Augustine and Dante's Inferno: Depicting Hell

Rex D. Barnes III

Abstract

In Book II of *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine of Hippo emphasizes that attributing religious value to iconographic representations of Christ and holy figures is scripturally unfounded and a conventionally inappropriate institution. According to the early Christian bishop, images—understood as signs—hold little religious significance. While Augustine's original theory of language and signs in *On Christian Doctrine* is foundational for biblical interpretation and interpreting Christian iconography within Western Christianity, his arguments could not contain currents of cultural and linguistic change that generated uncountable new conceptions of textual and visual meaning over time.

One fascinating example of the limitations of Augustine’s theory of signs comes almost a millennium after his lifetime. The critical philosopher and poet, Dante Alighieri, presents a problematic scenario when considering Augustine’s organization of language, text and symbols. This is because Dante’s famous poem, *The Divine Comedy*, re-appropriates canonical scripture by creatively interpreting the ambiguity of the Bible and medieval Catholic doctrine. More specifically, Dante re-presents Hell (in *Inferno*) through textual imagery and rhetorical ability rather than visual depictions.

This essay thus considers to what extent Augustine would have praised Dante for his personal, artistic talent as a poet, while critically questioning Dante's poem for instigating subversive mental images that signify a nonexistent reality within Christian canon. To this end, I wish to explore Augustine's theory of signs in order to compare and contrast Hell in Dante's *Inferno* with a potential Augustinian response to the infernal imagery that arose thereafter. If Augustine rejected veneration of religious images, or religious education through iconography, then I wish to consider: how would Augustine have responded to Dante's poem and would he have blamed the medieval Italian for the literal implications Hell would come to designate?

References

Augustine's book *Confessions* and Dante's *Purgatorio* both see humans as pilgrims on a journey that either brings them to God or away from God. These books have challenged readers, like myself, as they draw insight from them to apply to their own spiritual journey. In these books there are many themes that apply to Augustine and Dante’s spiritual journey. The theme that I am choosing to consider is evil and sin. In *Dante's Inferno*, Dante Alighieri comes across a groaning tree, as he makes his way through the seventh level of Hell. Dante was introduced to Pier della Vigna, a trusted counselor of Frederick II, in the form of a tree as his punishment. As Dante enters conversation with Pier della Vigna it become clear to the true significance of della Vigna's contrapasso. In other similar illustrated manuscripts of *Dante's Inferno*, multiple illustrations were used to depict the events described in a canto. In addition, most of the space in a page was given to the illustration and associated commentary while the text portion was smaller in comparison. Therefore, a single canto spread over multiple pages. Botticelli's text and illustration arrangement innovates by presenting the text on a single page in four vertical columns. Botticelli uses thirteen drawings to illustrate the eighth circle of Hell, depicting ten chasms that Dante and Virgil descend through a ridge.[2]. Dimensions[edit]. *Inferno X*, with just Dante (in red) and Virgil (in blue) coloured. Each page of the manuscript was approximately 32 cm high by 47 cm wide. Dante's *Inferno* is an allegorical poem telling the story of Dante's journey through hell, led by Virgil the Roman poet. In the poem, Hell is depicted as nine circles of suffering located within the center of Earth. The arrangement of the poem takes the reader step by step through greater and
greater sins. The content of the book shows the different punishments for sins, which are symbolic of the sins themselves. Augustine's Confessions and Dante Alighieri's Inferno are both stories about lost men on a journey to find salvation and God's grace in heaven. Augustine's first sinful experience happens in book II when he steals from a pear tree. (Vaught, 54) While Augustine is studying at Carthage his sinful nature takes over again.