

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expository Times* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expository-times\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php)

pdfs are named: [Volume]\_[Issue]\_[1<sup>st</sup> page of article].pdf

offence, at least, has been taken out of the way. 'I have sought,' says Canon Diggle, 'to persuade believers to treat Religious Doubt with large-mindedness and in a Christian temper.' And believers are actually ready to be persuaded. What they are to do now with the text 'He that believeth not is condemned already,' Canon Diggle does not say. No doubt they will be persuaded to take it along with its large-hearted context. And so this new 'Short Way with Infidels' is much more hopeful than the old one. Canon Diggle has found it actually quite successful. Read his book. It may drive some infidelity out of your own heart, and especially if there is unbelief in the existence of 'honest doubt.' His great method with the exultant unbeliever is to show him how much harder it is to believe his own unbelief than to embrace the Christian faith.

THE FINAL PASSOVER. BY THE REV. R. M. BENSON, M.A. (*Longmans*. Fcap. 8vo, pp. xxv, 550.) It is held by some expositors that when St. John said the world could not contain the books that would be written if everything which Jesus did had been recorded, he had all the commentaries that would be written upon these things in his mind, and included them in his statement. Well, here are six thick volumes all written by one man, and all on the limited period of the Passion. Who knows what might have been?

But the wonder is not that so much can be written, but that it can all be read so easily. This is no doubt the volume of deepest interest. For though it is the last in order of production, it is the third in order of event, and covers the final discourse and great high-priestly prayer. It is a subject of inexhaustible wealth and interest. And Mr. Benson's method is at once so simple and so reverent that all will be profited and none will be offended.

A LENT IN LONDON. (*Longmans*. Crown 8vo, pp. x, 239.) Again the London Branch of the Christian Social Union has organised a series of Sermons on Social Subjects, and again the sermons have been issued to a wider audience. Let the effort grow from more to more. It is on the right lines, and there is much hope in it. There is utmost variety in the volume. But 'in face of the intricacy and the complication of the vast social problem which Christianity is called upon to handle,' many men must express themselves, and they must have freedom, as here, to do it in their own way. Some of us have not yet discovered that Christianity has this problem to handle. Persistent preaching will help us to realise it. Some of us doubt if Christianity is capable of handling it successfully. Here are three-and-twenty preachers who all tell us that Christianity is just the living Christ, and *He* is able to do it exceeding abundantly.

## The Women of the 'Divina Commedia.'

BY ELEANOR F. JOURDAIN.

### I.

THERE is a marked difference in this poem between Dante's portraiture of men and women. The men were nearly always broadly touched, strikingly individual, whether in Hell, Purgatory, or Paradise.<sup>1</sup> We are not indeed surprised to find the shades in Purgatory human in their thoughts and actions, mixed of good and evil like ourselves; for, of the three kingdoms, that of Purgatory is

<sup>1</sup> So much so that it is difficult to remember sometimes that these shades differ in any respect from living men, and Dante is obliged to remind us continually that the words which we hear, the signs of human passion that we see are illusive, and that the spirit is impalpable to the touch.

most nearly akin to our present world. But in Hell, too, the sinners are for the most part still human, and we often lose the sense of their sin in compassion for their misery. Even in Paradise the saints, though purged of sin, retain their individual characteristics.

But Dante's women<sup>2</sup> are in all three kingdoms alike tender and gentle. Take Francesca in the Hell of the carnal sinners. She suffers, but her suffering arouses a feeling of deep pity even in Dante's breast; we feel as we read her beautiful apostrophe to Love, that her error lay in weakness

<sup>2</sup> The portraits of women are very rare compared with those of men.

rather than in desire for sin.<sup>1</sup> Take the story of La Pia, touched in eight sad lines in the *Purgatorio*.<sup>2</sup> As we read, the mysterious story associated with her name fades from our memory, and we are conscious only of the supreme pathos of her death. Take the story of the nun Piccarda, who had violated her conventual vows.<sup>3</sup> 'My sister,' Forese had said of her, 'who between fair and good, I know not which was the most.' As a rule, the women are less vividly contrasted than the men, and their qualities, both good and evil, less sharply defined. There are, however, two notable exceptions to this general rule. Among the men we have Virgil, the maiden poet, whom Dante, following history and tradition, represents as gentle and womanlike; among the women we have Beatrice, who, though a beautiful and faultless spiritual creation, is at the same time instinct with life and endowed with a vivid charm of portraiture.

