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DANTE AND THE 'GOSPEL OF BARNABAS.'

THE Clarendon Press has recently published an *Editio princeps* of the Mohammedan *Gospel of Barnabas* from an unique MS. of the latter half of the sixteenth century in the Imperial Library at Vienna¹. This document—apart from its theological and dogmatic importance—should prove to be of considerable interest to students of Italian literature, as well on account of its grammatical and orthographic peculiarities, as for the positive literary merits which not infrequently relieve a style in general somewhat rough and bald.

The task of preparing for the press a translation of this remarkable document could not fail to bring before one's mind certain points of contact with Dante, more especially as the curious archaic Italian in which the 'Gospel' is written lends itself, in a certain measure, to verbal coincidences and quasi-coincidences with passages in the poet's writings. The points of contact which will be adduced in the present paper are none the less interesting because the date of the original *Gospel of Barnabas* still remains, to a certain extent, an open question, and with it also the nature of the relations, direct or indirect, that may have subsisted between its compiler and the author of the *Divina Commedia*.

But first a word is due about the character and scope of this very apocryphal Gospel. The MS., as we have already suggested, is of comparatively recent date. Paper, binding, and orthography all combine with the script to place it—not, as its eighteenth century critics supposed, in the fifteenth century, or earlier, but—in the latter half of the sixteenth century². It is, however, of course possible that the Vienna Codex may be a copy of an earlier MS.; and, curiously enough, one of the strongest arguments for this earlier original arises, as we shall shortly see, out of an apparent reference to the famous Jubilee of 1300 A.D. which looms so large in Dante's life and writings.

¹ *The Gospel of Barnabas*. Edited and translated from the Italian MS. in the Imperial Library at Vienna by Lonsdale and Laura Ragg. Oxford, 1907.

² See Introduction to Oxford Ed., pp. xiii sq. and xlii.

The book is a frankly Mohammedan Gospel, giving a full, but garbled, story of the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, from a Moslem point of view. It claims to have been written by Saint Barnabas (who figures in it as one of the Twelve—to the exclusion of poor Saint Thomas!) at the injunction of his Master, for the express purpose of combating the errors taught by Saint Paul and others. These errors are summed up under three heads: (1) the doctrine that Jesus is Son of God, (2) the rejection of Circumcision, and (3) the permission to eat unclean meats. Of these three errors the first is regarded as of the greatest importance; and not only is the Gospel narrative contorted and expurgated to suit the writer's purpose, but Christ Himself is made repeatedly to deny his own Divinity and even his Messiahship, and to predict the advent of Mohammed, the 'Messenger of God.'

About two-thirds of the material is derived, without question, from our four Canonical Gospels, of which a decidedly unscientific 'harmony' forms the framework of Barnabas' narrative; the remaining third, which takes the form of discourses put into the mouth of Christ, is purely oriental in character, and largely an elaboration of germs or hints to be found in the Koran or in Jewish tradition. It is on this section of the book that the Dantist's interest will be concentrated.

The brief words of awful solemnity in which the Gospels speak of the doom of the lost are supplemented in Barnabas by elaborate descriptions of infernal torments which, whencesoever ultimately derived, are expressed in terms which exhibit remarkable coincidences with the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* of Dante. Mohammed's two favourite themes were, the final Judgment and the horrors of Hell on the one hand, and, on the other, the delights of Paradise. And the second theme is treated in Barnabas almost as fully as the first. The Paradise of Barnabas has perhaps little in common with the Earthly Paradise of Dante, and still less with the Celestial; but it gives our author scope for an excursion into the realms of astronomy, whereby he finds himself (perhaps unconsciously), at the end of his journey, much nearer to Dante's scheme of the Ten Heavens than to the normal tradition of the Jews and Arabs.

It will be convenient to deal first with this teaching on Paradise, secondly with the *Inferno* of Barnabas, and thirdly with certain verbal and other points of contact between Barnabas and Dante; concluding with some more general considerations regarding the tone and colouring of the 'Gospel.'

