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## COMMENTARY ON THE JOHANNINE PROLOGUE

HILDEGARD OF BINGEN

translated and introduced by Barbara Newman

**I**n the dramatic rediscovery of medieval women mystics in the late twentieth century, perhaps no figure has fired the popular imagination more widely or implausibly than Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179). Born over nine hundred years ago in the Rhineland, St. Hildegard lived in an age that might seem to us impossibly remote, before the beginning of the world as we know it. In the twelfth century, we like to imagine, the world was young. Troubadours sang of love as if they had invented it; knights went in quest of the Holy Grail as if they might actually find it; and Bernard of Clairvaux expounded the Song of Songs as if he were the first to discover God. "O that he would kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!" In our historical naiveté, we might imagine that the twelfth century was an Age of Faith when religion was easy. The Reformation and the breakup of Christendom lay far in the future, and no one had ever dreamed of Feuerbach or Freud, Darwin or Derrida.

Hildegard, however, looked around her and saw a world grown old, a society on the verge of senility. Civil war, corruption in high places, and clerical sex scandals were the order of the day, and the holier the office, the more cynically it was bought and sold. We at least can feel confident that, whatever the failings of our local bishop, he is not likely to impose an enormous tax on our city in order to wage war against the pope, then excommunicate us all for refusal to pay it and wind up assassinated amid mass riots. Yet that is what happened to Hildegard's prelate, the archbishop of Mainz, during her lifetime. Disgusted with the arrogance and self-indulgence of their leaders, the best and the brightest were leaving the church in droves to join the Cathars, an impressively chaste sect of heretics who despised the world so perfectly that their contempt extended even to

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its Creator. Hildegard, afflicted with the pitiless vocation of prophecy, had a great deal to say about these evils. No one was ever less tempted to make religion a safe haven from the storms of the world. But what she said most emphatically, ceaselessly, ardently, was this: Remember your beginning. Remember where you came from, who made you, what you are.

When Hildegard began the *Book of Divine Works*, the last volume of her great theological trilogy, she was sixty-five and feit every day of her years. Racked by migraine and fever, she had come close to death more than once and had known pain so excruciating that she feit sure the demons were tempting her to blaspheme. So it was no innocent, starry-eyed maiden who "saw a mystical and marvelous vision" and feit "drops as of gentle rain splashing into the knowledge of [her] soul," inspiring her to interpret the magnificent prologue of St. John.' The One who appeared to her then—luminous, androgynous, and winged like an angel—told her how to begin. "I, Who Am without beginning, from whom all beginnings proceed—I, the Ancient of Days—speak thus. I, by Myself, am the day that never came from the sun, but the sun was kindled from Me."<sup>2</sup>

Hildegard has achieved fame in these Jatter days as an apostle of "creation-centered spirituality," a theological movement promoted by the former Dominican (now Episcopalian) writer, Matthew Fox. There is some truth in the report: Few theologians in any age have spoken more insistently or eloquently than Hildegard of creation's intricate harmonies. Yet, in and through and beyond creation, she is bedazzled by the sheer stupendous fact of God, and she calls us again and again to marvel, to be singing mirrors reflecting that uncreated light: "Humankind is the signature work of God and a light that is kindled by him, but our life has a beginning and in our flesh we will eventually die. For this reason, John was sent to bear witness that God is not like this . . . . God never arose in any mom or any dawn: Before time he eternally was."

American culture does not speak or think much of eternity, obsessed as we are with the frenetic pace of time. Impatient to grow up when we are young and desperate to stay young as we grow old, we will leap through any hoop to remain on the cutting edge of fashion, technology, or thought, terrified that the times may pass us by. Even God appears timebound: Many Christians fear that if we fail to find the historical Jesus—or worse, if we succeed in finding him—our faith will become obsolete. To our historicist age, Hildegard's Christian Platonism may seem the ultimate heresy. Yet, her ceaseless return to beginnings is not a call for nostalgia, a sentimental yearning for a past that cannot be recovered. In her theological

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<sup>1</sup>These autobiographical remarks are cited by Hildegard's biographer, Theoderic of Echternach, in the *Vita Sanctae Hildegardis* 11.16, ed. Monika Klaes, *Corpus christianorum: Continuatio mediaevalis* 126 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1993), 43.

