Beatitude in Astronomical Terms: The Zodiacal Dance in the *Acts of John* and Dante's *Paradiso* 10

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Abstract. In the Apocryphal *Acts of John* Jesus commands the disciples to form a circle around him and leads them in a circle dance while singing a call-and-response hymn. In addition, Jesus refers to the Ogdoad (the Eight) and the 'Twelve dancing above' – astronomical references the contemporary audience would have recognized. In *Paradiso X*, Dante and Beatrice emerge into the sphere of the Sun at the spring equinoctial point, when twelve spirits encircle them like a crown of dancing stars. This 'zodiacal dance' of twelve distinguished philosopher/theologians, like 'young maidens', swaying and dancing and spinning around Dante and Beatrice to heavenly music, is striking. It has been argued that the circle dance in the *Acts of John* is in fact an early Christian ritual from a time of considerable plurality in liturgy and church practice, and that the dance was ecstatic in character while being informed by Greek Neoplatonic ideas. This paper examines the role of astronomy in the 'cosmic dance'. Complex astronomical references in Dante combine with the dance, the call-and-response hymn, music which is heavenly, not earthly, and stars which are souls that dance in the houses of the Zodiac.

Paradiso 10

In Canto 10 of Dante's *Paradiso*, Beatrice and Dante the pilgrim ascend to the heaven of the Sun. By the time we reach Paradise, Dante has gone through Hell escorted by Virgil, he has gone up the rungs of the mountain of Purgatory, through the terrestrial paradise, and ascended into the heavens. The spheres of Dante's Paradise relate directly to the planetary spheres of Aristotle: the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, the Fixed Stars, and then the Empyrean where resides God and the angels. The heaven of the Sun is the home of the wise and the learned, representing wisdom and prudence. Dante has been 'nella corte del ciel'

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[in the court of heaven], from which he has returned.[1] One central aspect of Dante's poem is that he experienced this vision and then returned to earth and wrote it out in poetry. He insists that his poem, no matter how great, is a feeble reflection of the experience given to him, nor can his mind or memory hold the vision he experienced. In the next two lines he says there are some jewels too precious to be brought back to earth. What are those? He sees and experiences things that are more than human. As he says at the beginning of the *Paradiso*, 'Transumanar significar per verba non si poria' [to go beyond the human cannot be rendered in words], so let the example satisfy him for whom grace reserves the experience.[2] While he admits his failure to capture the depth and power of the vision given to him, his poem has levels of meaning which make those insights available to humans here below, living in time.

So what are the jewels? One such gem is the song. The first thing Dante experiences going up into the sphere of the Sun is beautiful music. Music that is so beautiful it cannot be replicated or translated here below, even after he has written the poem and come back to earth. Who is singing the song? There are twelve spirits singing this song, moving in a circle like the circumpolar stars which move around the pole at night but never touch the earth. These stars, spirits, are singing, and they are twirling around in a circle three times. He calls these spirits 'ardenti sole' [blazing suns].[3] They stand out in front of the sun because they're so bright. His eyesight has to be made stronger and stronger as he goes up. They are singing and dancing and they move in a circle around him and Beatrice three times.

Then they pause. He says 'Donne me parve' [Ladies, they seemed to me].[4] So we have multivalent vision in the sphere of the Sun of souls, stars, ladies, music, dancing in a circle and weaving around them three times. When they paused it was like ladies who have danced to music which stops momentarily before taking up the next verse, and the spirits have gracefully paused in their circular motion until it begins again.

Then one of the twelve dancing spirits begins to speak. It is Thomas Aquinas, and he describes, not himself, but his teacher Albertus Magnus. This must have been shocking for the initial readers of the poem: we have

1 *Paradiso* 10, line 70. Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia Secondo l'Antica Vulgata*, ed. Giorgio Petrocchi (Turin: Einaudi, 1975). All quotations from Dante are from the Petrocchi text.
2 *Paradiso 1*, line 70–72.
3 *Paradiso* 10, line 76.
4 Paradiso 10, 79.

twelve dancing ladies singing and twirling, the music is supremely beautiful, ecstatic, and they turn out to be the wise and learned, mostly theologians. They are in order: Thomas Aquinas, Albertus Magnus, Gratian, Peter Lombard, Solomon, Dionysius the Areopagite, Orosius, Boethius, Isidore of Seville, The Venerable Bede, Richard of St Victor, and Siger of Brabant. Aquinas describes each of the souls beginning with Albertus Magnus, to Aquinas's right. He goes around the circle, and the last one is Siger of Brabant right next to him on the left side. It is revealing that Aquinas and Siger on earth were bitter enemies, and had fierce theological disputes.[5] Dante places both his teacher Albertus Magnus and his enemy Siger of Brabant among the twelve most representative of prudence and wisdom.