It would be strange if the Paradise of Barnabas had not some features

in common with Dante's. Man's dreams of an ideal resting-place whether past or future have a tendency to express themselves in terms of greensward and flowers and luscious fruits, cool streams and sunshine tempered by refreshing shade. The name 'Paradise' itself means 'park' or 'plaisance' as we know, and though Barnabas is not conspicuously happy when he poses as an etymologist¹, the connotation of the word was too securely established alike in Moslem and in Christian tradition to admit of much variation. Paradise, of course, has two different meanings in Dante, and the same is true of its use in Barnabas; but inasmuch as the distinction in the latter is not expressly marked, it will be convenient for our purpose to group together the conceptions of the Earthly and the Celestial Paradise. In Barnabas, as in Dante, the name is applied to the scene of man's creation,

il loco
Fatto per proprio dell' umana spece²,

and of his temptation, fall and expulsion³. In both again it is used also of the eternal home of God, the good angels and redeemed mankind⁴. Speaking generally, the main features of the Paradise of Barnabas resemble more closely those of Dante's Earthly Paradise; while its position in the scheme of the universe corresponds rather to that of the Celestial Paradise of Dante. Thus the four perfumed rivers⁵ of this 'Gospel,' though derived, almost certainly, from the Koran, correspond, in a sense, to the miraculously clear and limpid stream which arrested the poet's progress⁶; while its profusion of flowers and fruits⁷ recall the scene portrayed in Virgil's parting words:

...l' erbetta, i fiori e gli arbuscelli⁸,
and
La gran variazion dei freschi mai⁹,

which drew Dante's wondering eyes across the stream to where Matelda tripped singing through the painted meadow:

Cantando ed iscegliendo fior da fiore
Ond' era pinta tutta la sua via¹⁰.

Again, a somewhat terse definition of Paradise in Barnabas reminds one of a still shorter phrase of Dante's. The author of the *De*

¹ As for instance in his definition of the word 'Pharisee,' '*farisseo proprio uolle dire cercha DIO nella lingua di chanaam*' (Barnabas, 157^b).

² *Par.* i, 56-7, cf. *Barn.* 40^a, sq.

³ *Purg.* xxviii, 94 &c., cf. *Barn.* 41^b—43^b.

⁴ *Barn.* 189^a, cf. (for angels) *Canz.* iv, 24, 25, *Par.* xx, 102.

⁵ *Barn.* 189^a, *Koran*, Surah xlvi. The original source is perhaps *Gen.* ii, 10 sqq.

⁶ *Purg.* xxviii, 25 sqq.

⁷ *Barn.* 187^a, 189^a.

⁸ *Purg.* xxvii, 134.

⁹ *Purg.* xxviii, 36.

¹⁰ *Purg.* xxviii, 41, 42.

Vulgari Eloquentia describes the home which man forfeited by his first sin as 'delitiarum patria'¹; while for Barnabas, 'Il parradisso he chassa doue DIO chonsserva le sui delitie'²; or, as he puts it further on, 'DIO ha chreato il parradisso per chassa delle sui delitie'³.

But the heavenly Paradise of the Empyrean is also described by Dante in material phrase as 'God's garden.' 'Questo giardino'⁴ is the name by which Saint Bernard designates the Mystic Rose, as he unveils its mysteries to Dante; and already in the Eighth Heaven Beatrice had essayed to divert the Poet's gaze from her own loveliness

...al bel giardino
Che sotto i raggi di Cristo s' infiora⁵.

Here we may note that in Barnabas⁶ GOD (not Christ, of course) is the sun of Paradise, while Mohammed is its moon.

But there is another passage in the *Paradiso*, where Dante himself is speaking in answer to Saint John's catechizing: a passage which may well detain us a little longer. Here Paradise is described in so many words, as the 'Garden of the Eternal Gardener':

Le fronde onde s' infronda tutto l' orto
Dell' ortolano eterno, am' io cotanto,
Quanto da lui a lor di bene è porto⁷.

Is it fanciful to see a subtle resemblance—in thought, perhaps, more than in phrase (though Dante's symbolic meaning is wanting)—in Barnabas' description of Paradise as a place 'doue...ogni chossa he frutuossa, di fruti proportionati ha cholui che lo ha choltiuato'⁸?

There emerge, at any rate, from both passages, the thought of the Divine Gardener...and of a *proportion* for which He is in some way responsible. But perhaps a more striking coincidence—if coincidence it be—is that between the answer given to a problem raised by Saint Bartholomew in Barnabas and the assurance vouchsafed by Piccarda⁹ in resolution of Dante's difficulty concerning degrees of glory in Heaven.

