Hildegard 5: The Synagogue, and the Choirs of Angels

Hi everyone, and welcome to the final session of *Experiencing the Scivias.* I hope you’ve all enjoyed the course!

This session, we’ll be looking at two images. They’re not immediately related to one another, but are both quite short and finish off Hildegard’s first vision, so they’ve ended up in this session together. The first image deals with the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. The content here reflects medieval antisemitism, and needs contextualisation in light of more recent developments in the Church’s awareness of these issues. The second image deals with the choirs of angels, listing the various types of angels, their roles, and what they signify.

# Part 1: Vision five – the Synagogue

Hildegard sees “the image of a woman”. This is “the Synagogue”, which God explains is “the mother of the Incarnation of the Son of God”. She sees the secrets of God “in the shadows”, gazing on them “from afar with great admiration”, but without fully revealing them. God explains that the Synagogue admires the Church, who is the new “Bride” of the Son of God. The Church possesses virtues the Synagogue lacks, being protected from vice by angels. In contrast, “the Synagogue, deserted by God, lies in vice”.

The Synagogue is “pale from her head to her navel and black from her navel to her feet”. This signifies how “from the time of her fullest strength to the end of her time”, she was “soiled” by virtue of her transgressions against the divine precepts.

She has red feet. This signifies, according to the vision, how “at the end of her time” she killed Christ, and “therefore slipped and fell down herself”. This reflects the popular (but never canonical) medieval desire that Jews were corporately responsible for the murder of Christ. However, around her feet is a cloud of “purest whiteness”. This signifies the faith of Christians, which came about “as the Synagogue ended”.

She has no eyes, and is standing with her hands in her armpits. This signifies how she “did not look on the true light”, and “conceals the works of justice under the apathy of her laziness”, hiding them “as if they did not exists”. She stands next to an altar that itself stands before the eyes of God, but does not touch it. This signifies the way she knew the law “superficially”, without plumbing “its depths”.

Abraham is standing in her heart, Moses is standing in her breast, and the rest of the prophets are standing in her womb, all of which are displaying their symbols and “admiring the beauty of the Church”. This signifies the way they all stand in the same tradition of observing God’s precepts, and through their works and prophesies anticipated the coming of Christ.

She is as tall as a tower. This signifies her receiving “the greatness of the divine laws”, and therein foreshadowing the “bulwarks and defences” of the Kingdom of God. She is wearing a circlet “like the dawn”. This signifies her foreshadowing Christ and the “bright virtues and mysteries” he brings. The circlet is like the dawn because she was “crowned, as it were, early in the morning”, in her reception of God’s precepts, before falling into sin later. However, God says, in the end times she will turn back to God and acknowledge Christ. In doing so, she will exchange her worldly faith and “exterior doctrine”, embodied in circumcision, for the “better” “spiritual” doctrine or “circumcision” of Christianity, like the dawn recedes before the day’s sun**.** In doing so, she will be redeemed.

God states that it is fitting for the Synagogue to come before the Church in this way, as “fleshly things should precede and spiritual things should follow; the servant announces his master’s coming, and the master does not go before the servant to serve him”. In this way, the Synagogue foreshadows the Church, which comes “In the light of truth”.

# Part 2: Supercessionism

Hildegard’s theology of Judaism is what theologians call “supercessionist”. She believes that Christianity has replaced Judaism, which was abandoned by God due to its supposed disobedience to the Law and the alleged responsibility of the Jews for killing Christ. This does not mean that Hildegard thinks the Jews are forever abandoned by God, but only insofar as she looks forward to their eventual conversion to Christianity – that is, they will never be reconciled with God *as* Jews.

These ideas motivated or were used to validate antisemitism throughout history: because Christianity had supposedly rightfully replaced Judaism, it was seen as something that ought to police the remnants of the old religion, and to be protected from subversion by it. Moreover, because Jews rejected faith in Christ, they were seen as at odds with God. This raised questions about their relationship to God’s enemy, the Devil.

These attitudes came to a head particularly during the violence of the Crusades, and during the Black Death, which Jews were claimed to have caused by poisoning wells. They were also present in Church institutions: for example, various Cathedrals and religious communities promoted the veneration of child saints ostensibly martyred by Jews in Satanic rituals. Moreover, the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 sought to enforce segregation by specifying that that Jews had to wear clothing identifying them as such, precluded Jews from holding public office, and forbade converted Jews from converting back to Judaism.