With regard to this circular dance, Mark Musa suggests that Dante probably had a particular dance in mind, called the ballata. In this, 'the leader sings the first stanza while standing still. The other ladies then repeat (ripresa or ritornello) the stanza as they move in circular fashion. The leader sings the second stanza, and the ladies repeat it, and the dance continues'.[6] In the symbolic cosmology of Dante's poem, twelve heavenly spirits dance and revolve in a circle around a privileged centre. This scenario is informed by dances ancient and medieval, earthly and cosmic, and contributes to what John Freccero has called 'the translation of beatitude into astronomical terms'.[7]

Ancient Greece

Plato's *Timaeus* provides a vision of an ordered universe created by a divine craftsman, a universe modelled on a perfect ideal, with ethical and spiritual dimensions: 'And when he had compounded the whole, he divided it up into as many souls as there are stars, and allotted each soul to a star. And mounting them on their stars, as if on chariots, he showed them the nature of the universe and told them the laws of their destiny'.[8] The

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[5] Mark Musa, *The Divine Comedy, Paradise* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), p.132.

[6] Musa, *Paradise*, p.127.

[7] John Freccero, **Error! Main Document Only.**'Paradiso X: The Dance of the Stars' in *Dante Studies* 86 (1968): p.86.

[8] **Error! Main Document Only.**Plato, *Timaeus*, 41D-42B in Plato, *Timaeus, Critias, Cleitophon, Menexenus, and Epistles* ed. and trans. R.G. Bury (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp.176-181. Translation by Desmond Lee from **Error! Main Document Only.**Plato, *Timaeus* and *Critias* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), p.58.

fabricator or craftsman who builds the universe out of chaos divides the material into as many souls as there are stars. Each star gets a soul. When a human is born, the soul comes down and inhabits the physical body. And if the person lives a virtuous life, when they die, the soul resumes its place in the heavens as a star. In the *Timaeus* we see 'the choric dances of these stars and their juxtapositions with each other' an image expanded by Plotinus in the *Enneads* and by Neoplatonists generally, into the 'cosmic dance'.[9] The dancing rituals of ancient Greece often involved a circle around an altar or a circle around a central figure. Lillian B. Lawler describes one such:

> The dancers formed a circle around the altar and began to sing. During the dance the coryphaeus (chorus leader) and musician stood in the centre of the circle or near the altar of Dionysus. The dancers marched around the altar, moving to the right on the choric ode, to the left on the antistrophe, and standing still on the epode.[10]

There seem to be two aspects to dance in the ancient Greek world. One is suggested by the basic motions in the sky. The stars rotate around the Earth every night moving in circles. At the same time the Sun and the other planets have other more complicated movements. These are described as the same (the ideal movement) and the other (the actual movement) in Plato's *Timaeus*, and this kind of dance is abstract and universal, not to say ethereal and cerebral

The second kind of dance is the one we see in the sculptures of maenads, in the Eleusinian and Dionysian mysteries, dances which are wild, energetic, orgiastic, and sometimes violent. In Greek mythology the god Dionysus takes revenge on Pentheus by setting the Bacchantes after him. The Bacchantes, inebriated in their dancing revels, rip Pentheus to pieces, embodying the violent aspects of the orgiastic Dionysian festivals.[11] Dance in ancient Greece includes both these aspects: the cosmological dance involving the entire universe, and the extreme personal revels of the

[9] Plato, *Timaeus* 40A-D. Plotinus, *Enneads* IV.4.333 in Plotinus, *Enneads*, edited by **Error! Main Document Only.**Stephen Mackenna, revised by B.S. Page (London: Faber and Faber, 1956).
[10] **Error! Main Document Only.**Lillian B. Lawler, *The Dance in Ancient Greece*, (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1964), pp.75.
[11] **Error! Main Document Only.**Euripides, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, translated and commentary by G.S. Kirk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

mystery cults. Famous examples in visual art include the frescoes in the Villa of the Mysteries at Pompeii of a ceremonial initiation into the Bacchic mysteries. Dance serves as a personal release and, in its fury, elevates the individual into a higher level of consciousness.