<sup>2</sup>This and all subsequent quotations of Hildegard derive from my complete translation of Hildegard's commentary on the Johannine prologue in this article (see below). The Latin critical edition is Hildegard of Bingen, *Liber divinorum operum* 1.4.105, ed. Albert Derolez and Peter Dronke, *Corpus christianorum: Continuatio mediaevalis* 92 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1996), 248-64.

vision, the eternal is sovereign over the past as well as the present: Only the eternal is neither past nor passing. In the words of an ancient hymn to Christ, "This is he who was from the beginning, who appeared as new, who was found to be old, who is ever born young in the hearts of the saints."<sup>3</sup>

What could it mean to be created in the image of this God, who is eternal life and never-setting light? Hildegard's vision of human grandeur may seem at first profoundly alien to us, accustomed as we are to thinking of ourselves as fractured postmodern subjects on a globe spinning out of control. But if readers will pardon an irreverent comparison, the medieval visionary's worldview is rather like a comic scene in Douglas Adams's science fiction novel, *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*. Adams's fantasy features an amazing machine called the Total Perspective Vortex, said to be the most horrible instrument of capital punishment ever invented. This machine gives its victim "just one momentary glimpse of the entire unimaginable infinity of creation, and somewhere in it a tiny little marker, a microscopic dot on a microscopic dot, which says 'You are here.'" Faced with such a vision, the victim's brain is completely annihilated and he perishes with a howl of terror. One day, a lovable villain named Zaphod Beeblebrox is sentenced to death in the Vortex. But instead of dying, he emerges thirsty, ravenous, and awed by the beauties of creation. Astonished, the executioner asks how he survived the experience, and Beeblebrox says that he "had seen the whole Universe stretching to infinity around him—everything. And with it had come the clear and extraordinary knowledge that he was the most important thing in it."<sup>4</sup>

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*"For we are the image of God, Hildegard tells us, and if we wish to see God we need look no further than our souls and bodies, ourselves and our neighbors."*

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One clue to the astonishing revival of Hildegard's memory might be the fact that, in her own way, she gives us something very much like the experience of Zaphod Beeblebrox. We may not literally see visions as she did: Few of us have been blinded by the reverberating light of Christ or seen the shimmering form of Lady Wisdom spinning her cosmic wheel. But then, we do not need to: For *we* are the image of God, Hildegard tells us, and if we wish to see God we need look no further than our souls and bodies, ourselves and our neighbors. "God willed that his Word should

<sup>3</sup>*Epistle to Diognetus*, ed. J. J. Thierry (Leiden: Brill, 1964), ch. 11.

<sup>4</sup>Douglas Adams, *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* (New York: Pocket Books, 1980), 72, 81.

create all things, as he had foreordained before the ages. And why is it called a Word? Because with a resounding voice it awakened all creatures and called them to itself." In the same way, human beings, formed in the Creator's likeness, are inescapably creative, for we work with our hands and command with our voices. "What was made in the Word was life": Like our Creator, we too live by the works that we create. By our making, we reveal ourselves to ourselves, and, what is more, we reveal God to one another. God's rational word echoes in our speech, his praise resounds in our songs, and his creativity is declared in our creations.

Most Christians assume that if "the image of God" has any specific meaning at all, it must have something to do with the mind or the spirit. This was certainly the mainstream opinion in the Middle Ages as well, but Hildegard carries the idea much further. She considers *allo* the body, for she is deeply convinced that the Incarnation—the human embodiment of God—was the purpose of creation itself. In other words, she believed in what theologians call "the absolute predestination of Christ." According to this doctrine, which she shared with many other twelfth-century thinkers, Christ's coming in the flesh was not a divine afterthought in response to Adam's sin, a clever stratagem to bring good out of evil, or a judicial transaction by which God agreed to blink at human sinfulness and look instead at the righteousness of Christ. All these interpretations of the atonement give evil the priority, leaving divine goodness in the awkward position of reacting belatedly to an initiative of Satan. For Hildegard, it was not original sin, the serpent's mischief, or the fall of Eve that drove the Word to become flesh. It would be truer to say that not even sin could *prevent* God's coming. By analogy, a mother does not love her child *because* it hungers and cries, even though its crying makes new demands upon her love. Rather, in the best of all possible worlds, she loves the child before she ever conceives it, and that indeed is why the child has come into the world. Like a gracious mother, divine Wisdom made human beings in the first place because she wished to dwell among them and enjoy their company.

