Hildegard 2: The fall

Hello, and welcome back to *Experiencing the Scivias.* This week, we’ll begin reading Hildegard’s text.

The text itself recounts a series of visions. This course will look at Book 1 of the Scivias, which contains six visions in total. Each vision involves two components: the first is an image or series of images, which were reproduced in a form in the Rupertsburg codex. The second is a discourse by God explaining the images, and delving into related theological topics.

This session will focus on the first two of Hildegard’s images. It – and those later in this course – will focus primarily on explaining the textual side of her visions, which will aid you in your own reading of the *Scivias.* As you listen to this lecture, you might want to have the images themselves to hand: seeing them will make both the images themselves and the explanations easier to understand, which in turn will set you up to understand them better in your own reading.

As you listen to this explanation and look at the images, make a note of your thoughts and feelings. How do the ideas and images affect you? Do you find them beautiful or ugly, good or evil, consoling or threatening? Then do the same when you read the texts for yourself, and consider what additional thoughts and feelings are prompted by reading Hildegard’s words. Feel free also to meditate over her visions in other ways, like I suggested in the previous lecture.

At the end of this video, I will suggest some questions to think about in relation to the week’s content. These can serve as the beginning for discussion during the group session, but will also help to focus you on a few key points. I will also upload them separately on the web page for the course. Hopefully they can inform your reflection, and help draw your attention to certain parts of the reading!

# Part 1: Vision 1

Hildegard’s first vision illustrates God’s knowledge of human actions, and the way virtuous people have the fear of God.

Hildegard sees God enthroned in glory upon a great, iron-coloured mountain, with soft shadows extending to either side of him. The mountain represents the immutability of the Kingdom of God. God’s glory, which obscures Hildegard’s sight, reflects His incomprehensible divinity. The soft shadows represent how protection and the pursuit of equity are present in divine admonition and punishment.

A figure covered in eyes stands before God at the foot of the mountain. She cannot discern any human form in it, because of the eyes. This represents fear of God, and how it stands humbly in God’s presence and gazes upon the Kingdom, therein countering peoples’ tendency to forget divine justice.

In front of the eyes image, she sees a child in a tunic of “subdued” colour and white shoes. Glory descends from God to the child, glowing so brightly she cannot look at its face. This represents the poor in spirit, who are led by fear of God. The subdued colours of the tunic represents their simplicity and sobriety. Hildegard does not say so explicitly, but it seems reasonable to assume that their white shoes represent their following in the footsteps of the fear of the Lord. Blinding splendour falls upon the child, representing God’s powerful outpouring of unfathomable grace upon them.

Living sparks fly from God around the images. These sparks represent the virtues. They fly around the two figures, representing how they embrace, captivate, help and protect those who fear God and are poor of spirit.

The mountain is covered in many windows, with a human head at each one. Some of these heads are white, and others are of “subdued” colours. This represents the way that God knows all human acts. Most peoples’ acts are lukewarm at some times, and pure at others. Hildegard does not say so explicitly, but it seems likely that these tendencies are represented by the subdued and white colours respectively.

# Part 2: Vision 2

Hildegard’s second vision represents the Fall, first in Satan’s rebellion against God, and then in Adam and Eve’s sin in the Garden of Eden. It also addresses the question of how a good God could create humans with the capacity to sin, and thus damn themselves. It also includes a lengthy discourse on marriage which we will skip for the sake of time – but feel free to read it for yourselves.

Hildegard sees “a great multitude of very bright living lamps”. These represent the “vast army of heavenly spirits”. The fire represents the burning of their love for God, which led them to reject Lucifer’s rebellion, to shine with divine glory in their righteousness. Lucifer’s rebellion sought to shine with this beauty independently of God. This led God’s jealous wrath, in an ironic inversion of that light as “fiery blackness”, to cast him down. Now Lucifer likewise burns, rather than shines, and is “black” rather than bright.

God explains that this is fitting, because it amounts to trying to make what belongs to God (namely, this glory) independent of God, and therefore to “divide the wholeness of divinity”. Justice demanded retribution for this. As a result, the fallen wander the world, ever unsatisfied as God does not allow them to have their desire. God foresees their fate and withholds their former glory. Consequently, they withdraw from Him, suffering from their loss, and vainly seeking to substitute “evil fame” for their true fulfilment which remains ever withheld.

She then sees an enormous pit open up, emitting fire, smoke, stench, and a “loathsome cloud” which spreads out and touches “a deceitful, vein-shaped form”. The pit is hell, full of torments for the Devil and those who turned away from God, who despised goodness. When the devil rose up against God, He attempted to steal God’s glory, effectively becoming God himself. But God is almighty and it is impossible to prevail over him. Therefore, one cannot supplant God, and Lucifer failed – being cast down to hell instead. However, not all sinners go to hell. Those that are penitent, therein turning back to God, go to purgatory instead.

The cloud represents the Devil’s “fraud” coming forth from hell to touch the serpent, which is represented by the vein-shaped form. He chose the serpent because it resembled him and was deceitful, enabling him to deceive Adam and Eve without doing so “openly in his own form”. God notes that the serpent recognised that, in turning away from the tree, Adam and Eve were obeying a divine command. However, he only found out that it was forbidden through questioning Eve.

