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# Stars and Spirituality in the Cosmology of Dante's *Commedia*

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**Richard L. Poss**

**Abstract.** Combining Aristotelian and Platonic philosophy in a complex cosmological system, Dante employs astrology to provide contextual coherence for the reader on earth and for the pilgrim on his journey to God. Stars are spiritualized in the *Commedia* to provide glimpses of divinity, visible on Earth, from beyond the material world. Imbued with life, intelligence, and love, stars first guide then inspire the pilgrim in increasingly profound levels of meaning. This paper examines the relationship between the astronomical and cosmological functions of the stars and their metaphoric, poetic, and spiritual functions in the pilgrim's journey.

## **Introduction**

It is commonly accepted that astronomy and astrology were not effectively separated during the Middle Ages, and that Dante's *Commedia* is permeated by a Christianized astrology which does not differ markedly from the main currents of medieval philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Astrology's position in medieval culture was an exalted one. Macrobius even suggests that rational and speculative thought, the highest faculties of the soul, originate in the heaven of Saturn, which was associated with the study of astrology. In his *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* he describes the values inherent in each of the planetary spheres and the manner in which the soul descends through the heavens and 'acquires each of the attributes which it will exercise later. In the sphere of Saturn it obtains reason and understanding, called *logistikon* and *theoretikon*'.<sup>2</sup> In Dante's epic journey, astrology provides the cosmological coherence which allows the poet to bring together science, religion, poetic mythmaking, and a profound mystical vision. The *Paradise* in particular is organized around Aristotle's cosmos with the astronomical bodies themselves spiritualized according to theological categories and astrological associations. The poet's successful blending of all these elements forges what Giuseppe Mazzotta has called 'translation of Beatitude into astronomical terms'.<sup>3</sup>

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In Canto I of the *Purgatory*, Dante emerges from the underworld to see four bright stars. They are both realistic phenomena (Dante may have heard of the Southern Cross from travelers) and crucial symbols which tell the pilgrim what is in store at this stage of his journey. They are the cardinal virtues Prudence, Temperance, Justice, and Fortitude, and he sees them as lights in the sky, ideals toward which he can strive and which he may attain. Later in Canto 8 he sees another three stars which are the theological virtues, Faith, Hope and Charity. The four stars from that morning have rotated beneath the mountain. The vision of the three stars signals that his journey has moved into a new phase. The first four are prior or pagan virtues, superseded by the three which are considered specifically Christian virtues. Later still, in Canto 31, just after Dante is led into the river Lethe by Matelda who dips his head beneath the surface so that he drinks the water which takes away the memory of sin, he is led to dance with four lovely maidens, who join their hands over him. These four maidens are the four cardinal virtues realized, and they say 'Here we are nymphs and in the heaven, stars'.<sup>4</sup>

To understand the famous harmony into which astronomy, religion, poetry, and mythology are joined in Dante's *Commedia* is to appreciate the medieval taste for allegory. When the soul embodies Prudence, Temperance, Justice, and Fortitude, it is dancing with nymphs before a griffin in the Garden of Eden. The stars sighted from the surface of the earth are stars again in heaven, but what kind of stars? In Aristotle's physics, they are in some respects a form of matter and, in other respects, live beings with desire or love. Are they made of fire, or do they result from the heat caused by friction with the neighboring sphere? Even Aristotle does not resolve these issues.<sup>5</sup> According to Plato (in the *Timaeus*, to which Dante had indirect access) the stars are simply souls, who are implanted into human bodies and who eventually return to reside in the heavens as stars.<sup>6</sup> Dante is influenced by these views but modifies them considerably in accordance with traditional Christian orthodoxy. In the *Paradise* Dante encounters such figures as Boethius and Albertus Magnus, and they wheel and dance 'like stars that circle close to the fixed poles'.<sup>7</sup> Yet Dante makes clear to the reader that the angelic souls do not really dwell in the spheres of the sun, Mars, Jupiter and the other planets, but merely appear there as images for educational purposes, that is, to train Dante's spiritual insight so that he can at last, at the very end of the *Paradise*, see the angels, heaven, and God, as they truly are.

Dante's *Commedia* surveys the universe of the 13<sup>th</sup> century in the form of a pilgrim's journey through the afterlife. All the places where a soul

might end its journey are visited and described. One of the first things a reader notices about the *Commedia* is the coherence of the whole, the intricate system of consistent patterns and correspondences throughout the poem. This universe is a synthesis of Aristotle, Virgil, and Biblical and Patristic writings, whose didactic cosmology is designed to reveal insights of ever increasing complexity as we follow the pilgrim through the circles of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. The Earth where we live out our lives is only a small part of this system, and as we progress through the work we are taught to see the world from a different perspective. The poem itself is in many ways a rite of passage, a ritual of initiation, and to read the poem is to undergo this rite, a painful rite of endurance at first, and at last an ecstatic revelation of otherworldly joys.