"Let us make man in our image, after our likeness," says the account in Genesis 1:26. Hildegard puts it this way: "God awakened the first man that he formed from clay with the living spark of the soul, so that by that spark, he might be changed from day into flesh and blood . . . . At that moment he looked on the flesh in which he himself would be clothed, and he cherished it in burning love." This divine cherishing of human flesh is perhaps the most surprising and unexpected doctrine to emerge from—of all places—a twelfth-century Platonist's commentary on the Johannine prologue. Our own culture famously has a love-hate relationship with the body, yet even a superficial survey of anthropology would demonstrate that, in truth, *every* culture is ambivalent about the body. It dies, after all. The medieval church is well known to have cultivated a special hatred for the flesh. Hildegard's own teacher, a recluse named Jutta, was a case in point. She fasted savagely, stood barefoot on winter mornings while she recited all 150 psalms, and wore iron chains and a hair shirt till the day she

died. That day came when she was only forty-four. Hildegard must have learned something from Jutta's example, because she herself always stressed moderation and balance in ascetic practices. That is one reason she has become a darling of the holistic health movement.

There is something even more profound in her view of the body that stems from her theology of the Incarnation. Whether we love or hate our own bodies, we tend to think of them as *ours*. For Hildegard, though, the human form was quite literally the form of God: "the flesh that he cherished in burning love" because he meant to wear it as his royal vesture. The body as God's image is a doctrine she works out in detail, and, admittedly, much of what she has to say now sounds merely quaint and archaic. Beyond the curiosities, however, is an uncannily daring idea. The human body, in all its particularity, is not only an image of the cosmos ("microcosm" is the technical term), but also an image of God's holiness:

In the circle of the brain, God reveals his lordship, for the brain governs and rules the whole body. In the hair of the head, God designates his potential, which is his beauty, just as the hair beautifies the head. In the eyebrows, he demonstrates his might, for the brows protect a person's eyes and set off the beauty of the face. In the eyes, God declares his knowledge, by which he foresees and foreknows all. And, in the hearing, he discloses all the sounds of praise of the angelic hosts. In the nostrils, God signifies wisdom, which is the fragrant observance of order in all skills, so that, by its fragrance, a person may recognize what wisdom ordains. By the mouth, God designates his Word . . .

and so forth right down to the feet, which symbolize the faith that moves mountains—"for just as the feet support the whole body and carry it wherever it wants to go, faith mightily supports and magnificently carries the name of God everywhere with miracles."

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***"The living Light that made us is the singing Word that took our flesh; he made us because we were eternally his and he wished to be revealed as ours. We are his mirrors, his marvels, his fellow workers, and the work of his hands."***

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Hildegard was a medical writer and healer, as well as a visionary theologian, so her familiarity with bodies went far beyond the symbolic. Her thought is awash in paradox: She can write fiercely of the opposition between flesh and spirit, especially when sexual purity is at stake, but she also bears witness to their inextricable union, a union sundered only (and temporarily) at death. This paradox is nothing if not Pauline: "the flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh" (Gal 5:17), the apostle writes, yet he also commands Christians to "glorify God in your body" (1 Cor 6:20). To Hildegard's visionary gaze, it was impossible even

to look at human bodies *without* giving glory to God, for the simple and astonishing reason that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth, and we beheld his glory." Here is Hildegard's central truth, the theme around which all her brilliant variations endlessly circle. The living Light that made us is the singing Word that took our flesh; he made us because we were eternally his and he wished to be revealed as ours. We are his mirrors, his marvels, his fellow workers, and the work of his hands.

