Hildegard 3: The Cosmos

Hi everyone, and welcome back to *Experiencing the Scivias.*

This session works the same as the last one: watch this video while looking at the relevant image, and reflect upon it and your reactions. There are some questions at the end of the video, also uploaded to then webpage, which will hopefully provoke some thoughts! Then read the text itself, reflecting similarly. Finally, we’ll get together for discussion later, using the questions as prompts.

# Part 1: Vision 3

God states that He created the world such that it shows divine truths; something demonstrated in this vision.

Hildegard then continues to relate a picture of the cosmos. Depictions of the cosmos were common in the medieval period, as people sought to explain the relationship between the Earth and the other visible objects in the sky – the Sun, the Moon, the Stars, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn.

While the image in Hildegard’s vision is unique, the broad idea of presenting one would have been familiar to her readers. In line with the theological method we discussed in our first session, this serves as the basis for conveying divine truths.

Hildegard sees a vast, shadowed, egg-shaped object. The shape of the egg signifies the course of history. The narrow top represents humanity’s rude origins, the wide middle represents humanity’s enlargement throughout sacred history, and the narrow bottom represents the tribulations of the end times. The egg is surrounded with three zones or layers. Furthest from centre is a zone of bright fire. A shadowy zone lies beneath it. Finally, there is a zone of pure ether nearest the centre.

The fire signifies God’s vengeance consuming those outside the faith, as well as God’s consolation purifying those within it. The shadow beneath it signifies how God “throws down the darknesss of devilish perversity”.

In the fire is a globe of red flame – which is to say, the sun. This signifies the Son (in the Trinitarian sense), “within God the Father”, who illuminates all creatures with His glory and charity. This is held up by three small torches, which hang above the globe and illuminate it. These are Mars, Jupiter and Saturn; the planets which, under a geocentric view of the solar system, seem to orbit the earth on the other side of the sun. This signifies how the Trinity, and how the Son descended from heaven to earth to reveal heavenly things to creatures, to be worshipped by them, and to make them virtuous.

Sometimes the globe raises itself up, whereupon fire flows to it and its flames “last longer”. This represents the way the Incarnation raises up humanity, and the glory of virginity and chastity, which were made fruitful in his birth. Sometimes it sinks down and becomes cold, and its flames are “subdued”. This represents Christ’s suffering, and his eventual passing into mystery in his return to the Father.

Each zone – of fire and shadow – emits blasts of whirlwind, which diffuse themselves throughout the object. The whirlwind from the fire represents God’s power, which fills the world, and truth rushing forth from it. However, the wind from the shadowy zone represents the rage of the devil, sending forth falsehood into the world.

In the dark zone is a dark fire, too horrifying to look at. It is full of thunder, turmoil and sharp stones, which shakes the whole zone. This shaking throws the fire and air into turmoil, producing lightening to preceed the thunder. The horrifying nature of the fire represents the incomprehensible passion of the devil’s murderous hatred. It shakes the whole zone because murder contains every evil. In Cain, it emerged out of anger. The thunder, tempest, and sharp stones represent the avarice, drunkenness and hardness of heart present in all murder and milder vices. The commotion created by the thunder represents the arousing of divine justice. The lightning represents divine judgment which attends evil. It precedes the thunder because God’s knowledge foresees everything “exceeds and suppresses evil”.

The placement of the etheric zone beneath the dark fire signifies how “beneath the snares of the ancient betrayer shines most serene faith”.

The etheric zone contains a large globe of white fire, which emits its brightness, pouring it out into many white spheres within the ether, before moving under the globe of red fire to replenish its own fire and begin the cycle again. This large globe is the moon, and the small spheres are the stars. The large globe signifies the Church, which “asserts in faith innocent brightness and great honour”. The small sphere represent the works of piety in which the Church “passes on the beauty of its miracles”. When emptied, it signifies the church subject to disdain and “plunged into sorrows”. Its moving back to and replenishing its fires under the globe of red fire signifies its continued marvelling at the beauty of these works, and turning to Christ for protection and consolation in grace, which rekindles its ability to express its love in works.

Two small torches are placed over the globe of white fire to guide it in this movement. These are Mercury and Venus; the planets which, under a geocentric view of the solar system, orbit the earth between the moon and the sun. These signify the Old and New Testaments, which show the Church “the divine rules of the celestial mysteries” and protect its orthodoxy. Whirlwinds blast forth from this etheric sphere to infuse the whole too. This represents the tradition which communicates the truth and is spread throughout the world.

Beneath the ether is watery air, with a white zone beneath it. This air diffuses itself around the whole, spreading moisture. This represents baptism, which is “founded on blessed innocence and stability”, and which propagates itself around the world.

