The topographical underpinning of Bernard’s oeuvre consolidates a repeating pattern in the texts; a degree of sameness allowing for, and indeed promoting, moulding and differentiation. This textual repetition is congenial to the repetitive pattern of fall, restoration, and relapse. The topography stays the same but there are a variety of ways of going from A to B and a wide array of keys and approaches in which to describe the way, the travelling, the place A, and the place B. There is exchange and interaction between a sense of immutability anchored in the topographical scenario and a feeling of supple vitality and urgency imparted by the deliberations on the ways in which to navigate this topography. These two impetuses add up to an impression that all and nothing at all is the same.

Bernard’s work circles around ascents and descents between heaven and earth; those of Christ and those of man. This vertical dynamics is never absent. In his concern with the human condition, however, he frequently resorts to a representation implying a map, a horizontally orientated plane. The basic thesis of this study is that in his work, Bernard addresses this navigation through a number of different genres within the broad categories of sermons, letters, and treatises. Some texts and passages present themselves as full-bodied itineraries, describing journeys in detail yet in quite different veins; this applies for instance to De gradibus humilitatis et superbiae and the parables, to Div 42 and Ep 64. But the majority of texts depart from the viator outline and move in a more complex and indirect way with regard to the journey, often focusing on a quite specific aspect or section of it, which is explored with linguistic and contemplative diligence, yet with the entire scenario as a frame of resonance.

These texts may be set in a variety of keys attuned to their context, aim, and subject-matter. Some texts move along tragic lines, directing the attention towards the discord of earthly existence and the unobtainable character of the celestial goal: here the mood is despair, longing, or mourning. Others could more readily be defined as comedy and move toward an eventual resolution with a view to a beatific denouement.
Some texts are fashioned as a lyrical praise of a particular locus, some as battle-cries calling for the strength needed to fight off the assaults encountered along the way. Some texts offer paternal nudges, or an angry shove, in the right the direction, some deal with orientation gone wrong. Frequently, however, Bernard does not stick to any one of these keys, but moves between them, creating a suggestive flux in which, linguistically as well as contemplatively, he can manoeuvre his reader.

This introductory part has been aimed at constituting a frame of reference as well as a frame of interrogation for the textual analyses of the parables. Summarized briefly, these are the main features of this framework: Bernard’s spiritual topography is set out with the Bible as its land and its hinterland. His texts work this context from within biblical passages read in the light of other biblical passages, and with the monastic demand for ruminating appropriation never out of mind. In his representation of the biblical universe, Bernard conveys the soteriological landscapes of the Bible by means of a range of signatures: mostly named places, landscapes, or essential inhabitants associated with specific places. These signatures can be readily grouped into clusters of symbolic connotations. The named places, such as Babylon, Egypt, and Jerusalem have a relatively stable connotative charge and are furthermore defined as each other’s opposites. This goes also for their essential inhabitants. David is in this respect to a great extent synonymous with Jerusalem and its connotations, while Nebuchadnezzar is part and parcel of Babylon. The landscapes and cities, however, are open to, and indeed invite, interpretations and elaborations which draw on their physical features and attune them to the context.

But while a cartographer, Bernard is also an itinerant, entering the topography in order to depict it from different points of view, thus establishing differently qualified vistas. His is not a disinterested mapping but a matter of life and death, salvation and damnation. Bernard’s textual mapping is therefore primarily concerned with the actual and potential position of the recipient; and he inserts a range of “You are here” marks in order to enable the monk to recognize his own position. This identification is related to Bernard’s demand that man know himself as a *peregrinus*, a precondition of his progress as a *viator*. To arrive at this recognition, the monk must identify his surroundings and by means of this recognition—and sustained by the grace of Christ—find the way he must strive to follow by relating in an appropriate manner to the different loci through constant manoeuvres of estrangement and identification. The spiritual topography is furthermore a field of memory.