*A Note on the Translation*

Hildegard's autobiographical remarks indicate that her commentary on the prologue of John's Gospel was the initial inspiration or core of her last major work, the *Book of Divine Works*. In the completed text, however, it falls about midway through her *magnum opus* on cosmology, divine activity in the world, and the ages of salvation history. Although she adopts the form of scriptural commentary, her thought often wanders far from the literal or apparent meanings of the biblical text. Here, as through-out her work, Hildegard's thinking is structured by loose analogy and association rather than strict logic. Underlying the commentary is a series of richly developed parallels: between the cosmos and the body, creation and incarnation, Genesis 1 and John 1, divine creativity and human craftsmanship, divine reason and human language. Hildegard "reads" the human body downward from head to feet, just as she reads history forward from the creation through the birth of Christ to the acts of redemption. Her style of thought is highly visual, so the text may be easier to approach if we imagine both a timeline and a diagram of the human body superimposed on the linear narrative of John's prologue. The imagery is further complicated by incidental analogies; for example, in the act of conception, the fire of the soul transmutes semen into flesh and blood, just as fire and water transform flour into bread. A eucharistic resonance may be intended.

Writing in the manner of a biblical prophet, Hildegard often speaks for God in the divine first person—a habit that can be highly disconcerting to novice readers. But when she shifts from proclamation into exposition, she switches to the third person. In the present text, the "prophetic" passages occur mainly in the first two paragraphs and the final sentence, bracketing the whole commentary so as to assert its divine inspiration even where it is spoken in Hildegard's own voice.

Readers will notice that I have retained the gendered language of the original, for to do otherwise would be to falsify Hildegard's vision. Contemporary theological correctness favors the neuter gender: Personal pronouns for God are avoided entirely, thus suppressing the masculine without affirming the feminine. But Hildegard would have none of this: Her God is emphatically masculine *and* feminine, not gender-free. Some of her most evocative visions of the feminine divine, personified as Love and Wisdom, are found elsewhere in the *Book of Divine Works*. In the passage below, however, she follows the biblical idiom and speaks of God and his Word as masculine.

The question of gendered language for humans is more complex. Latin *homo* is a masculine noun that can mean a human being, a male person, or humanity in general. Hildegard rarely uses the word in the second sense, but she veers constantly between the first and the third. When she uses *homo* to denote an individual human of either sex, I have translated it as "person." But when *homo* means "humankind," Hildegard envisions neither an abstract universal nor a collectivity. Instead, she thinks of Adam, who is at the same time a specific male person—the first human being—and a summation of the entire race, which preexists in his loins (or in Eve's womb) just as the whole creation preexists in the mind of God. Given her pictorial mode of thought, when she writes *homo* she "sees" Adam as an animate body, fashioned from day by the hands of God. Whatever is true of this first divine artifact will be true of humans until the end of time. Elsewhere in her works, Hildegard imagines this universal body in feminine form in the figure of Ecclesia, the Church. But here, "man" is both all humanity and Adam, so rather than neutralizing this dual vision by translating it into the plural ("human beings"), I have retained the collective masculine singular.

#### HILDEGARD'S COMMENTARY ON THE JOHANNINE PROLOGUE

##### FROM THE *BOOK OF DIVINE WORKS*, PART I, VISION 4, CHAPTER 105

*In the beginning was the Word.* The text can be understood this way: I, Who Am without beginning, from whom all beginnings proceed—I, the Ancient of Days—speak thus. I, by Myself, am the day that never came from the sun, but the sun was kindled from Me. And I am the reason that did not resound from another, but all rationality breathes forth from Me. In order to behold my face, I created mirrors in which I gaze on all the miracles of my antiquity, which shall never end; and I made those mirrors sing together in praise, for I have a voice like thunder, through which I move the whole earth with the living sounds of all creatures. It is I, the Ancient of Days, who do this. By my Word, which always was and remains in me without beginning, I commanded a great light to come forth, and with it innumerable sparks, the angels. As these awakened in their own light, they forgot me and wished to be as I am. Therefore, with a great thunderbolt, the zeal of my vengeance cast them down in the presumption by which they stood against me. For there is only one God and can be no other.