This is not to say that the medieval Church was always wholly antisemitic. The reality is more complex, with wider Christian culture sometimes being at odds with Church teaching: in the 6th Century, in response to antisemitic violence in Naples, Pope Gregory the Great issued a Bull which affirmed that Jews were damned for not believing in Christ, but nevertheless ought to be protected by Christians and should enjoy the freedom to practice their faith. This was then reaffirmed in a string of Papal Bulls, beginning with Pope Callixtus II’s 12th Century, *Sicut Judaeis,* which did so against antisemitic violence and forced conversion during the crusades. Likewise, in 1348, Pope Clement VI issued a Bull condemning the popular belief that Jews were responsible for causing the Black Death by poisoning wells.

Nevertheless, this antisemitism and its connection to supercessionism was very much a problem. And this theology, with its problematic history, persisted into the modern era. In 1943, in his encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi,* Pope Pius XII would write,

… by the death of our Redeemer, the New Testament took the place of the Old Law which had been abolished; then the Law of Christ together with its mysteries, enactments, institutions, and sacred rites was ratified for the whole world in the blood of Jesus Christ… on the gibbet of His death Jesus made void the Law with its decrees fastened the handwriting of the Old Testament to the Cross, establishing the New Testament in His blood shed for the whole human race. "To such an extent, then," says St. Leo the Great, speaking of the Cross of our Lord, "was there effected a transfer from the Law to the Gospel, from the Synagogue to the Church, from the many sacrifices to one Victim, that, as Our Lord expired, that mystical veil which shut off the innermost part of the temple and its sacred secret was rent violently from top to bottom."

(*Mystici Corporis Christi,* no. 29)

This is basically the same narrative we find in Hildegard, minus the deicide charge: Judaism gives way to Christianity, which replaces the Law and brings a closer acquaintance with or knowledge of God, here represented by the tearing of the veil. It effectively looks forward to the end of Judaism and its replacement by Christianity; a hope that is qualified by a rejection of violent means, but nevertheless uncomfortably resembles the goals of the more violent attempts to suppress or eradicate Judaism which it motivated throughout history.

However, the 1960s saw a period of transformation in the Church. In 1962, Pope John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council, in which the Church wrestled with the challenges of the postwar context. This was sorely needed: for almost two hundred years, the Church’s theology and practice had been defined by a struggle against modernity and secularism, and the reactive approach taken hampered the Church in its ability to grapple with the new issues and concerns brought by the dramatic social and political shifts of the twentieth century. In this context, the Council sought to re-envision the Church’s stance towards both its own life and the world.

One such shift was a new recognition of the evils of antisemitism, including the dangers of supercessionism, spurred by the culmination of centuries of Christian antisemitism in the horrors of the holocaust. The extent of this shift should not be downplayed, even if, as we shall see, it was not total: for example, the conciliar document, *Nostra Aetate,* which deals with the Church’s relationship to non-Christian religions states:

As Holy Scripture testifies, Jerusalem did not recognize the time of her visitation, nor did the Jews in large number, accept the Gospel; indeed not a few opposed its spreading. Nevertheless, God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their Fathers; He does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls He issues-such is the witness of the Apostle.

(*Nostra Aetate,* no. 4)

Likewise,

True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today. Although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures…

(*Nostra Aetate,* no. 4)

And

Furthermore, in her rejection of every persecution against any man, the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel's spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.

(*Nostra Aetate,* no. 4)

Nevertheless, there is still ambiguity here about the status of God’s covenant with the Jews. For example, *Nostra Aetate* arguably still implicitly looks forward to the conversion of Jews to Christianity, stating that although God still “holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their fathers”,

In company with the Prophets and the same Apostle, the Church awaits that day, known to God alone, on which all peoples will address the Lord in a single voice and "serve him shoulder to shoulder" (Soph. 3:9).

(*Nostra Aetate,* no. 4)

We see this ambiguity reflected in later Church teachings. For example, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, originally promulgated in 1992, and updated in 1997 and then 2018, teaches that

The glorious Messiah's coming is suspended at every moment of history until his recognition by "all Israel", for "a hardening has come upon part of Israel" in their "unbelief" toward Jesus. St. Peter says to the Jews of Jerusalem after Pentecost: "Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for establishing all that God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old." … The "full inclusion" of the Jews in the Messiah's salvation, in the wake of "the full number of the Gentiles", will enable the People of God to achieve "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ", in which "God may be all in all".