The Apocryphal Acts of John

Little is known about the author of this fragmentary Gnostic text, which appears to have been composed around 180 AD.[12] In this version, on the night before Christ is crucified, he calls his twelve disciples to him and says, 'Form a circle, all of you, and join hands, dance around me!'. And then he sings and claps, and they respond, 'Amen!' to his singing. So we have Christ in the centre, twelve in a circle around him, singing, dancing, and responding to his calls. This becomes known as the 'Zodiacal Dance'.[13] In the lyrics of this song, the antithetical statements recall parts of the last supper:

> I would be saved and I would save,
> I would eat and I would be eaten.[14]

This may have been an alternate ceremony, either after the last supper or instead of the last supper.[15] For our purposes, what is important is this passage:

> Grace is dancing!
> I will pipe, dance all of you! Amen!
> I will mourn. Beat you all your breast. Amen!
> The Ogdoad sings praises with us! Amen!
> The number twelve dances on high! Amen!
> and the whole it belongs to dances in the heights. Amen!
> He who does not dance does not know what happens.[16]

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[12] **Error! Main Document Only.**'The Apocryphal Acts of John' in *The Apocryphal New Testament,* translation and notes by M. R. James (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924).
[13] Freccero, 'Dance of the Stars', p.92.
[14] 'Apocryphal Acts of John', 95.
[15] **Error! Main Document Only.**Mary Gabrielle Beard-Shouse, 'The Circle Dance of the Cross in the *Acts of John*: An Early Christian Ritual' (MA Thesis, University of Kansas, 2010), p.29.
[16] 'Apocryphal Acts of John', 95.

'Grace' is Christ, in the centre. The twelve disciples dance in a circle and shout 'Amen!' to each of Jesus's proclamations. The line 'He who does not dance does not know' affirms its place in the Gnostic tradition where only the few are given the sacred knowledge. Two crucial elements of this ritual are the 'Ogdoad' and the 'twelve'. The Ogdoad has two meanings. The first is a set of eight Egyptian primordial gods.[17] The second is simply the number eight. Here eight is the number of spheres in the Universe, if we count the seven planets (Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn) plus the sphere of the Fixed Stars.

What does it mean to say 'the number twelve dances on high'? Aside from the richly metaphorical identification of the disciples with the zodiacal constellations, Jesus proclaims not twelve things dancing on high but the *number twelve itself* is dancing. For the number twelve, so ubiquitous in the world's cultures, we suggest a kind of astronomical determinism. If we go back to the most basic elements of naked eye astronomy, it is the counting of patterns in the sky which gives us time keeping. The sun rises and sets, giving us the day. The movement of the rising and setting points on the horizon from solstice to solstice (or the movement of the Sun against the background stars) gives us 365 1/4 days for the year. The Moon goes through phases of around twenty-eight days. There are approximately twelve lunar cycles per solar year. These are basic astronomical features available to all the Earth's cultures as far back as we care to go. The Sun, Moon, and all the planets are visible in one area of the sky, a band at an angle to the celestial equator, which is the Zodiac. We divide that band into twelve equal parts and we have the zodiacal constellations in astronomy and the houses of the zodiac in astrology. The number twelve is a presence which predates the formation of actual civilizations.

By 'astronomical determinism' it is suggested that astronomy came first. We counted the lunar phases in a year and thus the number twelve was powerful, privileged. In England the twelve-member jury trial begins with Ethelred the Unready in the tenth century, but in ancient Greece, there are twelve jurors at the trial of Orestes organized by Athena in Aeschylus's *Eumenides*.[18] Twelve titans are overthrown by twelve Olympian gods of

[17] James Miller, *Measures of Wisdom: The Cosmic Dance in Classical and Christian Antiquity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), p.102.
[18] Aeschylus, *Oresteia: Agamemnon. Libation-Bearers. Eumenides*, ed. And trans. by Alan H. Sommerstein. Loeb Classical Library 146 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), pp.424-25.

the Pantheon. There are twelve labours of Hercules. In the Hebrew Bible, Ishmael has twelve sons, Jacob has twelve sons, and there are twelve tribes of Israel. In Scandinavian mythology Odin has twelve sons. The Hittites have twelve gods of the underworld, and so on.