Therefore, I composed within myself a little work, namely man, and made him after my own image and likeness, so that he might work in another medium after my fashion; for my Son was to be clothed in man with a robe of flesh. And I made this work rational from my own rationality and sealed my potential in it, just as human rationality in its skill comprehends all things through names and numbers. For a person discerns nothing except through names, nor does he understand the multiplicity of things except through numbers. And I am an angel of might, for

I announce myself through miracles to the angelic hosts, and I show myself in faith to all creatures when they acknowledge me as their Creator. Yet, my name can be perfectly pronounced by none.

Man is indeed that garment in which my Son, clothed in royal power, showed himself as the God of all creation and the life of life. Yet, no one but God can number the host of angels who specially wait upon his royal power; nor can anyone count to the end those who individually declare him to be the God of all creation; nor can any tongue suffice to list those who especially call on him as the life of all life. Therefore, blessed are they who abide with him.

God set his signature on all his work in the human form, as stated above and as demonstrated here by means of examples.

For in the circle of the brain, God reveals his lordship, for the brain governs and rules the whole body. In the hair of the head, God designates his potential, which is his beauty, just as the hair beautifies the head. In the eyebrows, he demonstrates his might, for the brows protect a person's eyes, keep harmful things out of them, and set off the beauty of the face. They are like the wings of the winds that support and sustain them—just as a bird sometimes flies with its wings and sometimes ceases from flight; for the wind blows from the power of God, and the blasts of the wind are its wings. In the eyes, God declares his knowledge, by which he foresees and foreknows all. The eyes display many sights in themselves because they are clear and watery, just as the reflections of other creatures appear in water. For through sight a person recognizes and discerns all things; and if he lacked sight, he would be like a corpse among creatures. And, in the hearing, God discloses all the sounds of praise of the secret mysteries and the angelic hosts, among whom God himself is praised. For it would be unworthy if God were known only by himself, when one human being may be known by another through hearing; and within himself, too, a person understands all things. If he lacked hearing, he would be like a hollow man. In the nostrils, God signifies wisdom, which is the fragrant observance of order in all skills, so that, by its fragrance, a person may recognize what wisdom ordains. For the sense of smell is diffused widely among all creatures, drawing in their scents so that a person may know what they are like. By the mouth, God designates his Word through which he created all things, just as everything is spoken by the mouth with the sound of rationality. For a person utters many things by speaking, just as the Word of God, creating in the embrace of love, arranged that nothing necessary should be lacking to his work. And just as the cheeks and chin surround the mouth, so the beginning of all creation was present to the Word when it sounded, when all things were created; and thus *in the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God. And the Word was God.*

The text can be understood this way: In the beginning of the beginning itself, when the will of God had already unfolded itself for the making of creatures—a plan that had existed in God without beginning, although it had not yet unfolded—the Word was without any beginning at all. *And the*

*Word was with God* as language exists in rationality, for rationality has language within it and language exists in rationality; and these two are not divided. For the Word existed without beginning before the beginning of creatures, and also within their beginning; and the same Word was with God, in no way divided from God, both before the beginning and in the beginning of creatures. For, in his Word, God willed that his Word should create all things, as he had foreordained before the ages. And why is it called "Word"? Because, with a resounding voice, it awakened all creatures and called them to itself. For what God composed in the Word is what the Word commanded in sounding; and what the Word commanded is what God composed in the Word. And so *the Word was God*. For the Word was in God, and in it God composed all his will in secret; and the Word sounded and brought forth all creatures; and thus the Word and God are one. When the Word of God resounded, it called to itself all creation, which had been preordained and prepared in God before time, and by its voice all things were awakened to life. God also placed a sign of this truth in man, who inwardly composes a word in his heart before he utters it. Just as the unspoken word is still present in its utterance, so the inner word exists within the spoken word. When the Word of God resounded, the same Word appeared in every creature, and the same sound was life in all creation.

So too, from the same word, human rationality accomplishes its works, and from the same sound, it expresses those works in speaking, shouting, and singing. For by the keenness of his skill with created things, a person makes music with stringed instruments and drums, because man is rational, after the image of God, on account of his living soul. This soul with its warmth draws to itself the flesh, in which there appears the first figure created by the finger of God, the figure that he formed in Adam. The soul completely permeates the flesh, giving it life and replenishing it from its own fullness to make it grow. For the flesh does not move itself without the rational soul; rather, it is the soul that moves the flesh and gives it life. For the flesh is to the rational soul as all creatures are to the Word. That is why the Word created man in the Father's will. But just as a person would not be human without the network of his blood vessels, so too he could not live without other creatures. Because man is mortal, he does not bestow life on his own work, for his life has its beginning from God. It is God who gives life to his work, for he himself is life without beginning.