'O Master,' says Bartholomew¹⁰, 'shall the glory of Paradise be equal for every man? If it be equal, it will not be just, and if it be unequal, the lesser will envy the greater.' Jesus answers: 'Non sera equalle perche DIO he iusto he ogniuno si chontentera perche hiiui non he inuidia'; and again, There shall be 'tutta una gloria sebene sara ha chi piu ha chi meno. Non portera alloro inuidia ueruna.' So,

¹ *V. E.* i, 7, 10—11.

⁴ *Par.* xxxi, 97; xxxii, 39.

⁷ *Par.* xxvi, 64—66.

¹⁰ *Barn.* 189^b.

² 185^a.

⁵ *Par.* xxiii, 71, 72.

⁸ 185^b.

³ 185^b.

⁶ 190^a.

⁹ *Par.* iii, 70 sqq.

when Dante questions the beatified Piccarda, in her earth-shadowed sphere:

Desiderate voi più alto loco...?¹

the spirit replies, in words which, though more beautiful and more profound, are inevitably called up by the passage of Barnabas just quoted:

Sì che, come noi sem di soglia in soglia
Per questo regno, a tutto il regno piace
Come allo re ch' a suo voler ne invoglia:
E la sua volontate è nostra pace².

Turning now to the geographical or rather astronomical aspect of the subject, we find in Barnabas a definite divergence from the doctrine of the Koran, and adoption of a Ptolemaic scheme closely resembling that of Dante's *Paradiso*. There are nine heavens, not counting Paradise, *i.e.* ten heavens in all. 'Noue sono li cielli li quali sono distanti luno dal altro chome he distante il primo cielo dala terra. Il quale he lontano dalla terra cinquecento hannì di strada³.' In the 'five hundred years' journey' there is a reminiscence of Jewish tradition: but the seven heavens of the Talmud and of the Koran have become ten. And though these heavens are not definitely stated to be arranged, like Dante's, as a series of concentric spheres with earth as the centre, they form a graduated series, in which each is to the next as a 'punto di ago⁴,' or as a grain of sand⁵. The planets, again, have their place in the scheme. They are not, apparently, identified with the several 'cieli,' as in Dante's arrangement, but are 'set between' or 'amongst' them: 'li cielli fra li qualli stano li pianeti⁶.'

The point of resemblance is to be found in a graduated series of ten (and not seven) heavens, characterised by an ascending scale of magnitude, and culminating in the Paradise of the Blessed.

So far, it may be said, the suggested points of contact between Barnabas and Dante have been somewhat vague and hypothetical. They may, perhaps, be adequately accounted for on the basis of a common tradition—the practically universal tradition of a Garden-Paradise, and the Aristotelo-Ptolemaic scheme of astronomy common to all the civilised West, whether Christian or Mohammedan, till the days of Copernicus and Galileo. But in the *Inferno* of Barnabas we may

¹ *Par.* III, 65.

² *Par.* III, 82—85. A reviewer of the Oxford Edition (*Guardian*, Aug. 21, 1907) points out a further significant resemblance between *Par.* xxxi, 7 sqq. and *Barn.* 56^b, where it is said of the angels that, 'chome appe uenirano intorno per circuito dello nontio di DIO.'

³ *Barn.* 111^a, cf. 190^b.

⁴ 111^a.

⁵ III^b, 190^b.

⁶ 190^b.

discover more definite and more convincing resemblances to features and passages of the *Divina Commedia*.

Islam, except in its later developments¹, has no place for a Purgatory. There is no mention of a Purgatorio in the Koran or in this 'Gospel,' though Barnabas gives even the Faithful a probationary residence of torment in Hell, varying from Mohammed's own brief term of 'the twinkling of an eye' to a duration of 70,000 years²! But the Barnaban arrangement of Hell itself furnishes an almost exact parallel to the scheme of Dante's Purgatorio. The framework of the arrangement is that of the seven capital sins. Hell is divided³ into seven circles or 'centri' wherein are punished respectively (1) lo irachondo, (2) il golloso, (3) lo acidiosso, (4) il lusoriosso, (5) lo hauaro, (6) lo inuidiosso, (7) il superbo. The order of the sins differs considerably from that adopted by Dante, and indeed is not repeated in any of the typical arrangements given in Dr Moore's well-known Table⁴; coming nearest to that of Aquinas. In common, however, with Dante's arrangement it has the juxtaposition of Pride and Envy and their position at the lower end of the series: a point which is perhaps the more significant in that Barnabas approaches his Inferno from the bottom (not, as one would have expected, from the top), beginning with 'il piu basso centro' of Pride. There is another point also, in which the Inferno of Barnabas resembles both the Inferno and the Purgatorio of Dante—the principle which runs through all its torments 'per quae peccat quis...per haec et torquetur.' The proud shall be 'trampled under-foot of Satan and his devils'⁵; the envious shall be tormented with the delusion that even in that joyless realm 'ogniuno prendi allegrezza del suo malle he si dolgia che lui non habia peggio'⁶; the slothful shall labour at tasks like that of Sisyphus⁷, and the gluttonous be tantalised with elusive dainties⁸. Nor can we fail to notice here how in the story of the serpent's doom⁹ there comes out the idea of all pollutions of human sin—especially repented sin—streaming back eventually to Satan: the conception which underlies the system of Dante's rivers of Hell, including the 'ruscelletto' that trickles down from Purgatory¹⁰.

