his intermediary role, being the great herald of Arabic science among European Jewry. The second is his intermediary role between the Spanish Jewish Culture and the Italian one. Ibn Ezra was either friend or a relative of several major Spanish Jewish authors, like Abraham Ibn

²⁰ Boman

²¹ For the four types of *metamorphoses* see Guido da Pisa, Bodo Guthmüller.

²² The Ma'aseh Merkabah ("Work of the Chariot" מרכבה מעשה) is a Hebrew-language Jewish mystical text dating from the Gaonic period (VIth – XIth Century) which comprises a collection of hymns recited by the "descenders" and heard during their ascent. It is part of the tradition of Merkabah mysticism and the Hekhalot literature.

²³ EJ, v.6, 441-442.

²⁴ and in Lucca, Mantova and Rome.

Daud, predecessor of Maimonides; Mose ibn Ezra, the Neo-Platonist poet; and Yehuda ha-Levi, author of the *Sefer ha-Kuzari*.²⁵

Ibn Ezra's allegorical-visionary tale, the *Chay ben Mekitz* is an adaptation of Avicenna's *Hayy ibn Yakzan* ("the living one, son of the wakeful one"), but Ibn Ezra introduced a few changes which has striking parallels with Dante's *Comedy* as it is declared by Gotthard Strohmaier.²⁶

In the introductory vision of the *Chay ben Mekitz* the narrator journeys with three companions. The first is a liar who mixes truth with falsehood, although the narrator depends on his informations. The second, often compared to a lion,²⁷ is angry. The third is always greedy. In the field the four friends meet an elderly man with a shining face who greets them kindly: he is the personification of the Active Intellect. While in Avicenna's version Hay ibn Yakzan refuses the wish of the narrator to take him into the regions of the invisible world; in Abraham Ibn Ezra the narrator is allowed to join the active intellect to begin a journey with him. These three friends have parallel characteristics as Dante's wild beasts in the Ist canto of the *Inferno*: after the *lonza*, appears the lion, interpreted traditionally as the symbol of *ira*, and the she-wolf as the symbol of greed.²⁸ And during his journey Dante will be guided by the wise Virgil and Beatrice, who has already been identified as the symbol of the active /heavenly intellect.²⁹

The walls of fire of the Earthly Paradise – described in the *Purgatory*, XXVII, 7-60 – is one of the few elements of the *Comedy* to have Jewish antecedents. The Garden of Eden was imagined on the top of a mountain in the Jewish tradition as well.³⁰ According to a *midrash* the Paradise is surrounded by three walls of fire of different colors.³¹ In Ibn Ezra – and it is not in the tale of Avicenna – we find the exact same scene: the narrator with his leader is ascending through the realm of the four elements towards the sphere of the moon. After crossing the air, they stand before a wall of fire. The narrator, who speaks in the first person, is full of fear, but his leader steps forward and says to him, "Come, oh ye blessed of the Lord" (Gen. 24,31) and so they pass through unharmed.³²

²⁵ Battistoni, 15-20.

²⁶ Strohmayer, Ibn Sina, 467-470.

²⁷ Strohmayer, Ibn Sina, 469.

²⁸ Strohmayer, Ibn Sina, 468-469.

²⁹ Francesco Perez, *La Beatrice svelata*, Palermo, 1865. See: Strohmayer.

³⁰ Graves-Patai, 63.

³¹ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/11900-paradise>

³² Strohmayer, 467.

A hidden Jewish element in the cantos of the Earthly Paradise can be the presence of the seven candelabra in the procession.³³ This image recalls the seven planetary deities, borrowed from Babylon and Egypt, who are commemorated in the seven branches of the Menorah.³⁴

III.b. Manoello's vision

The first imitation of Dante's *Comedy* was that of Immanuel of Rome. His *Maḥberet ha-Tofet ve-ha-Eden (Poem of Hell and Paradise)* is the 28th and final section of his *Maḥberot*, which is a collection of all his works. In his description Immanuel describes a journey to the next world, in which he is guided by Daniel, who, in the opinion of some scholars, is Dante himself. The *Hell and Paradise* is a fusion of Hebrew tradition, Biblical language and Dantean imitation.

Immanuel's poem, just like Dante's one, begins with the protagonist's age: he is already sixty, wearing the premonitory marks of death. In a prophetic vision, Daniel visits the poet and reveals that his journey is a result of divine grace. Immanuel, understanding Daniel's angelic nature, falls to the ground, just like Dante did after the Francesca episode. Then Daniel addresses Immanuel with the words, "Why are you sleeping?" which recalls Matelda's words (*Surgi che fai?*³⁵) to the sleeping Dante in the Earthly Paradise.

Similarly to other Jewish descriptions of the afterlife, we do not find a detailed topographical structure, neither a systematic emplacement for the souls. The Hell of Immanuel – as Dante's one – is located in the bowels of Earth. At the beginning of the journey, the travellers are descending on a dark, rough road and reach a ruined bridge (similar to the bridges of the Malebolge) through which the lost souls are guided to the gate of Hell.

The evil angels drag the first group of the damned, whose sins are written on their forehead, to a great pyre. According to the Kabbalah, the evil leaves its marks on the sinners' forehead, so one's list of sins becomes visible.³⁶ This concept is present in Dante's start for the passing through the Purgatory with seven P letters on the forehead.

In Hell, the travellers meet about 20 groups of sinners, but they often have more than one particular sin, and their punishment is often cumulated. Similarly to Dante, Manoello places the ancient philosophers and lustful women in one of the first parts of Hell. And the

³³ vv. 37-60.

³⁴ Graves-Patai, Introduction, see also Graves-Patai, I.6.

³⁵ Canto XXXII, v. 72.

³⁶ Battistoni, 11. (Moshe Idel.)

lustful women lament with voices of the doves, and moan like ostriches of the oasis.³⁷ The simile of the doves and the repeated images of birds in relation with lustful women resemble Dante's description in the Vth of the *Inferno*.

The punishment of dice players, bitten by scorpions, lions and panthers in an abyss,³⁸ echoes in the elements of the bites and the maledictions of the damned the state of the thieves in the Dantean *Inferno*. But their relation is more evident to one punishment of the *Liber Scalae Machometi*³⁹ where the sinners are tormented by scorpions and snakes.

The suicides' presentation (their souls are and will be separated from their bodies) is based on the Dantean description in the 13th canto even in its rhetorical figures.⁴⁰ The find most striking similarities between Dante's and Manoello's works in the protagonists' attitudes. They always ask the souls or their guide to understand who these souls are and why they are punished that way, and the dialogues of Manoello are recalling the Dantean ones. The protagonists often react with compassion: sometimes they almost faint because of the intense of the pity.

The *Paradise* of Manoello is significantly shorter than Dante's *Paradiso*. In this part of the poem we find fewer similarities between the two works. One of them is the long ladder which leads from Hell to Paradise in Manoello, which resembles the golden staircase of the XXI-XXII cantos of *Paradiso*. This element has antecedents in the biblical Jacob's ladder and Mohamed's scale.

After Manoello has spoken to important religious writers, and watched the faithful on canopies, and spoken to Moses whose face is so shining that cannot be seen, Daniel commands him to write down everything he saw for the good of mankind – just like Dante.

³⁷ vv.100-105.

³⁸ 110 skk., de is: vv. 353-360. (dragon, spider)

³⁹ Alhurba.

⁴⁰ 345-350. Rhetorical figures: e.g. repetitions, antitheses.