*This Word was in the beginning with God*, that is, in the beginning about which my servant Moses speaks, inspired by me, saying, *In the beginning God created heaven and earth*. For the Word that said, *Let there be*, as it is written, *And God said, let there be light*, existed in God in the beginning, when the creation received its origin from the Creator. The Word was with God, that is, in the unique equality of the divine; for this Word that is with God is equal to him in divinity, since the Word that is in God is inseparable from God and consubstantial with him.

Thus *all things were made by him*, for all creatures were made by the Word of God as the Father willed; there is no Creator save God alone. All

useful things that possess form and vitality were made by him. In our arms and the fingers that are joined to them, he reveals the strength of the firmament, with the signs that uphold and govern it, just as the arms, with the fingers of the hands, manifest the rule and activity of the whole body. The right hand is like the south wind, the left hand like the north wind, which together support the firmament so that it does not overstep its bounds, as it is written: *And in all of these a great chasm has been set between us and you*, that is, lest the darkness extinguish the light or the light expel the darkness.

*And without him nothing was made*, for without the Word of God no creature was fashioned. Through the Word of God there arose every creature, whether visible or invisible, that subsists in any degree of being—with a living spirit or viridity or virtue. Without him nothing was made except evil, which is from the devil—and therefore it was cast away from the sight of God and brought to nothing; for there is only one God and no other. Rational man, to whom God gave the ability to work, committed sin, which comes to nothing because it was not created by God. For this "nothing" God established endless darkness, because it rejected and fled from the light.

But *what was made in him was life*. For all things that were created appeared in their Creator's reason because they existed in his foreknowledge. They were not coeternal with him, yet they were foreknown, foreseen, and foreordained by him. God is the only life that had no beginning. Therefore all that was made in him was life, because it was foreknown by him and alive to him. God never began to hold creation in his memory, since he had never forgotten it: It already existed in his foreknowledge, even though it did not yet exist temporally in its own forms. For just as it is impossible for God not to be, so it is impossible that those works which had been foreknown and foreordained in his wisdom should not have come forth as creatures. What was made in creation existed in God as unending life, because it was to be created in such a way that the finished creature should lack nothing, and nothing should keep it from attaining full maturity in the course of its growth. In the same way, the works a person does for himself are "life" to him insofar as they sustain his life, because he maintains and perfects himself through them. God, however, is the fullness of life without beginning or end, so even his work is life in him, work that can by no means be mocked. God has sealed this principle in the breast, where a person gathers everything in his thoughts, both good and evil. In the process of desiring, planning, and setting forth to act, he considers what should please and displease him. Whatever pleases him he gladly keeps, so that it may preserve his life, and whatever displeases him he casts away in anger, lest it harm his life.

So, all that God made is life in the Word, for, coming from God, it is lively in its nature. Therefore, just as the Word of the Father gave people carnal life when he created them, so also, when he put on his robe, he showed them spiritual life, so that by following an unfamiliar way of life and not walking in accord with the flesh, they might spread throughout the

world in spiritual congregations. So God holds both peoples in his hand, since he—the Son of God—is both God and man. He embraces the spiritual people in love because he is the Son of God, but he keeps the secular people in justice because he is the Son of man. In this justice it is said, *Increase and multiply*.

*And the life was the light of men*, because the life that awakened creatures—the life of human life, through which we live and exist—gave people the light of reason and knowledge. In this light they may look toward God in faith, acknowledging him as their Creator, and so be suffused with divine light just as daylight illumines the world. By the sky which displays the sun and moon, we understand the wings of knowledge, for the day demonstrates the knowledge of good, and night, the knowledge of evil, just as the sun manifeste the day and the moon, the night. And just as, without these lights, man with all creation would be as if blind in the conduct of his life, and just as the human body could not live without the spirit, so too, without the wings of knowledge, man would not understand what he is.