Stars play an important role in holding this system together, both in terms of the part they play in the cosmology and in terms of the poetic and symbolic function they have in the fabric of the literary work. Dante alerts us to this important function of the stars by ending the last line of each canticle with the word 'stars.' In each case the context is such as to support the psychological and spiritual differences that separate the three realms. By closely examining the various ways in which Dante employs stars we can gain an insight into both the cosmology of the poem and into the spiritual power of the pilgrim's journey.

### **Inferno**

The souls in Hell never see stars and they have no hope. Their future is sealed – they will never see God. The relationship between the impossibility of seeing stars and the certainty of never seeing God, between the removal of stars and the removal of hope, is central to Dante's treatment of astronomy. But this approaches the question the way everything is read in the *Inferno*, that is, negatively, or upside down, with the question and the answers inverted. From the perspective of the completed *Paradise*, it assumes a systematic coherence. The pilgrim sees stars only in the very last lines of the *Inferno*, after the long and tortuous journey through the bowels of Hell:

'I saw the lovely things the heavens hold,  
and we came out to see once more the stars'.<sup>8</sup>

Here the hopelessness of all those levels of human failing begins to be ameliorated. Still, while Dante the pilgrim does not see stars while in Hell, Dante the poet uses images of the stars at several points in the

*Inferno*. In Canto 2, when Virgil relates how Beatrice came down to Limbo to call upon him, he says that her eyes were 'of light more bright than any star'.<sup>9</sup> Beatrice is the woman Dante loved on earth, and in the *Commedia* she is the bearer of truth in the form of revealed theology. Her eyes shine with a light which carries in them both the promise of Dante's vision of heaven and also the light of womanly beauty in the old courtly love tradition. When Beatrice comes to Virgil, it is revealed or theological wisdom coming to summon Reason to go to Dante's aid, and the light of the star burns in Beatrice, rather than in the pale classical virtues represented by Virgil.

Dante's poetic universe is complex and interwoven with correspondences and interrelations. The stars are always reminders of the eternity which prevails in heaven, outside of time, but they are also invoked as indicators of the passage of time as in Canto 7, when Virgil says to Dante that they must hurry as 'the stars that rose when I set out for you are going down'.<sup>10</sup> In Canto 3, the shrieks and lamentations of the souls who refused to choose between good and evil echo through the 'aere senza stelle,' the 'air without stars'.<sup>11</sup> Why Dante should mention that there are no stars in the air at this particular place is part of a strategy of steadily increasing exclusion of hope and ideals, telling us what is not in the underworld, increasing in severity as we descend. In Canto 16 one of the souls implores to be mentioned if the pilgrim ever makes it back to the world above, saying 'if you survive these unlit regions and return to gaze upon the lovely stars,' so that the stars refer to something beyond the earth, which is remembered as one of the chief pleasures of time on earth.<sup>12</sup> This allusion to stars as eternal truth is continued when it is remembered in Canto 20 that Aruns, one of the soothsayers, lived in a marble cave where he could look out and 'observe the sea and stars with ease'.<sup>13</sup> Stars are a spatial indicator when Ulysses in Canto 26 relates that the stars he had known were gone and did not show above the ocean floor, the geographical reference revealing that they had traveled into the southern hemisphere.

In Canto 15, Brunetto Latini counsels his former pupil to 'follow your star' using the old nautical metaphor. 'You cannot fail to reach your port of glory'.<sup>14</sup> Here 'glory' is essentially pagan fame. Latini's conception of glory is scaled down to his level of comprehension. The nautical metaphor is neither erotic nor spiritual but limited to renown. Latini and Dante have a great affection for each other in this canto, and Latini's devotion to his former student expresses itself in the highest kind of aspiration of which he is capable.

