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# NATHAN THE PROPHET IN DANTE'S *PARADISO*

J o h a n C h y d e n i u s

In the 10th Canto of the *Paradiso* Dante gives an account of his ascension, in the company of Beatrice, to the fourth heaven, that of the Sun. The blessed souls of this celestial sphere form a circle of flames around Dante and Beatrice. One of the blessed begins to speak and presents his companions. He himself is Thomas Aquinas; the other spirits are, in the order of their presentation, Albert the Great, Gratian, Peter Lombard, Solomon, Denis the Areopagite, Orosius, Boethius, Isidore of Seville, the Venerable Bede, Richard of St. Victor, and Siger of Brabant.<sup>1</sup> In all, the circle is thus made up of twelve souls.

In the 12th Canto there appears another similar circle, which joins the circular movement of the first round Dante and Beatrice. Its leader is Bonaventure; his companions are the Franciscans Illuminato and Augustine, Hugh of St. Victor, Peter Comestor, Peter of Spain, *Nathan the Prophet*, John Chrysostom, Anselm of Canterbury, Donatus, Hrabanus Maurus, and Joachim of Floris.<sup>2</sup> The second circle is, like the first, composed of twelve souls.

The blessed souls that appear in the heaven of the Sun may roughly be characterized as the teachers of the Church. This is seen from the mere fact that they are under the guidance of the two greatest theologians of the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure. It is equally obvious that Dante does not here, any more than elsewhere in his *Comedy*, choose his 'example figures' (*Beispielsfiguren*) according to any conventional pattern. The selection of the teachers of the Church does not follow any tradition but is entirely determined by Dante.

Dante's choice of the teachers of the Church is in part easy to explain. Together with the two leaders, Albert the Great, Peter Lombard, the Victorines Hugh and Richard, Peter of Spain, and Anselm of Canterbury belong to the

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<sup>1</sup> Par. 10, 97—138.

<sup>2</sup> Par. 12, 127—141.

most prominent theologians and philosophers of Scholasticism. Among this group Siger of Brabant is, no doubt, also to be classed, though the admission of this Averroist heretic has been very much debated. He was included as a representative of pure philosophy as distinct from theology.<sup>1</sup> A more apocalyptic tendency in the theology of the high Middle Ages is represented by Joachim of Floris. The historical learning of Scholasticism is represented by Peter Comestor, the study of Canon Law by Gratian. The two Franciscans are probably included, together with Bonaventure, in order to honour the Minorite Order.

One of the most important foundations of Scholasticism was the scholarship of late Antiquity. For that reason, not only the theologians John Chrysostom and Denis the Areopagite and the philosopher Boethius are admitted among the teachers of the Church, but also the grammarian Donatus, the historian Orosius, and the three important compilers who acted as intermediaries between the encyclopaedic learning of Antiquity and that of the Middle Ages, *viz.* Isidore, Bede, and Hrabanus' Maurus.<sup>2</sup>

It remains to explain the presence of the two representatives of the Old Testament: Solomon and Nathan. Solomon was held by tradition to be the author of four of the books of Scripture, *viz.* Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, and the Book of Wisdom.<sup>3</sup> He was thought to have possessed the greatest imaginable resources of 'regal prudence', as is expounded by Dante, at great length, in the 13th Canto.<sup>4</sup> He, then, as the great patron of Christian learning, *la luce ch'è tra noi più bella*<sup>5</sup>, is in his right place in the heaven of the Sun.

The presence of Nathan is more difficult to explain. All the other persons who are found in the heaven of the Sun are renowned for a literary achievement; Nathan alone has not left a single line. If he was included in his capacity of prophet, there were at least seventeen prophets who have left writings to choose between. Why did Dante place among the teachers of the Church one of the early prophets who taught only by word of mouth, whereas all the prophets who wrote were excluded?

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<sup>1</sup> On this problem, see M. GRABMANN, *Mittelalterliches Geistesleben*, Bd. III, München 1956, pp. 180—196: 'Siger von Brabant und Dante'.

<sup>2</sup> See E. R. CURTIUS, *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*, 2. Aufl., Bern 1954, p. 374 f.

<sup>3</sup> Jerome, *Prologus galeatus* (MIGNE, *Patrol.Lat.* 28, col. 599, 601—602).

<sup>4</sup> Par. 13, 88—108.

<sup>5</sup> Par. 10, 109.