(*CCC* 674)

In contrast, however, Pope Francis writes in *Evangelii Gaudium* that

We hold the Jewish people in special regard because their covenant with God has never been revoked, for “the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable” (*Rom*11:29). The Church, which shares with Jews an important part of the sacred Scriptures, looks upon the people of the covenant and their faith as one of the sacred roots of her own Christian identity (cf. *Rom*11:16-18). As Christians, we cannot consider Judaism as a foreign religion; nor do we include the Jews among those called to turn from idols and to serve the true God (cf. *1 Thes*1:9). With them, we believe in the one God who acts in history, and with them we accept his revealed word.

(*Evangelii Gaudium,* no. 247)

Moreover, despite this ambiguity, the very softening of rhetoric around Judaism proved to be controversial in Catholic circles, not just in terms of perceived changes in teaching, but as part of the wider controversy and the Council – particularly when read in the context of the Church’s broader relationship with modernity, the fraught nature of which had given rise to the more reactionary theologies of the preconciliar period.

First, *Nostra Aetate,* which also addressed relationships with other non-Christian religions,was part of a broader shift towards acknowledgment of the right to religious freedom for non-Catholics. This was something which had traditionally been denied by Catholic teaching prior to the council, particularly as it formed around the Protestant reformation. However, documents such as *Nostra Aetate,* as well as another conciliar document called *Dignitatis Humanae,* presented something of an about face. The latter, particularly, explicitly states that

…all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs… within due limits.

(*Dignitatis Humanae,* no. 2)

Second, the Dreyfus affair in the 1890s had cemented antisemitism in particular as a banner position in the Catholic Church’s struggles against modernity. In 1894, the French Jewish soldier, Alfred Dreyfus was wrongly convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment for treason, for allegedly sending French military documents to the German Embassy in Paris. The affair split French society, between the pro-Dreyfus ‘Dreyfusards’, and his ‘anti-Dreyfusard’ opponents. Unsurprisingly, the anti-Dreyfusard popular reaction was deeply antisemitic. After he was eventually pardoned, backlash against anti-Dreyfusard elements led to the election of a government whose anticlerical policies then linked the antisemitic anti-Dreyfusard cause to the Catholic fight against secular modernity.

Since the Council, the Church has been split by fierce debates around whether the council represented an updating or a dangerous capitulation to modernity, or at least of how to read the council such that it doesn’trepresent too radical a shift from the preconciliar tradition. In this context, the Council’s shift on antisemitism thus became a focal point in the various contested narratives around these questions.

Engaging Hildegard’s antisemitism threfore requires us not only to enter into difficult discussions about the relationship between Christianity and Judaism in which the Church is still working out its position with regards to its own historical antisemitism, but also discussions about the nature and place of the Church in the world today more generally.

OK, now back to Hildegard!

# Part 3: Vision six - the Choirs of Angels

God opens image vision by explaining that He created some creatures to inhabit the earth, but also some to “inhabit the celestial regions”, and that He created angels to aid in human salvation, and “for the Honor of His name” by manifesting the “judgments of His secrets”.

In this vein, this next image is of concentric circles of angels. Each circle of angels indicates a different type of angel. This evokes a common idea in medieval angelology (that is, theology about angels): that there are multiple ‘choirs’, each playing a different role. These choirs are, from least to most important: angels, archangels, virtues, powers, principalities, dominations, thrones, cherubim and seraphim. In Hildegard’s vision, the lowest ranks are on the outside of the circle, with the ranks ascending as they progress towards the centre. God discusses each in turn.

On the outside, Hildegard sees two shining armies of “heavenly spirits”. God explains that the fact that there are two of them signify how the body and the soul should both serve God as they are both destined for Heaven.

Members of both armies have wings on their breasts, with “forms like human forms” in front of them. For members of one army, these forms have human features, visible as if seen “in clear water”. These are the angels, and the wings signify their desire to and speed in fulfilling God’s will. Their beautiful forms display “the beauty of reason, by which God examines human deeds”, paying attention to God’s will, and showing human actions to Him in themselves. For members of the other army, these forms display “the image of the Son of Man shone as if in a mirror”. These are the archangels. They contemplate God’s will “in the desires of their intellect”, and also display the beauty of reason. Knowing God’s “secret desires”, they “have often prefigured the mysteries of the Incarnation of the Son of God”. As such, they “magnify the Incarnate Word of God in the purest way”. There is no other form in either of these two armies, signifying how they contain “many secret mysteries” that the embodied human intellect cannot understand.