The nautical metaphor appears again in Canto 22, with 'ships that sail by landmarks or by stars', a casual image of things seen on earth, back in the sweet world, but it reinforces the notion that even in this dark restricted hopeless world, stars are out there to guide. Again in Canto 26, the poet writes that he must stay on his course: 'I restrain my talent / lest it run a course that virtue has not set; for if a lucky star or something better / has given me this good, I must not misuse it'.<sup>15</sup> The poet's responsibility to the star requires him to hold back his creativity and ingenuity, to find the path of the good using poetic power from the star, or 'something better'. These variations on the ancient nautical metaphor combine their associations from love poetry, devotional poetry, and a Platonic zeal for ever higher truth. The word 'comedy' in its medieval context means that the story begins badly and ends well, moving upward from low to high. So when Dante sees, with enormous relief, the stars in the last lines of the *Inferno*, we sense the possibility of hope which has been missing for so long. Ending each canticle with the word 'stars', with the pilgrim looking up into the heavens, reinforces this central theme.

### **Purgatory**

Among the colorful images of rebirth, baptism, and new hope which fill the first Canto of *Purgatory*, the pilgrim looks up into the sky to see the planet Venus in the constellation Pisces, and near the southern celestial pole he sees the four bright stars already mentioned. As Mark Musa points out in his notes to *Purgatory*, 'From this moment on we will never be able to forget the heavens above the Pilgrim, the heavens toward which he will be climbing throughout his journey in Purgatory and into which he will enter, still continuing to ascend, at the beginning of the *Paradise*'.<sup>16</sup> Whereas Hell was a closed world without hope, Purgatory is a place of hopeful process, open to heaven. Everyone there is on their way to Paradise, and their eventual residence in heaven is not in doubt. What goes on in Purgatory is cleansing, training, and discipline. The souls endure great physical pains but with great hopefulness and haste to continue their ascent. Each level brings them closer to the Terrestrial Paradise at the top of the mountain, which is the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve began, a place of innocence, entirely without sin.

From the foot of this great mountain of hopeful cleansing (the entrance to Antepurgatory) Dante looks up to see the four cardinal virtues which the virtuous pagans shared with the Christians. When the three stars representing the theological virtues appear in Canto 8, it is to direct his attention toward the more specifically Christian aspects of the good

which comes to mankind through the figure of Christ. The stars initiate a new perspective as the pilgrim leaves the more earthbound region of lower Purgatory and begins his ascent toward the Garden of Eden. Those things which are 'like a star' or have stars inside them internalize or embody the qualities which are seen in the stars in the sky. In Canto 12 Dante encounters the angel of humility in a scene full of the optimistic energy which characterizes the Purgatory. The angel is a 'radiantly fair creature' whose face is 'shining like a trembling star at dawn'.<sup>17</sup>

Near the top of the mountain, in Canto 31, Dante is upbraided for unfaithfulness by Beatrice with such severity that he faints, and awakens submerged up to his neck, being carried through Lethe by Matelda. She dips his head under the water so that he drinks of the sacred river, and when he emerges he is led to dance with the maidens who join their hands over him:

'Here we are nymphs and in the heaven, stars.  
Before Beatrice came into the world,  
we were ordained her handmaids. It is for us  
to lead you to her eyes. The other three,  
who see more deeply, will instruct your sight,  
as you bathe in her gaze of joyful light'.<sup>18</sup>

The virtues are handmaids of revelation, bringing the pilgrim into her presence. Metaphors combine stars with ideals, seeing with understanding, guiding with carrying, dancing and bathing with baptism. Together they construct a relational matrix of symbolic images. The four cardinal virtues lead the pilgrim to the eyes of revealed theology, while the theological virtues will instruct his perceptual powers as he bathes again in her light, or sight, or eyes, which are stars. Each of the handmaids infuses the pilgrim with her particular virtue, thus protecting him from its opposite vice.<sup>19</sup>

When Dante foretells the future ('my prophecy') in Canto 33, it is the stars which account for the validity of the prophetic utterance ('I clearly see / those stars, already near, that will bring in a time...') and which emphasize its inevitability ('Its advent nothing can prevent'). In Dante's God-created cosmos it is natural that the configurations of the heavenly spheres should influence events on Earth.<sup>20</sup>

Stars, water, and submersion in a sacred river occur again at the end of Canto 33. The waters of the river Eunoë restore the memory of good deeds:

'From those holiest waters I returned  
to her reborn, a tree renewed, in bloom  
with renewed foliage, immaculate,  
eager to rise, now ready for the stars'.<sup>21</sup>

More than lights in the sky whose motions require a rational explanation, the stars are living spirits which embody the ideals of truth and growth. 'Ready for the stars', then, is meant to carry a great variety of meanings. He is ready ethically as he has been purged and cleansed by the experience of Purgatory. He has been educated through the structures of confession, penance, and the repeated clarifications on each circle of Hell and each terrace of Mount Purgatory, so that now he is equipped and strengthened, ready to ascend to the spheres and to speak and interact with the stars in the heavens.