But what is most remarkable is the intense tone of this episode, part celebratory, part manic. James Miller, in his authoritative work on the cosmic dance, says

> The image of a leaping frisking Christ, his spirit youthful his steps nimble and ebullient like a colt's, must strike modern Christians as ludicrous or even sacrilegious. Early Christians seemed to have responded as much to the playfulness as to the piety of the redeemer, who was free to leap into time and out again with all the passionate vitality of a Dionysian dancer.[19]

The One and the Twelve

If the twelve disciples are the twelve constellations of the Zodiac, then Christ in the centre is the Sun. Using the Sun as a symbol for Christ has a long history, as does placing the Sun in the centre of a circle.[20] In *Apocalypse* 12:1, 'there appeared a great wonder in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of 12 stars'. This in visual art becomes the Immaculata. The Virgin Mary stands on the moon. The light of the sun comes out from behind her, and she wears a crown of 12 stars. Paintings and sculptures of the Immaculata can be found from medieval art through to Catholic churches today. The marble zodiac floors of San Miniato al Monte, and of the Baptistery, both in Florence, have the 'Christ as Sun' in the centre of a circle made up of the zodiacal constellations. The zodiac floor of the Florence Baptistery has the following palindromic inscription:

> EN GIRI TORTE SOL CICLOS ET ROTOR IGNE
> I the Sun, move athwart the orbits, being moved by fire at the same time.

We notice the much remarked-upon paradox that medieval Christianity loved to take the Sun and make it a symbol of Christ.[21] On the other hand, in medieval astronomy the Earth is at the centre, and the Sun actually

[19] **Error! Main Document Only.**Miller, *Measures of Wisdom*, p.135.
[20] Freccero, 'Dance of the Stars', p.94.
[21] Freccero, 'Dance of the Stars', p.90.

revolved around the Earth. But symbolically equating Christ with the Sun just made sense. The universe was literally geocentric, but metaphorically heliocentric. Later, with Copernicus, when the Sun becomes the literal centre, it is no longer as active as it was before as a symbol of Christ.

Dante packs an awful lot of meanings into the zodiacal dance of *Paradiso* 10. However, the notion of a circle dance which has other meanings layered into it is a feature of Western art. Prominent at weddings, the circle dance seems more firmly rooted to cultural traditions of the past, and to social cohesion. A famous modern example, Matisse's painting *The Dance I* (1909) drives to the essence of the meaning of dance.

The circle dance differs from other popular dance styles in its communal purpose. Rather than talent display or mating ritual, the circle dance always incorporates some notion of togetherness, of transcendence from the ordinary, abandoning one's individual identity and joining the group.

Paintings from the Old Masters depicting the Golden Age invariably contain a circle dance amid other celebrations in the idyllic landscape. It is thought that Matisse may have drawn his idea from Carracci's engraving 'Love in the Golden Age' from 1595, which in turn may have been influenced by Paolo Fiammingo's 'Love in the Golden Age' from 1589. Both are idyllic visions of a golden time before civilization, characterized by bucolic rural peace, with people and animals lounging blissfully in the sun, and dancing to music in a circle. Whereas Dante takes the circle dance and makes it ecstatic and transcendent, and places it in heaven where he hopes to go, here in the Old Masters tradition, we look back to a mythical time before Greco-Roman culture and call it the golden age. And there we always have, for whatever reason, a circle dance. And we can trace this topos of the circle dance through Western art.

In the medieval period, Lorenzetti portrays the effects of good government on the walls of the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena in 1339. When you have good government, people are at peace. They are happy. In the foreground is a circle dance. Starting in the early Renaissance, when Apollo dances with the muses, the inspirations for poetry, music, and the creative arts, they do a circle dance. Examples of golden age circle dances include Baldassare Peruzzi's 'Dance of Apollo and the Muses' (early sixteenth century), Maartin van Heemskerk's 'Apollo and the Muses' (1560), and Jacopo Zucchi's 'The Age of Gold' (1581). Finally in the seventeenth century there is Nicolas Poussin's 'A Dance to the Music of Time' (1636). This was commissioned by Giulio Rospigliosi, who would soon become Pope Clement IX. Yet the allegory is entirely pagan. We have Time in the lower right-hand corner, cherubs playing with an hourglass and

blowing bubbles, and four figures (three women and a man) dancing in a circle. You might think they are the cardinal directions or the seasons, but in the commission, they are supposed to represent poverty, labour, wealth, and pleasure. Above them in the sky the goddess Aurora leads the Sun, heralding the dawn. In a glowing rendition of the god in the centre with twelve encircling, Apollo in his chariot holds up his arms and carries the zodiac in his hands, the one and the twelve.

The circle dance with one (Sun, God, Beatrice, Dante the Pilgrim, Jesus, Apollo) in the centre and twelve (Zodiacal constellations, dancing maidens, theologians, disciples, Muses) dancing, singing, and revolving about the centre, is a scenario that appears in Western culture multiple times. We still enjoy circle dances at many weddings and other joyous celebrations. Perhaps all these examples are manifestations of a Jungian archetype, a vital portion of humanity's cultural expression which will extend as far into the future as it reaches into the past.