Like *Inferno*, Dante's poem the *Commedia* was ‘event publishing’. It lit up the collective imagination of the Middle Ages, and Dante's account of falling in love with Beatrice on a May day holiday in Florence many hundreds of years ago is still one of the most famous scenes in all literature.

After that first meeting Dante only ever had fleeting glimpses of her, but Beatrice began to appear to him instead in visions, sending him off on a quest that would lead him to Hell and back.

Similarly chapter one of Inferno sees Robert Langdon having a vision of a woman who tells him ‘Seek and ye shall find’. Like Dante he is propelled onto a quest by his vision. He knows that people are willing to be extremely ruthless in order to further their aims, but for the moment he doesn't know exactly what is at stake. Military powers, secret societies and evil geniuses emerge from the shadows, and both these somewhat otherworldly and scholarly writers, Dante and Langdon, find out that people who want to kill them.

Sometime after his meeting with Beatrice a somewhat mysterious and ambiguous older man would come into Dante's life. As I show in *The Secret history of Dante* Brunetto Latini became his mentor, helping him to make sense of his visions. Similarly we know from Dan Brown's previous book that Robert Langdon had a mentor, Peter Solomon, a 33 degree Freemason who had helped teach him how to read esoteric symbolism.

As a result of this mentoring, Robert Langdon is, as all Dan Brown fans know, a world expert on *Symbology*. He is master of a discipline that enables him to read not only ancient symbols but also the signs of the times, to work out what is really going on beneath the surface and to play a decisive part in the battle between good and evil.

It is a little known fact that Dante's mentor was a Templar, a member of a tertiary order of the Templars. Like the tertiary order of the Franciscans, for example, it enabled lay people join and do the work of the order in society at large rather than being a closed community. Latini was probably initiated into the order during his time in exile in Paris, and there is evidence to show that later, when he was able to return to his native Florence, he initiated his pupil. Certainly Dante shows great fellow feeling for the Knights Templar in the *Commedia*. Recent research into the records of property ownership in Italy in the Middle Ages show that the Templars owned a house in Florence in the time of Dante.

It is appropriate that Dante’s mentor was a Templar and Langdon’s a high degree Freemason, and I show in *The Sacred History*, Freeemasonry preserves many Templar symbols and traditions.

Recently there has also been a move to demystify the Templars and portray them as a sort of club for gentlemen farmers, concerned to protect tourists in the Holy Land as if it were their civic duty, like members of a Rotary club. In reality they were far stranger than they are often portrayed - even by many conspiracy theorists. In fact the more I've looked into the Templars the more I've come to the conclusion that the least helpful frame of reference you can use when trying to understand them is modern down-to-earth common sense…

The Knights Templar, after all, were not just prepared to risk dying as martyrs, they *wanted* to do so. The Rule of the Templars is not much read - perhaps even by some people who have written whole books about them! - but it has survived to this day and it is very strange indeed. The Knights Templar were allowed to hunt only lions, were forbidden to kiss any woman including their mothers - and were expressly forbidden, too, to wear pointy shoes! They believed it was their duty to commit what they called '*malicide*', the killing of evil people (a Christian equivalent to *jihad*). When they were not actually fighting they spent most of their day praying and performing other ceremonial rites and practises. Revealing any of these practises to outsiders would attract the most drastic sanctions, which could include the culprit being starved to death.

Initiation into any religious order has always involved some form of symbolic dying and being born again. As I show in *The Secret History of Dante,* there is a great deal of evidence to show that in the ancient world and on into the Middle Ages initiation involved extremely elaborate underground ceremonies which aimed to induce an altered state of consciousness. In this altered state and in long smoke-filled corridors and chambers the candidate really believed he was descending into Hell before being led up again into a new life. These ceremonies took place in facsimiles of hell – and of these one has been excavated in Baia in Italy.

It is probable, then, that in Dante's account of his journey underground in the *Inferno* he was writing a literal description of something he had actually experienced, describing passageways of brick and stone quite as real as the secret passageway that leads Robert Langdon from the Boboli Gardens over the Ponte Vecchio and into the Palazzo Vecchio.

Langdon ‘s mentor Peter Solomon would have taken part in Freemasonic initiation ceremonies which preserve traditions running back to the ancient and medieval versions. Are these Freemasonic versions as powerful and life-changing as the ceremonies that Dante and his mentor had experienced? Some have cast doubt on this, but a friend of mine, an initiate of more than one other secret society, who was initiated to the 33rd degree in Washington in the 1990s, told me that he was surprised at just how spiritual experience this turned out to be.

Like his mentor Dante would be driven into exile and as a result he lived for a while in Paris. Verses in the *Commedia* (‘Upwards my hands, together clasped, I raised, scanning the glowing flames and remembering the burning bodies I have seen’*)* suggest Dante was there to witness the execution of the Grand Master of the Templars.