It sometimes contracts – suddenly, to produce heavy rain, and gently to produce soft rain. This represents the different ways in which the faith is preached – either in a “flood” that astonishes people with an “abundance of words”, or discreetly and “with sweet moderation” such that it reaches people “by a gentle watering”. It too produces whirlwinds in the manner above. This signifies the “forcible sermons” which are produced by believers after their baptism, which reach out across the world to bring people to faith.

In the very centre is a huge, sandy globe, held unwaveringly in place by these elements. This shows the strength of humanity, which was created from dust, and is “so entangled with the strengths of the rest of creation” that it can never by “separated from them”. Rather, they are humanity’s servants, and humanity rules over them with its intellect. However, the blasts of whirlwind and turmoil in these elements causes it to move a little. This represents how people, when confronted with God’s miracles, “feel the impact” of their greatness and consider their own “weakness and frailty”.

In the Northeast, there is a great mountain. Its North face is wholly dark, and its East face is wholly light, with the light and darkness being entirely separate. This illustrates the choice between good and evil, salvation and damnation. The separation of light and dark signifies how “the works of light do not come down among the works of darkness, and the works of darkness do not ascend to the works of light” – despite the devil’s deceptions, which lead people to confuse the two. The compass directions are also important here. Later in the Scivias, Hildegard associates the North, which is cold and absent of the sun’s light, with Satan in His fallen state. The East, by contrast, as the direction of the rising sun, is associated with the resurrection.

God then digresses to condemn augury. He expresses that it is futile to try and prevent what He wishes to come to pass. Moreover, all power to foresee the future is rightly God’s power: He permits some creatures to foresee the future because they have love of Him, and that they do so in the way that “a servant can sometimes display the power of his master”. In this context, forgetting God and looking to creatures to discern the future is a kind of idolatry, replacing God with a creature. He also notes that humans do not have particular stars governing their lives. Moreover, just because a given creature holds within itself signs of the future does not mean that it *knows* the future – just as a coin, stamped by a minter, does not understand the form it has been given. However, this is not to say that humans should not look at the creatures – “neither stars nor fire nor birds nor any other creatures of this kind can either harm you or help you by your examining them”. Just that they should not be used for divination.

God then digresses further to reprimand people for doing magic, which amounts to this idolatrous turning to creatures, and is the result of the devil’s deceit. He condemns it as a throwing away of the “arms” of intellect and virtue, with which God has equipped people, for vanities; something which people persist in out of pride. He also condemns as futile the attempt to know the future to extend one’s life. God takes righteous people only when they have borne their spiritual fruit. God also takes anyone who will not be fruitful before they can fall into corruptions and apathy. Finally, God may seem to condemn people to death, only for them to live a bit longer. This is not because they have staved off death; it is because God is using the threat of death as a lesson, calling the person to justice. Here, we might also think of Hildegard’s own experiences of illness, which she saw as God prompting her to write.

God then condemns humans who say that if God wants them to be good, he should make them righteous. This is an attempt to make God who controls the future the servant of humans – while they themselves ignore God’s laws. He illustrates this by way of an analogy: “Wishing to catch Me like this is as if a wanton goat wished to catch a hart; it would be thrown back and pierced by the hart’s strong horns”. Likewise, God will crush anyone who seeks to catch him with judgment by His law. Similarly, such a person is like a sheep who runs from the shepherd to follow a wolf, thinking that it has mastered it. God will judge them, just as the wolf will devour the sheep, seeing that it has chosen to forsake the shepherd. He concludes this point by reiterating that He is just, “so everything He does in heaven and earth is justly ordained” – i.e. don’t claim that God is unjust for not making you righteous.

He then draws another analogy, this time with a physician, who charges for more difficult cures to serious illnesses. “Lesser sins” are wiped away with only “people’s groans and tears and good resolutions” – but “graver faults” require “penitence and amendment”. Nevertheless, He does bring mercy. He then the prohibition on augury as seeking knowledge humans should not have, describing it as asking or invoking the devil, and therein similar to Adam and Eve eating from the tree of knowledge. Humans should not seek anything from the devil, who will only seduce, whereas God actually saves people; something that illustrates the Devil’s own lack of knowledge, because he did not foresee this and was defeated in it.

# Part 2: Questions

That’s it for Hildegard’s vision. Here are some questions to consider:

1. What impression does this vision give you of the cosmos? What feelings does it evoke, and how? Does it inspire you to approach the world in any particular way?
2. This vision of the cosmos is not a scientific one. How should we interpret it in light of this fact? How might does this affect the way in which we think about Hildegard’s visions?
3. Hildegard’s allegorical method is illustrated clearly in this vision. What can we learn from this method? How might this affect our approach to the world, or depictions of it?

Enjoy the reading, and I’ll see you soon!

# Reading

Book 1, Vision 3