

# Hildegard's *Liber Divinorum Operum*

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## Introduction

St. Hildegard composed the last and greatest of her visionary works, the *Liber Divinorum Operum*, "The Book of Divine Works," between 1163 and 1173. It was inspired by a mystical experience while meditating on the Prologue of John's Gospel, "In the beginning was the Word..." As Hildegard explains in *Vita S. Hildegardis* II.16:

And from God's inspiration, drops as of sweet rain sprinkled into the conscience of my soul, as too the Holy Spirit imbued John the Evangelist when he drew from Jesus' breast the most profound revelation. (...)

For the Word, which existed without beginning before creation and will still exist without end after it, bade all creation to come forth and produced his work like a smith striking sparks upon it, for what was predestined before time then appeared in visible form. So too Man is the work of God, together with all creation. But Man is also Divinity's worker, and an overshadowing of his mysteries, and should reveal the Holy Trinity in all things, for God made him in his own image and likeness (Gen. 1:26). For as Lucifer in all his malice could not break God to pieces, so neither shall he destroy Man's essence, despite his attempt to do so with the first man.

This grand vision of the Work of God (*opus Dei*) is at the center of the *Liber Divinorum Operum* and the culmination of Hildegard's theological project. The first part of the work explores the intricate physical and spiritual relationships between the cosmos and the human person, with the famous image of the universal Man standing astride the cosmic spheres. The second part examines the rewards for virtue and the punishments. At the end of each Hildegard writes extensive commentaries on two of the most important biblical texts about God's creation—the Prologue to John's Gospel (Part I) and the first chapter of Genesis (Part II). She is the only premodern woman to have composed such intricate scriptural commentaries. Finally, the third part tells the history of salvation, imagined as the City of God standing next to the mountain of God's foreknowledge, with Divine Love reigning over all.

For Hildegard, the Incarnation of the Word as Jesus Christ is the key moment of all history. It was God's will from eternity that his Son became a human being, in order to complete his Work. Humankind shares in God's creative capacity and loving mission. We are, after all, made in his image—for Hildegard, the tunic of the incarnate Christ; and we are made in his likeness—the rationality of the Word that creates and loves. Humankind contains all creation within ourselves, and we are divinely called to cooperate in the Creator's work. The scope of Hildegard's visionary theology is both cosmic and close—reflections of

God's loving revelation of himself to humanity are both grand and utterly intimate, as the Work of God reaches from the very heart of infinity down into every smallest detail of the created world.



## Part I, Vision 1: Divine Love

The opening vision of Hildegard's masterwork is dominated by the figure of *Caritas* or Divine Love, its most prominent allegorical revelation of God's essence to the world. In a whirl of symbols and ideas, Hildegard connects several biblical images—the Ancient of Days, the woman clothed with the sun (Apocalypse 12:1), the Lamb of God, the wings of the seraph—to set this Divine Love at center-stage of the cosmic drama of creation and salvation. She is the “supreme and fiery force” and “fiery life of the essence of divinity” that both sparked and sustains creation, and at the same time reflects and sets alight the body, soul, and mind of each human being. She declares: “I am also rationality, possessing the breath of the resounding Word through which every created thing was made. (...) For rationality is the root, and the resounding Word flourishes within it.” God's rationality compels him to then to act in creation: “For it was always determined from eternity that God would will his work—humankind—to come into being; and when he perfected this work, he gave all creation to them so that they might do their work with it, in the same way that God himself had made his work, that is, humankind.” (I.1.2 = Schipperges, pp. 25-26)



## Part I, Visions 2-4: The Cosmos and the Human Being, Body and Soul

The spheres of the cosmos whirling within each other, and standing in their midst, the human form. This is what Hildegard sees held within Divine Love's embrace—a vision of the human person enmeshed within the created universe, to act and create with it. Over the course of three visions, Hildegard elaborates in precise detail the relationships between each component of the universe as the macrocosm and humankind as its physical, spiritual, and moral microcosm. The intricate network of winds and celestial spheres described in the second vision are interconnected first with the physical health of the human body, through the balance of the humors described in the third vision. But the inextricable link between cosmic forces and human health is not just physical, but spiritual too. In this sense, Hildegard's perspective is fundamentally sacramental—the elements do not just symbolize the virtues, but are physical agents of spiritual powers. The courses of the heavens and the elements are also signs for the complex network of impulses that guide our spiritual journey. These courses of the human moral life become familiar paths throughout the *Liber Divinorum Operum*, as Hildegard explores the many ways in which the cosmos sets before us an example of how to live. This intense interconnection between humanity and creation is thus signified by the human form standing amid the spheres, its gaze directed ultimately to God:

Humankind exists within the structure of the universe, in its middle as it were. For humankind is more powerful than the other creatures that exist within that structure—insignificant, perhaps, in stature, but great by virtue of its soul. With its head placed above and its feet below, humankind moves both the higher and the lower elements and enters into them with works. (...) For as a person sees each and every creature everywhere with his eyes, so in faith he looks everywhere upon God and recognizes him through his creations, because he understands that God is his Creator. (I.2.15 = Schipperges, pp. 44-45)



