
Beverly Mayne Kienzle’s book on the medieval visionary abbess Hildegard of Bingen’s (1098–1179) little-studied *Expositiones evangeliorum*, fifty-eight homilies on twenty-seven Gospel passages, is interesting reading. It follows Kienzle’s critical edition from 2007 of the *Expositiones*, edited with Caroline A. Muessig and George Ferzoco. *Hildegard of Bingen and her Gospel Homilies* represents the first in-depth study of Hildegard’s *Expositiones* and their use as sermons in and outside Hildegard’s convent.

Kienzle writes in her preface that the book arose out of her interest for women’s ministry and her search for evidence of women preaching in the Middle Ages, despite Pauline prohibitions (pp. xii–xiii). Though Hildegard seems to be the only medieval woman who wrote systematic works of exegesis and preached publicly, Kienzle explores the *Expositiones* on the background of newer research on religious women in twelfth-century Germany/Austria, which shows that Hildegard’s seemingly unusual religious practices were not entirely unique. Other twelfth-century nuns also preached and wrote sermons. For instance nuns at the Benedictine double monastery of Admont in Austria preached in their chapter meetings on feast days, when the abbot was away, and the Augustinian canoness Herrad of Hohenbourg (d. after 1196) compiled a manual, the *Hortus deliciarum*, or *Garden of Delights*, for the education of religious women. The *Hortus* was to some extent written as a sermon. Even if Hildegard was without equal, she was not without parallel as Kienzle expresses it (p. 47).

On the one hand Hildegard’s *Expositiones* represent her preaching and/or teaching to her nuns at the monastery of Rupertsberg; on the other hand she did not confine her activities to her own monasteries. God’s voice called her in visions to revive the faltering faith of her time by continuing the exegesis begun by the Church Fathers. As a consequence of this, she went on preaching tours to several German towns, among others Cologne, Trier, Metz and Bamberg, in the 1160s and 1170s, where she spoke in male and female monasteries as well as in cathedrals.

In contrast to Hildegard’s visionary works—*Scivias*, *Liber vitae meritorum* and *Liber divinorum operum*—the *Expositiones evangeliorum* does not open with a vision, justifying her authority, maybe, Kienzle suggests, because her homilies were basically commentaries delivered to her fellow nuns. But still, it was God’s voice that commanded Hildegard to undertake her exegesis. In a letter to her future secretary, Guibert of Gembloux, Hildegard claims that her knowledge came from visions and not from school books. Nonetheless in all of her visions the images are interpreted by a Voice from Heaven, representing Hildegard’s exegesis of the vision. By presenting herself as unlearned, and as a mere channel of divine
messages, she was freed from the scripturally based restrictions on women’s speech, a strategy common to medieval female theologians.

Kienzle shows how interpretation of Scripture is central to Hildegard’s thought and writings in general, but also how it was the exegetical understanding developed in the visionary works of *Scivias* and *Liber divinorum operum* that extended into the *Expositiones evangeliorum*. Though the writing of homilies as a genre must be seen against the background of monastic life, for Hildegard’s part particularly on the background of the Benedictine practice of commenting on the Rule, Hildegard also had access to patristic sources through manuscripts from the library in her own monastery or from libraries in other monasteries. The twelfth century witnessed a powerful monastic network of intellectual exchange. Nuns were as learned as monks.

Hildegard’s exegesis partly draws on traditional patristic writers such as Origen, Augustine and Gregory the Great, which was common for both male and female monastics. Hildegard’s exegesis has, however, an emphasis on a more independent “spiritual” interpretation of the Bible, deriving from her visionary experience. Interestingly, Kienzle draws attention to another distinctive feature of Hildegard’s exegesis, namely its dramatic potential. In Hildegard’s homilies one can discern three distinct voices: the more or less traditional voice of the commentator, the voice of the narrator telling a moral story, and finally a dramatic voice that extends beyond the scriptural text. This third voice uses its own words to tell what a biblical character says in the scriptural text. In short: Hildegard recreates the biblical story, and the performative nature of the *Expositiones* makes it likely that Hildegard may have staged her homilies as a one-actress drama for her nuns.

Hildegard’s use of drama as well as allegories in the homilies invites to a comparison with her morality play, the *Ordo virtutum*, in which vices and virtues fight for the human Soul. Kienzle explores the depiction of key virtues in the homilies: *Fides* (Faith), *Humilitas* (Humility), *Caritas* (Charity), *Virginitas* (Virginity), and *Sapientia* (Wisdom), and comes to the conclusion that many homilies reveal a dramatic structure comparable to the *Ordo*. A parallel to Hildegard’s visionary works lies in the association of *Caritas* with the Virgin Mary in the *Expositiones* and the *Ordo*. Hildegard’s exegetical narrative depicts *Caritas*, representing Mary, as the mother virtue. In Hildegard’s visionary works *Caritas* is seen as the archetype of the Virgin Mary and plays a major role in her theology of the feminine, associated with the feminine aspect of the divine, *Sapientia* or Wisdom. In her exegetical work the virtues remain allegories, not female apparitions of God, but nonetheless link Hildegard’s exegesis to her visionary works. Visions were inseparable from theology in the life of Hildegard.

Finally Kienzle explores Hildegard’s anti-Cathar writings between 1163 and her death in 1179 in the light of her biblical exegesis. Hildegard’s attacks on heresy are mainly tied to preachings preserved in some of her letters, whereas denunciations of heresy can be found in only a few *expositiones*. Hildegard’s exegetical