### **Paradiso**

It is often said that Dante's paradise is an acquired taste. The poet signals as much in the second Canto: 'I set my course for waters never traveled; Minerva fills my sails, Apollo steers, and all nine Muses point the Bears to me'.<sup>22</sup> This wonderful combination of poetic inspiration, classical mythology, and the stars of Ursa Major shows the unparalleled nature of the claims Dante makes for his poem. He depends not just on inspiration, but on ultimate, and ultimately successful inspiration. In the *Paradise* the pilgrim ascends to the heavenly spheres and rises through the planetary orbits until he enters the Empyrean and experiences a vision of God and ultimate reality. To arrive at that point, however, much preparation and spiritual education must take place as he rises ever higher in perception and insight. Much of this is done through concepts of astronomy. The vocabulary of *Paradise* is saturated with the multivalent symbolic use of stellar imagery.

The lunar sphere comes first so the moon is 'la prima stella' but the Sun moves around the earth so it is a 'pianeta'. Mercury is a 'stella' and Venus is the 'star which courts the Sun'.<sup>23</sup> When a soul moves from one position to another it is an 'astro' and looks like a meteor in the sky.<sup>24</sup> In Canto 25 Dante says the idea of hope defined came to him from 'many stars'.<sup>25</sup> The sound of Bonaventure's voice makes Dante sweep around like a compass needle toward the north star.<sup>26</sup> The Virgin Mary is 'that living star'. In Canto 31 Dante proclaims the Trinity as 'Oh three fold light which in a single star...' When he refers to the archangel Gabriel as 'one who in



Mary's beauty glowed / as does the morning star in fresh sunlight' he suggests that Gabriel is to the Virgin Mary as Venus is to the Sun.<sup>27</sup> Gabriel announces to Mary the coming of Christ, and Venus as morning star announces the rising sun.

In Canto 4 a remarkable discussion takes place between Beatrice and Dante over the interpretation of Plato's words in the *Timaeus* when he describes the stars as souls. First Beatrice insists Plato is wrong if his 'reincarnation' of stars to souls and back to stars denies free will. Secondly, Beatrice allows that Plato's words may not actually mean what they appear to say, even in a pagan Platonic context. Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas both comment on this difficulty, and Beatrice appears to hesitate between two schools of interpretation.<sup>28</sup>

It is also interesting that Dante does not deny that the heavenly bodies influence things on earth, but only that they would determine a soul's eventual residence in Heaven or Hell. Other problems with Plato's words have to do with the qualifications he places on the story before he tells it in the *Timaeus*,<sup>29</sup> and with the fact that the theory is not fully described there, but in the myth of Er in the *Republic*.<sup>30</sup>

In Canto 10, twelve philosophers and theologians circle around Dante 'like stars'. When they speak, we are no longer hearing physical sounds, but a more direct articulation of thought than we know on earth. Later in Canto 13 there appears a second circle outside the first, a double crown of stars, each one a soul of some importance in medieval learning: Solomon, St. Thomas, Boethius, Albertus Magnus, etc. 'Imagine, you who wish to visualize / what I saw next'.<sup>31</sup> Dante elaborates a grand image of constellations to impress upon the reader the majesty of the assembled double circle of spirits. By repeating the word 'imagine' he insists on the difficulty of the image for which mortals would have no analogue. The 'fifteen brightest stars in all of heaven' are here because Ptolemy had fifteen first magnitude stars.<sup>32</sup> The 'turnings of the Wain' and the 'bell-mouth of that Horn / whose tip is marked by that bright star which serves / as axis for the Primum Mobile', are all joined in a 'double constellation' which he likens to the constellation of Corona which is Ariadne's crown in Greek mythology, daughter of Minos and lover of Bacchus, placed in heaven when she died. And here it is doubled. This double dancing circle of thinkers and philosophers is another of the insistent circle images leading up to the giant Rose image in Canto 31.

Perhaps the most remarkable passage occurs when in Canto 22 of the *Paradise* Dante proclaims: 'O glorious constellation! O mighty stars pregnant with holy power which is the source of all of whatever genius

may be mine'.<sup>33</sup> This is Dante's address to the zodiacal constellation and astrological sign of Gemini, the sign under which he was born. He pays homage to the sign and attributes his poetic talent to the constellation. As Giuseppe Mazzotta has said, this indicates both 'the poet's sense of his predestined mission as well as his desire to make his voice originate within the cosmic pattern of nature'.<sup>34</sup> The strength of this extended passage lays to rest any doubt of Dante's belief in the influence of the heavens on human life. Still, it is conceived within a medieval Christian system of beliefs which is interlaced with classical philosophy.