If, leaving the spirits, we examine the other figures introduced into the *Divina Commedia*, we find that while in Hell the characters intended for symbols of sin are usually monsters, in Purgatory and Paradise the personifications either of a special virtue or of a high ideal of life are always women. So a woman, Beatrice, represents Divine Love; Illuminating Grace is shown to us in the form of St. Lucy; Leah and Matilda represent the Active Life; the three theological virtues of Faith, Hope, and Charity are female figures. All these symbolic characters are alike bright, gentle, and beautiful, but, with the exception of Beatrice, are not easily distinguishable one from another. Matilda appears among the fresh May flowers of the Terrestrial Paradise as 'a solitary dame who was going along singing, and choosing flower from flowers.'<sup>4</sup> Of Leah, Dante says, 'I seemed to see in dreams a dame young and fair go through a plain gathering flowers and singing; she was saying, "Let him know who inquires my name that I am Leah, and I go moving about my fair hands to make me a garland."' <sup>5</sup> Of Rachel, Leah says, 'She is fain of seeing her fair eyes, as I of adorning myself with my hands.'<sup>6</sup> Of St. Lucy, Virgil says, 'When thy soul was sleeping within thee, on the flowers came a dame and said, "I am Lucy . . ." Here laid she thee, and first her fair eyes showed me that entry open, then she and sleep together went their way.'<sup>7</sup>

But these symbolic characters are shadows compared with the more striking personality of Beatrice, who is a living as well as an allegorical figure. The Beatrice of the *Divina Commedia* is in a new and close relation to Dante, neither chiefly human as in the 'Vita Nuova,' nor intellectual as in the 'Convito,' but Divine. She is his instructress in the spiritual mysteries. Their intercourse, broken for a time—not indeed by death, but by Dante's forgetfulness of the spiritual relation between them—is renewed after the ascent of the Mountain of Purgatory, and is symbolised by Beatrice's mode of address. After their first meeting, she no longer calls him Dante, but 'brother.'<sup>8</sup> The renewal of their relation is the direct means of bringing Dante nearer to God. When he feels his heart suffused with such love to God, that it eclipses his love for Beatrice, she smiles, well pleased.<sup>9</sup> Again, she directs his eyes upward, saying, 'Not only in my eyes is Paradise.'<sup>10</sup> Thus he is led from Heaven to Heaven, until the music that mounted with him in his journey through Paradise is stilled into a diviner silence: the Beatific Vision dawns upon him, and the union of the human soul with God is complete.

## II.

But Dante's high ideal of womanhood is shown not only by his treatment of the characters actually introduced into the *Divina Commedia*, there is also, in this poem, a very subtle yet striking indication of the deep reverence with which he approached the subject of the life of the Blessed Virgin. Dante pays a more than ordinary tribute to her in the special and characteristic reference which he there makes to her virtues.

By voices, vision, or sculptured story, the pilgrims who suffer the penalty for sin on the terraces of the Mountain of Purification are reminded of the most beautiful examples of the virtue for the loss of which they suffer punishment. Foremost among these examples we find in each circle an incident taken from the life of the Blessed Virgin. References to her are so rare in the Gospel story that Dante has had recourse to his own ingenuity in twisting out of the few recorded words the seven instances he needed for his purpose.

On the stone of the first terrace<sup>11</sup> (that of the

<sup>1</sup> *Inf.* v.    <sup>2</sup> *Purg.* v.    <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* xxiv. par. iii.    <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* xxviii.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* xxvii.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* ix.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* xxxiii. par. vii.