There is a vivid description in Barnabas of the 'Harrowing of Hell' at the coming of God's Messenger, which though it has nothing in common with the account of the Saviour's Descent as related by Virgil

¹ *E.g.* in the Motalizite Sect (see *Encycl. Brit.* vol. xvi, p. 592).

² 149^b sqq.

³ 146^b—149^a.

⁴ *Studies in Dante*, Series II.

⁵ 146^b.

⁶ 147^a.

⁷ 148^a.

⁸ 148^b.

⁹ 43^a.

¹⁰ *Inf.* xiv, 85 sqq.; xxxiv, 130.

in Limbo, is strongly suggestive of a later scene where at the advent of the much-debated 'Messo del ciel', who comes to open the gates of Dis, both banks of the Styx tremble, and more than a thousand 'anime distrutte' fly headlong like frogs before a water-snake². 'Onde tremera,' says Barnabas, 'lo inferno alla sua pressenzza³...quando elgi ui andera tutti li diauoli stridendo cercherano di asscondersi sotto le ardente brasse dicendo luno allo altro: scampa scampa che elgi uiene machometo nostro inimicho⁴.'

While the general atmosphere of Hell in Barnabas, with its 'neui he giazi intollerabili⁵,' its torturing fiends, its biting serpents, its Sisyphus-labours and Tantalus-pains, its harpies, its burning filth and nameless horrors, has the same 'reek' as that of Dante's *Inferno*, there are passages which present an almost verbal parallel. In his description of the cries of the lost, Barnabas says: 'malladirano...il loro padre he madre he il loro chreatore.' Who can but recall Dante's words about the dismal spirits assembled on the bank of Acheron, who

Bestemmivano Iddio e lor parenti⁶?

This brings us to the subject of actual verbal coincidences, of which we must confess we have found but two, though a more systematic investigation might well yield a much larger number.

Barnabas' recurring characterisation of the idols of the heathen as 'dei falsi he bugiardi⁷' is surely too remarkable to be without significance, and is enforced and supported by the occurrence of another cadence of the same canto of the *Inferno* in the phrase 'rabbiosa fame,' which in Barnabas, however, applies not to the symbolic lion of the *Divina Commedia*⁸, but to the torments of the Lost.

There remains one more point to be adduced—an incidental and a somewhat subtle one which makes, not so much for a relation between Dante's writings and the *Gospel of Barnabas* as for a relation of contemporaneity between the two writers. The inference which it would suggest is so definite and precise, that it is only fair to remark that there are puzzlingly contradictory arguments to be drawn from the language and style of Barnabas.

Our point, then, is as follows. Barnabas puts into the mouth of our Lord, as we have observed above, numerous predictions of the future

¹ *Inf.* ix, 85.

³ 149^b.

⁵ *Barn.* 113^a, cf. *Inf.* xxxii, 22 sqq.

⁷ In 23^a, 81^b, 225^a. It is characteristic of the MS. that the three passages furnish as many different spellings of the last word: *bugiari*, *bugiardi* and *buggiardi*! Cf. *Inf.* i, 72.

⁸ *Inf.* i, 47; *Barn.* 62^b.

² *Inf.* ix, 66 and 76 sqq.

⁴ 150^a.