Now it is to be noted that Dante's choice of 'example figures', here as in many other passages in the *Divine Comedy*, bears a strong impress of arbitrariness. Especially striking here is the omission of most of the theologians who were classed by medieval tradition among the *doctores Ecclesiae*, and not only all the Greek Fathers except Chrysostom, but also the Latin Fathers Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, and Gregory.<sup>1</sup>

This does not, however, explain the inclusion of Nathan. In the biblical account he appears three times: advising David on the building of the temple<sup>2</sup>, castigating him after his transgression with Bathsheba<sup>3</sup>, and securing Solomon in the succession of David.<sup>4</sup> Nothing of this seems to motivate his inclusion among the teachers of the Church. ERNST ROBERT CURTIUS, when investigating the list of persons in the *Comedy*, finds the presence of Nathan in the heaven of the Sun wholly inexplicable: »Was soll man aber erst zu der Auszeichnung des Propheten Nathan sagen, der weder zu den 'grossen' noch zu den 'kleinen' gehört? Hier müssen wir unser Nichtwissen bekennen. — — Vom literarhistorischen Standpunkt aus ist aber die Nennung eines Nathan unter den seligen Zwölfen kein geringerer Anstoss als die Sigers und Joachims. Vielleicht ein grösserer, denn man sieht keine Handhabe zum Verständnis.»<sup>5</sup>

An attempt to solve the problem is made by ROBERT L. JOHN in his *Dante*. According to him, Solomon is admitted into the *Paradiso* in his capacity of the builder of the temple, and Nathan as being connected with him in the biblical account.<sup>6</sup> But though JOHN makes a point of it, there is no reason to believe that Dante took any particular interest in the temple tradition of the Jews.

It is, however, reasonable to associate Nathan, who is the sole Old Testament figure in the second circle, with Solomon, who has an analogous position in the first circle. Because the first circle had in Solomon a representative of the kingdom of Israel, Dante wished to include in the second circle a figure parallel to him. That Nathan in particular was chosen would possibly be motivated by the fact that he appears in Scripture as a kind of executor of the divine authority over the theocratic kingdom when the succession is transmitted from David to Solomon. Together with Zadok the priest he

<sup>1</sup> On the *doctores Ecclesiae*, see E. R. CURTIUS, *op.cit.*, p. 264 f.

<sup>2</sup> II Sam. vii. 1—17.

<sup>3</sup> II Sam. xii. 1—25.

<sup>4</sup> I Kings i. 22—40.

<sup>5</sup> E. R. CURTIUS, *op.cit.*, p. 375 f.

<sup>6</sup> R. L. JOHN, *Dante*, Wien 1946, p. 172 f.

performs the anointing of Solomon.<sup>1</sup> In medieval times, Nathan was particularly associated with the idea of kingship when the verse *Unxerunt Salomonem Sadoc sacerdos et Nathan propheta regem* was adopted as an anthem in the ritual of coronation.<sup>2</sup> Yet it is difficult to imagine why the idea of kingship should play such an important rôle in the heaven of the Sun, which is otherwise assigned to the teachers of the Church.

Among the medieval sources that may be supposed to have influenced the *Divine Comedy*, the work of Honorius Augustodunensis takes a conspicuous place. J. S. P. TATLOCK asserts that Honorius' description of the pontifical Mass in the *Gemma animae* has influenced Dante's picture of the mystical procession in the earthly Paradise.<sup>3</sup>

In Honorius we find, at last, the explanation of the position of Nathan in the *Paradiso*. In his introduction to the 50th Psalm Honorius writes: *Nathan, qui David de poenitentia monuit, dicitur 'dedit' et significat ordinem doctorum, qui populo fidelium consilium de poenitentia dat.*<sup>4</sup> With the support of the etymology of the name, which was assumed to be 'he has given', Nathan was in medieval tradition an 'example figure' of teachers, especially those who preach penance. Dante follows this tradition when he includes Nathan among the teachers of the Church in spite of the fact that he is no teacher in the usual sense of the word. Moreover, Dante has a personal reason for choosing Nathan, who exhorted David to penance, since his own penance before Beatrice is one of the central themes of the *Divine Comedy*. When Dante wanted to include in the second circle of the teachers of the Church an Old Testament figure corresponding to Solomon in the first circle, it was consequently quite natural that he should choose Nathan the Prophet.

<sup>1</sup> I Kings i. 38,39.

<sup>2</sup> I Kings i. 45. — The anthem is already found in the 8th-century Pontifical of Egbert. See T. M. FALLOW, Coronation, in *Encycl. Brit.*, Vol. 6, London 1956, p. 468.

<sup>3</sup> J. S. P. TATLOCK, The Last Cantos of the *Purgatorio*, in *Modern Philology*, Vol. 32, Chicago 1934, p. 113 ff.

<sup>4</sup> *Expositio* in Ps. 50 (*Patrol.Lat.* 172, col. 282—283).