Hence, *the light shines in the darkness*, just as the light of day, reflected by the moon, shines in the night, so that in the midst of good works a person may recognize evil works that are cut off from the light. For good knowledge, supported by reason, reproaches evil and casts it away.

*And the darkness did not overcome it*, just as night cannot overshadow day, because evil does not wish to know or understand what is good, but flees from it. God declares this truth in the heart, which is the life and firmament of the whole body and sustains it all. For in the heart, a person's thoughts are ordered and his will is nourished. The will is the light of men, as it were, for just as light penetrates all things, so the will abounds in what it desires. In this very desire, which a person takes to be his light, he often walks in the darkness of the evil deeds he wishes to carry out. But the darkness does not overcome the will to the extent that it can take the knowledge of good away; it cannot keep a person from knowing what is good, even if he does not do it.

*There was a man sent by God* who did not have the taste of soil, because he had been sent by the Creator on high, not by any man. For the warmth of God's Word had rejuvenated the withered flesh of his parents, so that, in many works, his own flesh too would be alienated, as it were, from the habits of those who are born in sin. For his parents, touched by the grace of God, conceived him, and so by the grace of God he came forth, sent to bear witness to the Son of God. Therefore, the angel named him John.

*His name was John* because the works he did accorded with his name: The grace of God strengthened him before and behind. For the grace of the Word, which is God, sent John without the moral instability that abounds in the fickle habits of people who are bom in sin. For this reason, he had a certain stability like the righteousness of angelic spirits, who neither share the moral instability of humans nor have any desire to sin. God, who is marvelous, created in the belly a likeness of the miracles that he worked in John. For the belly abstracts the vital forces of the created things that it

takes in and ejects, so that it might be nourished by their juices as God ordained. In all creatures—animals, reptiles, birds and fish, herbs and fruit trees—there lurk certain hidden mysteries of God that neither man nor any other creature knows or perceives, except insofar as God grants them this knowledge. But John was marvelously sent to the elements and marvelously fed by them, and just as he was abstracted in a way from the habit of sin, so too, through his abstinence, he marvelously lived off the elements. And as a pure man, he was a worthy and praiseworthy messenger before the hidden Son of God, by whom the world was established with its numberless beings, and all creatures were created. This too is designated by the belly, for just as the world contains all things, the belly takes all creatures into itself in digestion. And just as all creation came forth from God, so Adam carried in his own form all the human beings whom the Son of God fed with true nourishment when he carried man in his own humanity.

*He came for testimony to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him.* For John—a marvelous man, miraculously made in marvelous ways beyond the norm of carnal birth—came by divine dispensation to give testimony concerning the mysteries of God, so that he might bear witness to the light, that is, to God, from whom all lights are kindled. Through the mighty works accomplished in John, all who were on fire with the Holy Spirit could believe in God through the testimonies he marvelously uttered. Therefore, he came bearing witness to divinity clothed in human form. And, as he himself was bom of an arid nature with no viridity of its own, he proclaimed my Son to be bom without sin of the Virgin Mary. This is what I willed, so that, by the miracle I worked in John, people might believe in the miracles of my Son. And just as this witness appeared in John, a true witness is declared in the thighs, which witness all births and propagate the entire body, which secs, touches, thinks, and chooses, and in its knowledge takes account of all it does. For man is a miracle of God; therefore, it is right for him to bear witness to the marvels of God.

*He was not that light, but came to bear witness to the light.* For John was not the light that is never divided or altered: That light is God. Sent by God, however, he came to bear witness concerning the true light that kindles all lights. For God exists in and through himself, with no lack or need of any kind, since it is he who would accomplish all in all. So he is present in every work of his making. Therefore, John testified and bore witness concerning Christ, for just as the fruit bears witness to the quality of the root, he arose amid the marvels of God and bore witness to them.

Man is the signature work of God and a light that comes from him, but his life has a beginning and in his flesh he will eventually die. For this reason, John bears witness that God himself is not like this. *He was the true light* that is never darkened by any shadow, that knows no time of serving or ruling, waning or waxing, but shines of its own accord, the ordering of all order and the light of all light. For God never arose in any mom or any dawn: Before time he eternally was.