Hildegard then sees a beautiful human figure emit a bright cloud. The human form contains many stars. The human form represents Adam, and the cloud, Eve - who shines with “God’s preordination”. The loathsome cloud touches the white cloud and the human form, casting them out “from that region. This represents the Devil influencing Adam and Eve, leading them to be ejected from Eden. God explains that the devil targets Eve specifically because he knows “that the susceptibility of the woman would be more easily conquered than the strength of the man”, but that Adam’s “holy love” for Eve would lead to him doing what she told him. She could “flatter and caress” him, and is able to mislead him so because she is made from his rib.

When this happens, a “luminous splendor” surrounds the region, and the calm between the elements of the world becomes agitated and horrifying. The luminous splendor represents God’s purification of Eden after Adam and Eve leave. The turmoil is creation turning itself against man, containing him now that he has lowered himself, rather than serving him.

God then digresses to discuss why God made man such that he could sin. He states that glory and honour require testing, much like valuable gold must be “tested in the fire”, and that gems need scrutinising. Because man is made in the image and likeness of God, he needs testing more than any other creature, and to be tested *through* every other creature. God explains:

Spirit is to be tested by spirit, flesh by flesh, earth by water, fire by cold, fight by resistance, good by evil, beauty by deformity, poverty by riches, sweetness by bitterness, health by sickness, long by short, hard by soft, height by depth, light by darkness, life by death, Paradise by punishments, the Heavenly Kingdom by Gehenna, earthly things by earthly things and heavenly things by heavenly things.

(book I vision 2 no. 29)

That is, humans are tested by their capacity to sin, which encompasses their whole existence.

God then admonishes humans for questioning the justice of this, asserting that God is just, and that humans make themselves unjust when they claim to be wiser than God by questioning Him. And humans are not wiser than God – they don’t even understand basic, worldly things like how they were created, or “how you live in the body, or how you may be divested of the body”, let alone heavenly things.Moreover, He states, the fall was a happy fault: God exercised his mercy in ordaining the incarnation, which elevated humans to a greater glory in their redemption. This evokes a common medieval idea that, although the Fall was evil, it lead to our redemption in Christ, which is so good that the Fall could be counted as “happy”. In line with this, he states that humans are raised to a greater glory because, just as “when a field is cultivated it brings forth much fruit”, “after humanity’s ruin many virtues arose to raise it up again”.

God then employs three further metaphors in further defence of divine justice: a garden, a sheep, and a pearl. First, God is like a wise gardener, and humanity his garden. A gardener would labour to cultivate his garden carefully if it were never going to bear fruit for him. Likewise, God would not have worked so hard on humanity were they simply destined to be damned. Here, God is addressing the anxiety that God created humanity just to be damned. He points out that he didn’t create humans simply to go to hell, as is evidenced by his continued activity in human existence.

Second, God then talks about human wickedness as filth, and God’s justice as the sun. The sun is loved more because it can be compared to the filth, and the filth hated next to the sun. That is, sin is needed to show God’s goodness by contrast.

The next bit might come across as a bit strange. He then asks us to imagine a sheep, belonging to the gardener above, falls into the filth having been separated by its own consent. The sheep is humanity. However, God then sends his Lamb to free humanity. In doing so, God did not choose to simply oppose the devil in his power, but through the humility of the incarnation. Because of this, the devil does not recognise the Lamb, but sees that when it is killed and peoples’ sins are remitted that he must lose the sheep. He then only then comes to recognise the lamb is God.

This idea evokes a particular understanding of just what goes on when Christ saves us. Nowadays, we most commonly think about this process in terms of Christ dying in our place, or paying off the debt of our sins. However, another narrative which was particularly common in the early medieval period and before was that Christ, in dying, somehow tricked the devil, and saved humanity from him by this trick. God does not explain this in much detail, however. Rather, he simply uses this to illustrate the fact of God’s salvific activity, making the same point as above. It shows how God did not simply “will to forsake humanity, but sent His Son for its salvation”; humans are not abandoned to the sin in contrast to which God shows forth His glory.

Finally, God compares humanity to a pearl dropped into filth, which is then rescued in mercy, purified, and then “restored to its former honor with even greater glory”. Christ, in becoming man, lifted man “up above the heavens” – “through the Son of God God appeared in Man and Man in God”. That is, again, humans end up better than they were before.

God concludes the vision by reflecting on the role of humility in this, noting that the humble nature of the Incarnation illustrates how humility “groans, weeps and destroys all offenses, for this is its work”. As such, humility is key to resisting the devil and humans should arm themselves with it. He also states that the Incarnation was an exercise of charity, which embraces sinners as well as saints. Together, these are the two most important virtues, and inseparable from one another. He draws an analogy between them and the soul and the body, stating that

Humility is like the soul and charity like the body, and they cannot be separated from each other but work together, just as soul and body cannot be disjoined but work together as long as a person lives in the body”. And just as the various members of the body are subject to the soul and body, “so also the other virtues cooperate, according to their justice, with humility and charity.

(Book 1, vision 2, no. 33)

# Part 3: Questions

That’s it for Hildegard’s visions. Here are some questions to prompt you further, before you go on to the reading.

1. Hildegard’s first vision portrays God’s power with a range of imagery. What kind of power is evoked by these images?
2. Hildegard’s portrayal of the fall is dramatic. How does it capture the reality of sin? Does it do so effectively? Is there anything it fails to capture?
3. Do you think Hildegard’s answer to the problem of God’s justice in light of the human ability to sin is satisfactory? Why?

I’ll see you for the group session! Bye for now!

# Reading

Book One, Vision 1; Vision 2 *except* no. 11-26\*

\*feel free to read this section anyway – I just didn’t cover it in the lecture