⁶ *Barn.* 63^a; Dante, *Inf.* iii, 103.

advent of Mohammed as 'Messiah' and 'Messenger of GOD.' In one of these a 'Jubilee' is spoken of as recurring every hundred years: 'il iubileo...che hora uiene ogni cento hanni'.¹ The writer or compiler here, as often, fails to throw himself back into the Palestine of the first century, in which, as his very considerable knowledge of the Old Testament² should have reminded him, the Hebrew Jubilee of fifty years would have been in force. Whence, then, comes this Jubilee? He cannot have derived it from the Koran. We are almost forced to the conclusion that the 'hora' of the passage quoted is a literal 'now' and refers to a contemporary institution—to the Jubilee as conceived of at the moment when the lines were penned; and that, the Jubilee of Western Christendom. This carries us back beyond the twenty-five years' Jubilee of modern times—beyond the year when Clement VI, for his own ends, instituted a Jubilee of fifty years after the Hebrew model; and would give us as our *terminus ad quem* the year 1349. For the upper limit—the *terminus a quo* of the original Barnabas we must turn to the famous Jubilee of 1300, the ideal date of Dante's pilgrimage. For though the Bull³ by which that Jubilee was promulgated alleged antecedent tradition, and the contemporary chroniclers naturally followed suit⁴, there seems to be no sufficient historical evidence for a precedent. Thus, between the years 1300 and 1350—and, apparently, only during that period—it would have been possible to speak of the centennial Jubilee as an established institution. If this be so, the writing of this passage in Barnabas is relegated to the years in which the *Divina Commedia* took its final shape, or those just after the poet's death in 1321 when the poem so swiftly took its place among the classics of the world's literature.

The foregoing sketch does not pretend to be exhaustive⁵; it does not even claim to have proved anything of a substantial nature: but it may perhaps suggest to some more competent mind a line of study which has at least the merit of freshness, and it may serve to introduce to those who are not acquainted with it, a document of no ordinary interest and of no little beauty.

¹ 85^b and 87^a.

² A little earlier (76^b) he has what seems to be a quotation from memory of *Lev.* xxvi, 11, 12; the Law of the Jubile is to be found, of course, in the chapter immediately preceding.

³ *Antiquorum habet* (Coqueline, III, 94).

⁴ *E.g.* Cron. Astense (Muratori, *R. S. I.*, tom. XI, p. 192): Jacobus Cardinalis (in Raynald., tom. IV, sub an. 1300): Villani, VIII, 36.

⁵ Another point that might have been adduced is the counsel 'habbandonare il perche', *Barn.* 95^b; cf. *Purg.* III, 37.

It is sometimes stated that Dante places Mohammed not among pagans nor among heretics but with the schismatics: as though he shared the optimistic view of some of his contemporaries, that the Moslems were but an extreme form of Christian 'sect.'

But Dante distributes his pagans without prejudice throughout the successive circles, from the 'Nobile Castello' in Limbo to the central seat of infamy in the Giudecca; and, as a matter of fact, a pagan, Curio, is partner of Mohammed's doom in the penultimate 'bolgia' of Malebolge. Obviously 'scisma' must not be taken too technically from Mohammed's lips, supplemented as it is by the more general phrase 'seminator di scandalo'. The 'schism' of which the False Prophet is guilty is rather that introduction of discord and strife into the civilised world, which makes 'Macometto cieco' in the eighteenth canzone a personification of the factious spirit of Florence.

Yet if it had fallen to Dante's lot to judge the Founder of Islam by the spirit of this Mohammedan Gospel, he might have shared that milder and more optimistic view of Mohammedanism which, according to a recent writer², inspired Saint Francis when he set out upon his Egyptian mission. For here he would have found, side by side with the inevitable denial of our Lord's Divinity, an attribution to him not only of the Gospel miracles, but of others besides. He would have found deep teachings on prayer and fasting and almsgiving; on humility, penitence³ and self-discipline; on meditation and mystic love. He would have found an asceticism in some ways as extravagant as any to be discovered in mediaeval legend, yet tempered with saving humour and common sense; a tolerant and charitable spirit which rivals even that of the 'Cristo d' Italia,' and 'a succession of noble and beautiful thoughts concerning love of God, union with God, and God as Himself the final reward of faithful service, which it would be difficult to match in any literature⁴.'

LONSDALE RAGG.

¹ *Inf.* xxviii, 35.

² Prof. N. Tamassia, *S. Francesco d' Assisi e la sua Leggenda*, p. 88.

³ Including (38^b) a striking statement of the impossibility of penitence (and therefore of absolution) to one meditating fresh sin: cf. Dante, *Inf.* xxvii, 118 sq.

⁴ Introduction to Oxford Edition, p. xxxiv.