At the end of Canto 22 Dante looks down from the sphere of the fixed stars and reflects on the smallness of the earth which seems a 'threshing floor', building on the image in Cicero's 'Dream of Scipio'<sup>35</sup> and its many descendants, including Macrobius' *Commentary*. This compares with the Canto 24 of the *Paradise*, where Dante declares his faith to the assembled spirits. The existence of God as one and three, described by Dante in a speech which is both credo and final exam, is 'the very spark which then ignites into a living flame and like a star in Heaven lights my mind'.<sup>36</sup> His statement is approved by the spirits, one of whom, St. Peter, flies three circles around the pilgrim. Where before he has observed and praised and conversed with stars, now the star burns inside Dante and fires his speech.

In Canto 28 Dante sees a vision of the universe the way it really is, not from an earth-centered but from a God-centered perspective, a universe turned inside-out. He sees a point of light radiating truth and love, surrounded by nine concentric spheres representing the orders of angels. What is remarkable about this view is that it constitutes a kind of 'spiritual Copernicanism'. Dante clearly considered the earth to be a sphere at the geometrical centre of the physical universe, and God to be infinite and outside of space and time, figured on maps of the cosmos as the Empyrean, 'outside' of the outermost sphere, the prime mover. But the tradition of the Sun as an image of God is a powerful one, which Dante uses in the very first Canto of the *Commedia*, 'the planet which leads men right on every road'.<sup>37</sup> Thus while Copernicus recalls an Aristotelian classicism by maintaining perfect circles in the planetary orbits, Dante in the *Commedia* creates an image of the solar system curiously modern, with the Sun-God at the centre, and everything else in perfect circles going outward. In this spiritual universe seen from God's perspective the sphere nearest the centre is spinning most rapidly, and they decrease in velocity as they go outward. Their ranking is in order of distance from the

central point. Beatrice explains the vision to Dante and he sees the truth 'shine like a clear star in the heavens'.<sup>38</sup>

The final vision in Canto 33 enables Dante to grasp in the same instant the human and divine nature of Christ, a vision from which human intellect falls away at once, but not before his will and desire are at one with the cosmos, impelled by the 'love that moves the sun and the other stars'.<sup>39</sup> Here the movement upward which has characterized the entire work culminates in the ultimate insight, described in terms of the movements of the heavenly bodies.

### **Cosmology and Spirituality**

When Dante begins his descent into Hell, pilgrim and reader consider the movement to be downward. After we emerge at the foot of Purgatory we understand this to be constant upward motion in the spiritual geography of the poem. If we consider the shape of Hell (concentric circles in the shape of a funnel, with Satan in the centre/bottom) and the shape of Purgatory (concentric terraces on a mountain, with the Terrestrial Paradise at the centre/top), we see that this geometrical or topological parallelism is part of the moral of the journey. In Hell we examine types of human failing which get worse as we go 'lower' until we see the source of sin, Satan. In Purgatory we examine types of purgation until we see the original innocent state without sin, the Garden of Eden. Both these work from the outer circles toward the centre. But what of Paradise? Ostensibly we work from the centre (Earth) outward toward the Empyrean. However, this is Earth-bound thinking again, and when we see it as God sees it the image is the vision Dante experiences in Canto 28 of *Paradise*. Here it is a three-dimensional topological inversion, for now God is in the centre as a brilliant point of light taking up no space but filling the universe with radiance. Then concentric spheres extend outward, and their order reverses those of the 'heavenly' spheres we normally think of as making up Ptolemaic astronomy.

What are the stars made of? Why are there stars? In a God-created universe all the features of the physical world are related to the overriding purpose of human salvation, which in geographical terms means human presence not amongst the stars but, rather, residence in the realm to which the stars are merely indications, signs, even windows. But here Dante employs spiritual metaphor, whereas Aristotle is still poised between a living cosmos and a mechanical one. Dante takes Aristotle's shapes and forms and endows them with life and a theological structure. Copernicus' system is neoclassical in another sense, in that it takes the most

prominent body in the heavens which functions as a metaphor for God, and places it in the centre. Dante's vision places the reality of God in the centre of the universe with orders of perfection of souls-become-angels arrayed around him. This is a visionary rendering of a universe which is in physical terms geocentric but in spiritual terms theocentric.