These armies are arranged “in the shape of a crown”, encircling five other armies. This signifies how the body and soul must contain the five senses, purify them by the five wounds of Christ, and govern them righteously.

Members of the first of these five armies have human forms, and shine “with great splendor from the shoulders down”. These are the “Virtues”, which “spring up in the hearts of believers”, leading them to good works. They enlighten the elect, showing them God’s will, and defend them against the devil, while showing God the struggles of those whom they help against the Devil. God states that at the heart of these struggles is the question: “Is there a God or not?” It is the Holy Spirit which answers this question, reminding the person of how God created and redeemed them. In this, the question itself brings the person to repentance. Hence, he states, so long as this question is present in the person, God does not abandon them.

Members of the second of these five armies shine too intensely for her to look at them. These are the powers, and their inability to be looked at signifies how God’s unfailing power cannot be understood or attained a likeness of by mortals.

Members of the third army appear to be made of “white marble”. Their heads are human heads. Torches burn over their heads. From the shoulders down, they are surrounded by “an iron-gray cloud”. These are the principalities, and show that earthly rulers, who are appointed by “God’s gift”, must “assume the true strength of justice”. This means contemplating Christ, who is “their Head”, directing their government according to His will, and seeking “the grace of the Holy Spirit” to persist in justice.

Members of the fourth army have “forms like human forms”, and “feet like human feet”. They wear helmets and “marble tunics”. These are the Dominations, and show that God has “raised human reason… from earth to Heaven” in the Incarnation, redeeming it from sin. This means that the faithful should imitate Christ, “placing their hope in Heaven and fortifying themselves with the strong desire of good works”.

Members of the fifth army have “nothing human in their appearance”, and shine “red like the dawn”. These signify how Christ’s incarnation was free of human sin. They have no other form. This signifies that “there are many mysteries of the celestial secrets that human frailty cannot understand”.

These five armies are themselves arranged “like a crown”, encircling two others. This signifies how, in turning their senses to God, and knowing that they are redeemed through God’s five wounds, people attain “to love of God and their neighbour”.

Members of the first of these last two armies are “full of eyes and wings”. These are the Cherubim, who “signify knowledge of God”. They enjoy this knowledge, knowing “celestial secrets”, and use it to fulfil their desires “according to God’s will”. In each eye there is a mirror. In each mirror appears a “human form”. This signifies how this knowledge also enables them to “miraculously foresee” those who know God. These angels raise their wings “to a celestial height”, signifying how this knowledge also enables them to raise the desires of those who know God towards God, like wings. She sees no other shape in them, signifying the unknowable secrets of God.

Members of the second of these last two armies burn “like fire”. These are the Seraphim, who “burn for the love of God and have the greatest desire to contemplate Him”. They have “many wings”, which act like mirrors in which “all the Church ranks arrayed in order” can be seen. This signifies how they, “also by their desires”, display all those who “flourish in the mysteries of the Church” and therein show forth the secrets of God which the seraphim desire to contemplate. She sees no other shape in these either, likewise signifying the unknowable divine secrets.

All of these armies sing “with marvellous voices”, singing of “the wonders that God works in blessed souls”. This is how the spirits make known their “great joy” in these works. In doing so, God is “magnificently glorified”. This reflects the way that “the joy of salvation” brings with it “true exultation”.

# Part 4: Questions

That’s it for Hildegard’s first vision! Congratulations – just the reading to get through and you’ll be done for the course.

However, before you go, here are the questions you’ve come to expect:

1. In the previous session, we discussed the worrying theology of disability in Hildegard’s vision. Here, we see another concerning trend: antisemitism. How does this shape the way we should read Hildegard? And how ought we to respond to this more generally?
2. Hildegard’s vision of the Synagogue involves many images with complicated social significance. It is a depiction of a woman, it uses metaphors of whiteness and blackness for grace and sin, it includes representations of royalty and master-servant relationships, it links continuity of tradition to reproduction, and it portrays the relationship between Christianity and Judaism in terms of the family. What do these images communicate today that might not have been so obvious to medieval audiences? And how should we navigate these differences as modern readers?
3. The imagery in Hildegard’s angelic vision is striking and elaborate. What does it communicate, and how? And does it make you think about angels differently?

See you in the group session!

# Reading

Book 1, visions 5 and 6