<sup>8</sup> *Par.* x.

<sup>10</sup> *Purg.* x.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* xviii.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* xiii.

proud) are sculptured the figures of Mary and the Angel, and Mary is represented as saying in her humility, '*Ecce ancilla Dei.*' In the second circle,<sup>1</sup> where the sin of 'invidia' is punished, invisible spirits are heard uttering cries which call to mind the opposite virtue, namely, loving participation in the joys and sorrows of others. The first cry heard is, '*Vinum non habent,*' Mary's words at the wedding in Cana. In the third circle,<sup>2</sup> where the spirits are purged from the sin of wrath, Dante 'is suddenly drawn into an ecstatic vision,' and beholds the scene in the temple where Mary, 'with sweet motherly gesture,' said to Christ, 'My son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? Behold thy father and I were seeking thee, sorrowing.' In the fourth circle,<sup>3</sup> where are the spirits who have given way to 'accidia,'—despairing, sullen sloth,—a crowd rushes by and a spirit from among the throng cries out, 'Mary ran with haste to the hill country.' In the fifth circle,<sup>4</sup> that of the avaricious, Dante hears a spirit wailing, 'Sweet Mary, so poor wast thou, as one may see by that hostelry in which thou laidest down thy sacred burthen.' In the sixth circle,<sup>5</sup> where the sin of gluttony is punished, Dante hears a voice in the leaves of the apple tree saying, 'Mary thought more how the wedding should be honourable and complete than of her mouth, which now answers for you.' And in the last circle<sup>6</sup> Mary's purity is contrasted with the guilt of the carnal sinners, as the spirits passing through the flames cry aloud her words, '*Virum non cognosco.*'

### III.

In the numerous references which are made to the Blessed Virgin in the *Paradiso*, we can trace no consistent plan. It is, however, worthy of

<sup>1</sup> *Purg.* xv.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* xviii.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* xx.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* xxii.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* xxv.

<sup>6</sup> *Par.* iii.

notice that there is some allusion to Mary in nearly all the heavenly circles (the only exceptions being the circles of Jupiter and Saturn). The allusion, too, is in every case to some circumstance connected with the Annunciation, and thus the Archangel Gabriel is frequently associated with her. Sometimes, as in the first circle, the thought is merely suggested by the singing of an 'Ave';<sup>7</sup> but on another occasion, in the fifth circle, the 'Ave' referred to is the actual salutation of Gabriel. In the second circle, the circumstances of the Incarnation are twice dealt upon;<sup>8</sup> in the third circle there is an allusion (rather abruptly introduced) to 'Nazareth, the place where Gabriel unfolded his wings.'<sup>9</sup> In the fourth circle, Dante, inquiring about the state of the glorified body, hears 'in the brightest light of the lesser circle a modest voice, *such as was haply the Angel's to Mary*, answer, "For as long as shall be the festival of Paradise, will our love spread around itself such a garment."<sup>10</sup> The Heaven of the Fixed Stars shows to Dante the vision of Christ in glory, and it is as a continuation of this vision that he sees the Blessed Virgin, the 'Fair Sapphire,' sharing in the glory of her Son.<sup>11</sup> The allusions to Mary in this canto are many and beautiful. 'Here is the Rose,' says Beatrice, 'wherein the Word of God was made flesh.' Gabriel, 'angelic love,' still accompanies the 'Lady of Heaven,' and all the other lights as they revolve round the name of 'Mary.' In the Empyrean we have our last reference to the Blessed Virgin. Gabriel, 'that love which first descended thereon, singing "*Ave Maria, gratia plena,*" in front of her spread out his wings'; and Dante is told, 'He it is who bore the palm down to Mary when the Son of God would to charge Himself with our burden.'<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* xvi.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* vii.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* ix.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* xiv.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* xxxiii.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* xxxii.