He believes, with Aristotle, that the earth is a sphere whose size, compared to that of the planetary spheres, is 'not large'.<sup>40</sup> He portrays the stars as shining from the inner surface of the outermost sphere, beyond which is the prime mover which instigates motion in all the spheres inside. The Empyrean is a spiritual idea, not a physical one, not a place on the map of the material world, but a classification for a realm outside of space and time.

A common misreading of ancient and medieval cosmology is to mistake geocentricity as a sign of pride, of mankind placing itself in the centre because it thought itself supremely important. According to this view, Copernicus was the beginning of true self-knowledge as mankind was 'dethroned' first from the centre of the universe, then from circular orbits, then from a fixed sphere of stars, etc. There are several problems with this view. First, if we look at the centre of Dante's universe we see not mankind, but Satan in the centre of Hell. How can mankind be proud of his place at the centre when he is spread across the surface of the earth, with all Hell more central than he is? If the modern reader can accept that what is most important to the medieval reader is God, then what are we to make of a system in which mankind is placed at the farthest remove from God that the model allows? Again, to speak of God's 'location' in a map of the cosmos is metaphorical. In one sense, beyond the sphere of the prime mover is God and the angels, heaven, the Empyrean. It is more accurate to say they are 'other than' rather than 'on the other side of' the sphere of fixed stars. As it is with space, so it is with time. The Empyrean exists outside of time and duration, while the stars wheel about in regular patterns which indicate the divine nature of what lies beyond.

### **Conclusion**

What are the stars for Dante? In the spiritualized astronomy of the *Commedia* they carry many levels of meaning as they satisfy a variety of needs for the cosmology and for the poem as a literary work. They are poetic symbols, spiritual guideposts, as well as the literal stars in the sky which move according to Ptolemy's astronomy. When the pilgrim encounters four nymphs dancing in the garden we are meant to understand that he is seeing a purer form of what stars represent. Thus the

literal stars in the sky are representations. Four nymphs dancing are closer to the truth, but they are not yet the complete truth. As he ascends through the levels of the *Paradise* his vision becomes stronger, until he is able at last to grasp mystically the reality of the spiritual world, even as he stresses the futility of trying to render these insights into poetry.

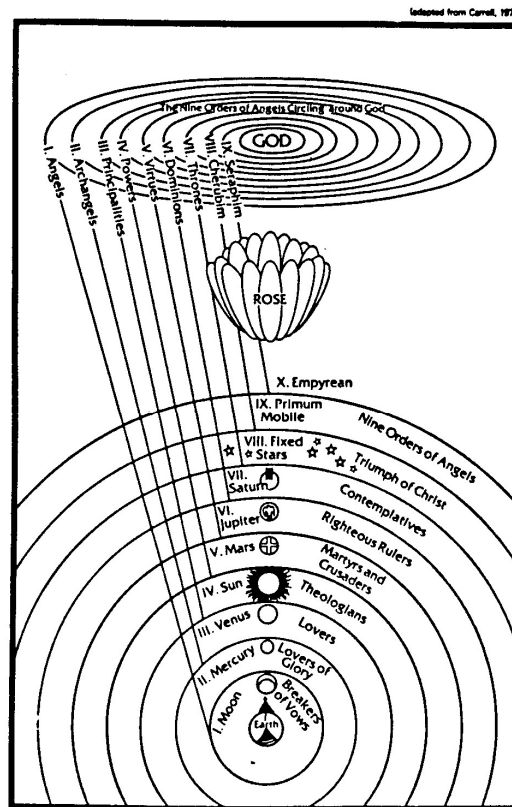
In Canto 13 of the *Paradise*, when Dante describes the double Ariadne's crown of wise men, his strategy is similar to Raphael's in the *School of Athens* where the philosophy of each figure (Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Euclid, Zeno, Ptolemy, etc.) is expressed in the pictorial representation of his human form, in the stance and body-language of the figure. Dante's double dance of star-thinkers represents a profound melding of theological and philosophical outlooks in which figures as diverse as Aquinas, Augustine, Anselm, Solomon, Hugh of St. Victor, and the Venerable Bede, are brought together in two moving circles of stars which, Dante insists, form only a 'shadow' of what he experienced. As Alison Cornish points out, this is a necessary failure of imaginative rendering, 'symptomatic of the *Paradiso*, which is all about places the intellect can go where neither imagination nor memory can follow'.<sup>41</sup>

Throughout the *Commedia* stars and stellar imagery are interlaced, even in the midst of Hell, into time references, the eyes of Beatrice, the angel's face, inside Dante's heart, and they all serve to reinforce the ancient function of stars as reminders of the existence of ultimate truth. The sight of stars in the last line of each major section of the poem, and the intense mystical vision which culminates in the 'love which moves the sun and the other stars' show that the stars, and the astronomical concepts of Aristotle and Ptolemy, are an elaborate poetic metaphor for divine truth. It weaves itself throughout the journey and unifies the movement from that first moment lost in the dark wood to the last moment found in heaven.