To write openly in favour of the Templars to risk being burnt alive, but in the *Commedia* where Dante describes the ranks of the elect wearing white robes crowned with the lily of martyrdom, he is clearly alluding to the Templars. He reserves special places in Hell for the pope and Philip the Fair, the king of France who conspired to condemn and destroy the Templars – which Dante saw as a cosmic crime on a level with the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. In the poem Dante’s guide to the highest levels of heaven is Bernard of Clairvaux, the great spiritual power behind the Templars and the man who wrote their Rule.

But to understand fully what the Templars and Dante - and also as we shall see Robert Langdon, following in their footsteps - were fighting against, the evil forces that pursue them and which they must ultimately confront and defeat in order to save the world, I think we have to ask what is was the Templars actually thought they were doing in Jerusalem? And in order to that we need to crack what I think may properly be called the Dante code.

Dante scholars everywhere acknowledge that the *Commedia* is written according to an exceptionally complex Kabbalistic numerical ‘Symbology’. This discipline was widely regarded as the most advanced thinking of the day, and intellectual, spiritual and political leaders wanted to know about it, just as today people feel the need to understand quantum mechanics or evolutionary biology. Philip the Fair and Jacques de Moloy independently sought audiences with Ramon Lull, a renowned magus and expert on Kabbalistic number symbolism.

According to the Kabbalist art of *gematria* Hebrew letters have numerical values, so that certain numbers have words encoded within them. Some significant numbers such as 666, famously the Mark of the Beast, have clusters of words contained in them. The Crusading pope Innocent III predicted that a great showdown would take place between the forces of good and the forces of evil in the year 1332, this being 666 x 2. Richard the Lionheart consulted the famous Calabrian monk and prophet Joachim of Fiore, who used number symbolism to justify his prediction that a *novus ordo* was about to dawn, a Third Age in the history of the world. Then people would learn to live free of all bodily necessities and attain such a level of perfection that they would be able to wield supernatural powers. He also prophesied that the forces of evil would try to prevent this development and retard the evolution of humanity. The armies of Satan would arise in special forms (*ordines speciales*) and would be opposed by the knights of Jerusalem (*milites Hiersuslem*).

Dan Brown is no slouch when it comes to playing with number codes, and Dante himself flaunts his use of this number symbolism in the Purgatory section of the *Commedia*, chapter 33, verse 43, where he uses the number 515 to refer to a mysterious messianic Messenger.

The Symbology of 515 is complex and abstruse. 515 is a significant number in Jewish mysticism; God made his promise to Sarah in the 515th verse of the Talmud, and Moses prayed to enter the Promised Land 515 times. In Christian mystical tradition 515 people witnessed the risen Christ. In terms of *gematria* we may read 515 as the number of the Virgin and also of her conceiving. 515 is the number of prayer and of promise about to be fulfilled.

Additional layers of meaning have been suggested. In the Tarot cards, which first surfaced in Italy in the fourteenth century, card number 5 in the Major Arcana is the Hierophant, who is depicted wearing the eight-layered crown of the pope. Card number 15 of the Minor Arcana is the Devil. By linking these two cards together is Dante also again referring to the conspiracy between the pope and the King Philip he elsewhere describes as a devilish figure?

There is one other level of meaning which ties all these ideas together and takes us straight to the heart of the matter. 515 refers to two passages in the Bible – Ezekiel 5.15 and Revelation 5.1-5 – both of which are key parts of the prophecies concerning the rise of the Antichrist and the battle which will be fought for the Temple in Jerusalem. This battle must be won by the armies of God if the Antichrist is to be defeated and the new heavenly Jerusalem is to descend, marking the beginning of heaven on earth.

In the time of the Knights Templar and Dante *all history was sacred history*. The site of the Jerusalem Temple was the place where Adam and Eve had lived, where Abraham had decided to sacrifice Isaac, where Solomon had built the Holy of Holies to house God and where the great events in the life of Jesus had taken place. Medieval maps show Jerusalem as the centre of the world. It was the place where all the great events of history had taken place. Whoever controlled Jerusalem could control the future.

This then was the cosmic mission of the Knights Templar. The real reason the Knights Templar devoted their lives to controlling Jerusalem was because they believed that it was destined to be the site of a decisive battle that would soon be fought there between the forces of good and the forces of evil led by the Antichrist. They believed that during the battle they would die as martyrs, but that their martyrdom would pave the way for victory and for heaven on earth. There they would come into their own.

And what does all this have to do with Robert Langdon and Inferno? The tradition of thinking about the Antichrist and prophesying his arrival did not die out with Middle Ages. Intense speculation and prophecy has continued into modern times in a traction that runs through writers such as the Russians Dostoyevsky and his friend Soloviev and the Austrian mystic Rudolf Steiner. I don't want to risk publishing a spoiler, but suffice to say here that the picture of the Antichrist that emerges in this tradition is of a man who is a scientist of remarkable gifts, who claims his discoveries will be of great benefit to humankind.

Dan Brown is a great story teller, but the reason why his book sales break records may also be to do with the way that his stories, unwittingly or deliberately - bring to the surface powerful streams of secret mystical philosophy. The hidden reality of underground initiation ceremonies is like a subliminal message in novels of Dan Brown, and prophecies and archetypes of the Antichrist help give them mythic power.