Balance is a fundamental feature of Hildegard's descriptions of the physical universe, the human body, and the human soul. Every aspect of the physical world—the cosmic spheres, the network of winds, the weather and the seasons, the alternation of day and night—relies on each other to stay in balance. The human body, too, must be kept in the proper balance of its humors—neither too moist nor too dry, too cold nor too hot. Otherwise, it weakens and falls ill. These physical balances also all point to the necessary balance between soul and body. The soul naturally rises up to heavenly good works above the firmament, but also condescends with the earthly body in its appetites and necessities below. For the body given wholly over to sin wallows in darkness, but the soul so focused on heaven that it ignores its body causes the body to fail and die. Within the constant conflict between a soul wanting to fly to heaven and a body whose appetites cannot endure it, we find the cycle between sin and repentance. The soul may condescend to the body's appetites for a time, but only until it awakens the person with the searing pain of conscience, compelling him to repentance and renewal. So the soul returns viridity to the body parched of virtue.

The fourth vision closes with Hildegard's commentary on the Prologue to John's Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word..." Meditating upon this text had been the impetus for Hildegard to write the *Liber Divinorum Operum* from the start, and her commentary thus weaves together most of the work's themes: humankind as a microcosm of God's creation; the latency of all creation in the foreknowledge of God; and the dynamic creativity of God's Word. The scriptural text provides Hildegard the echo chamber in which that Word resounds, especially as her commentary begins in the voice of the Father. His eternal plan for his Son binds a creative beginning with an incarnate culmination, the story of humankind.

## Part II, Vision 1: The Earth: Life's Merits, Purgatory, and Commentary on the Creation

In the single vision that comprises Part Two, Hildegard sees the earth's globe divided into five zones of light and dark, which represent broadly the different paths people can take and the places that await them at their journey's end—realms of beatific light, purgatorial punishment, or hellish darkness. This vision's first sixteen chapters thus return to the themes of Hildegard's second visionary work, the *Liber Vitae Meritorum* ("Book of the Rewards of Life"), and its visions of the fierce fight between vice and virtue, the penances owed to overcome the vices, and their resulting merits. Hildegard's perspective here, however, encompasses not just the end of salvation history, but also its beginning. As she traces the roots of that epic battle between good and evil back to Lucifer's primordial fall, Hildegard turns her attention from the beginning of John's Gospel to that of Genesis. The Creation commentary that comprises the remainder of this vision adopts a threefold interpretation for each day—literal, allegorical (related to the Church), and moral. It complements Part One's dynamic interplay between macrocosm and microcosm, but also brings those relationships to their fruition in the time of the Church. Each of the seven days is its own work—in the world, in the Church, and in the striving of the virtuous person—that builds upon the ones before and supports those after; and the Sabbath of perfection to which they all lead is the incarnate Son, the prism of creation and redemption.



Of particular note is Hildegard's departure from the traditional allegory in which the time of the Church is history's sixth day or age, to be followed by the "eternal Sabbath" of the end of time. Instead, she sees the seventh work of Creation—its perfection—as the Incarnation itself, echoed in her own ecclesiastical order of virgins, and the crown of the life of the virtues. The Word Made Flesh is once again the mainspring for creation from beginning to end.

### Part III, Visions 1-5: The City of God and the History of Salvation

In Part Three, Hildegard returns to the imaginative structure of the third part of *Scivias*, a great edifice upon which she projects salvation history. Here, the fortified city is God's foreknowledge, the timeless bedrock of the Word's predestination. It anchors Hildegard's gleaming visionary images to express the creative unfolding of salvation history. The first vision sets the stage with Hildegard's most detailed account of the fall of Lucifer and the triumph of the angels. Two hybrid figures in the next vision reveal the stages of salvation history before and under the Law, with the Incarnation prophetically promised and then fulfilled, together with the symphony of the saints. Hildegard's poetic power shines (in the spirit's shadow) upon the waters of the city's fountain in the third vision as Divine Love declares God's eternal plan streaming forth in another rich flood of images. That divine plan (*consilium*) is embodied in the next vision, together with its creative force of Wisdom, to fly with mirrored wings through the courses of salvation history.

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The work's final vision then projects the wheel of eternity alongside the city, and within the wheel Divine Love appears again. The dynamic divisions and zones of the wheel move to indicate time and tell again salvation history. This leads to Hildegard's most detailed prophetic program of the life of the Church from her own time until the coming of the Antichrist, intricately refining the vague "five ages" in the corresponding vision of *Scivias* III.11. For Hildegard, the Church's history after Christ is foreshadowed and foreordained in the history of God's people told in Scripture. Creation corresponds to the foundation of the apostolic Church and its perfection in the monastic order, while the Fall can be seen in the weak, "womanly time" of corruption Hildegard sees all around her. Although the final, complete Redemption will only come at the world's end, in the Second Coming and New Jerusalem, Hildegard sees it echoed too in the periods of holy renewal that she prophesies are still to come. Aware that human sin always parches the world and withers holy life, she nevertheless held always the hope that our desire for heavenly virtue would burst into verdant bloom.