**Figure 1. Earth with Hell and Purgatory.**

Dante descends through a cone-shaped underworld of concentric ridges or circles which grow smaller as he goes lower until he reaches the centre of the earth where Satan is held in the frozen lake of Cocytus. Viewed structurally, from above, Hell would look like a solar system with Satan as the centre and the different sins as 'spheres'. Mount Purgatory has a similar structure, with the Garden of Eden at its centre. From a different perspective the pilgrim is traveling up all along, from Hell towards Purgatory and Paradise.

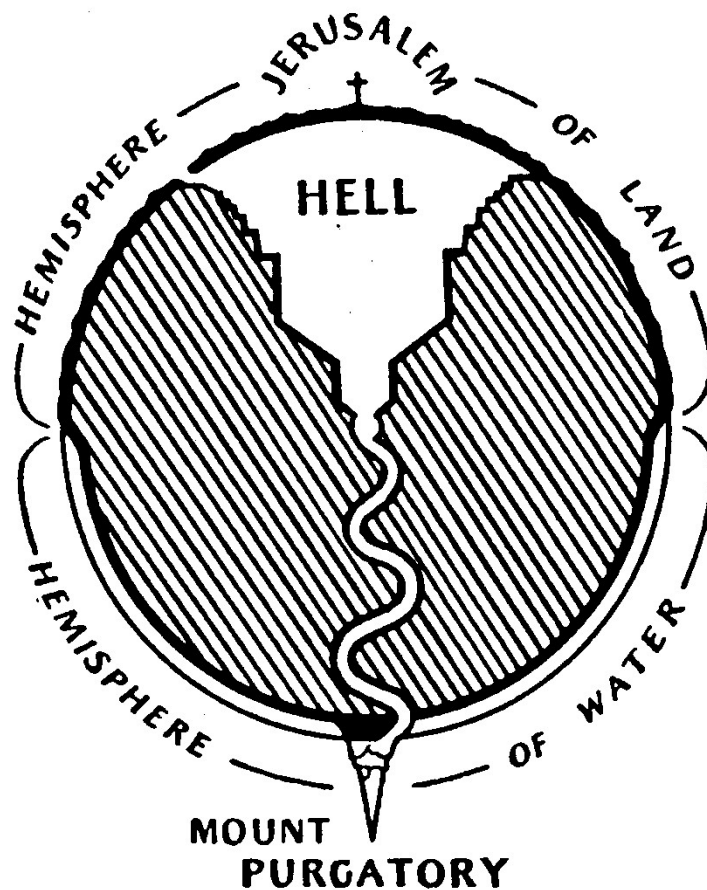
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**Figure 2. Earth and the Planetary Spheres.**

Medieval cosmographies are no more 'to scale' than modern diagrams of the solar system. In Dante's system the earth would look very small from the perspective of any of the planets. This diagram portrays Dante's vision of the 'true' universe from God's perspective. God is a blazing point of light at the centre, surrounded by spheres of angels who are associated with planets in reverse order of those in the standard medieval configuration.

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3. John Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986) p.223.
4. 'Noi siam qui ninfe e nel ciel siamo stelle;' (Purg.31.106.) Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia Secondo L'Antica Vulgata*, ed. Giorgio Petrocchi (Turin: Einaudi, 1975). All quotations from the *Commedia* are from the Petrocchi text; all translations are from Mark Musa, *The Divine Comedy, 3 Volumes: Hell, Purgatory, Paradise*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1984, 1985, and 1986).
5. Aristotle, *On the Heavens*, ed., trans. W. K. C. Guthrie (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986) pp. 176-181.
6. Plato, *Timaeus* 41D-42B in Plato, *Timaeus, Critias, Cleitophon, Menexenus, and Epistles* ed., trans. R. G. Bury, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975) pp. 90-93.
7. 'come stelle vicine a'fermi poli' (Par.10.78).
8. 'tanto ch'i' vidi de le cose belle  
che porta 'l ciel, per un pertugio tondo.  
Equindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle' (Inf.34.137-39).
9. 'Lucevan li occhi suoi piú che la stella' (Inf.2.55).
10. 'già ogne stella cade che saliva  
quand'io mi mossi, e'l troppo star si vieta' (Inf.7.98-99).
11. 'Quivi sospiri, pianti e alti quai  
risonavan per l'aere senza stelle' (Inf.3.22-3).



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12. 'Però, se campi d'esti luoghi bui  
e torni a riveder le belle stelle' (Inf.16.82-3).
13. 'per sua dimora; onde a guarar le stele  
e'l mar non li era la veduta tronca.' (Inf.20.50-1).
14. 'Ed elli a me: Se tu segui tua stella,  
non puoi fallire a glorioso porto' (Inf.15.55-6).
15. 'e piú lo 'negno affreno ch'i' non soglio,  
perché non corra che virtù nol guidi;  
sí che, se stella bona o miglior cosa  
m'ha dato 'l ben, ch'io stessi nol m'invidi' (Inf.26.21-24).
16. Musa, *Purgatory*, p.7.
17. 'par tremolando mattutina stella' (Purg.12.90).
18. 'pria che Beatrice discendesse al mondo,  
fummo ordinate a lei per sue ancelle.  
Merrenti a li occhi suoi; ma nel giocondo  
lume ch'è dentro aguzzeranno i tuoi  
le tre di là, che miran piú profondo.' (Purg.31.107-11).
19. Musa, *Purgatory*, p.340.
20. 'ch'io veggio certamente, e però il narro,  
a darne tempo già stelle propinque,  
secure d'ogn'intoppo e d'ogne sbarro' (Purg.33.40-42).
21. 'Io ritornai da la santissima onda  
rifatto sí come piante novelle  
rinovellate di novella fronda,  
puro e disposto a salire a le stelle' (Purg.33.142-45).
22. 'L'acqua ch'io prendo già mai non si corse;  
Minerva spira, e conducemi Appollo,  
e nove Muse mi dimostran l'Orse.' (Par.2.7-9).
23. The Moon is 'la prima stella' (Par.2.30); The Sun is a 'pianeta' (Inf.1.17); Mercury is a 'stella' (Par.5.97) and (Par.6.112); Venus is the star which courts the sun:  
'Della stella  
che il sol vagheggia' (Par.8.11-12).

24. The soul of Cacciaguida moves from the arm to the base of the cross made of stars,  
'Corse un astro  
della costellazion che li risplende' (Par.20-21).
25. Dante's ideas come from many stars, 'da molte stelle' (Par.25.70).
26. 'si mosse voce, che l'ago a la stella  
parer mi fece in volgermi al suo dove' (Par.12.29-30).
27. 'come del sole stella mattutina.' (Par.32.108).
28. Charles S. Singleton, *The Divine Comedy*, Vol.III: *Paradiso*, Pt.2: 'Commentary' (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975) pp.76-78.
29. Plato, *Timaeus* 29C-D, pp.52-53. It is suggested that because we are unable to be precise and consistent in our descriptions and because we are only human, we should accept what is a likely story and not search beyond it.
30. Plato, *Republic* 614B-621D, Vol. II Ed., trans. Paul Shorey (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970) pp.490-521.
31. 'Imagini, chi bene intender cupe  
quel ch'i' or vidi...' (Par.13.1-2).
32. Ptolemy's star catalogue in the *Almagest*, H38-H169, in Claudii Ptolemaei, *Opera quae exstant omnia*. Vol. I, *Syntaxis Mathematica*, Ed. J. L. Heiberg, 2 Vols. (Leipzig: Teubner, 1903). For an English translation of the *Almagest* see G. J. Toomer, trans., *Ptolemy's Almagest* (London: Duckworth, 1984) pp.341-399.
33. 'O gloriose stelle, o lume pregno  
di gran virtù, dal quale io riconosco  
tutto, qual che si sia, il mio ingegno' (Par.22.112-14).
34. Mazzotta, *Dante's Vision*, p.168.
35. 'Stellarum autem globi terrae magnitudinem facile vincebant. Iam ipsa terra ita mihi parva visa est, ut me imperii nostri, quo quasi punctum eius attingimus, paeniteret.' Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Re Publica* VI.16, ed., trans. Clinton Walker Keyes (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959) pp.268-269.
36. 'Quest'è'l principio, quest'è la favilla

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che si dilata in fiamma poi vivace,  
e come stella in cielo in me scintilla' (Par.24.145-47).

37. 'vestite già de'raggi del pianeta  
che mena dritto altrui per ogni calle.' (Inf.1.17-18).

38. 'e come stella in cielo il ver si vide' (Par.28.87).

39. 'l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle' (Par.33.145).

40. Aristotle, *On the Heavens*, II, xiv, 298, pp.252-55.

41. Cornish, *Dante's Stars*, pp.97.