*The true light illumines every man coming into this world.* For this light suffuses with the breath of life every human being who has flesh and bones and enters into the present world of change, growth, and decay through the gate of birth, so that, when the sun with its luminaries has welcomed him, he may see and recognize creatures. For God awakened the first man that he formed from clay with the living spark of the soul, so that, by that spark, he might be changed from clay into flesh and blood. So in Adam's posterity, when the foam of semen has been pressed out by nature, it is completely transformed into flesh and blood by the fiery spark of the soul. If it were not quickened in this way by the warmth of the soul, it would not be completely transformed into flesh and blood, even as the matter of the first man would have remained clay if it had not been changed by the soul. For just as bread is made from flour by the action of fire and water, flesh and blood are produced by the fire of the soul.

Man is, so to speak, the light of the other creatures dwelling on earth, who frequently run up to him and fawn on him with great love. And, in return, a person often lovingly seeks to fulfill the wishes of a creature he ardently loves. But a creature that does not love human beings flees from them and tramples and destroys everything that belongs to them, because, terrified by the fear of humans, it is angered by their very existence. Therefore, it frequently attacks people and tries to kill them.

*The Word was in the world* when he put on the royal garment taken from the Virgin's flesh, when the holy divinity lay down in her womb. For he became man in an alien nature, unlike any other man, because his flesh was inflamed by holy divinity. Therefore, after the last day, when all human beings have been transfigured, the souls of the elect by faith will lift their bodies into heaven, the same bodies that once existed in the world. This is what God himself will do by his own power, to which no creature can set any limits, for then man will be clothed with flesh and his bones filled with marrow. He will never again become weak for want of food or drink or life, for then he will come forth in the strength of divinity with no taint of mutability, because in goodness he is a member of Christ—who in the world endured many sufferings and humiliations, even though he was the Son of God. The devil, the inventor of all falsehood, could not know this and hastened to deny Christ, together with all his members who reject God. Yet he could not prevent humankind from being raised up to unending life.

*And the world was made by him.* This means that the world arose from him, not he from the world. For creation came forth by the Word of God—meaning all creatures, both invisible and visible, for there are some that can be neither seen nor touched, while others are seen as well as touched. Man possesses both kinds in himself, the soul and the body, for he was made after the image and likeness of God. Therefore, he commands with his word but also works with his hands. In this way, God ordained man to resemble himself, because he wished his Son to be incarnate of man.

*And the world did not know him*, for the children of the world, that is, those who follow the world in their ignorant blindness, neither knew of his coming nor recognized his working, even as an infant is unaware of knowledge and work. God demonstrates the ignorant childishness of such unbelievers in the thighs and knees. Just as an infant that feeds on milk and soft food cannot walk, because its bones and marrow are not yet strong enough, and even an adult cannot walk on his thighs and knees without the calves and feet, so it was with unbelievers. Because their knowledge and senses were devoid of the fire of the Holy Spirit, through which they should have recognized God, they could not walk in the way of righteousness.

*He came to his own*, for he had created the world and put on human flesh. So all creatures revealed him, just as a coin reveals the ruler who minted it. For God created the world, which he wished to prepare as a tabernacle for man; and, since he wanted to clothe himself in man, he fashioned him to his own image and likeness. Therefore, all things were his own.

*And his own did not receive him*. They were his own because he had created them and made them especially after his image, yet they neglected him when they failed to acknowledge him as their Maker and did not understand that they had been created by him alone. For unbelievers did not receive his humanity, nor did they recognize God in human form, because of the blindness of their unbelief. Now, foolish and idle youth is symbolized by the legs. Young people attend to the blossoming life of creation and esteem themselves wiser than others, because their bones and marrow have by then reached full strength. This is how the Jews and pagans behaved. Loving the vanity of the world, they thought they knew what they did not know and were what they were not, and they paid no faithful attention to the one who had given them flesh and spirit. Just as deluded youth takes delight in creatures, the world at that time lived in vanity. Therefore, it was necessary for God to show himself to them and gather them to himself, as he did when he commanded the ass and its colt to be untied and brought to him and took his seat on them according to the law of truth.

*But to as many as received him, he gave power to become children of God*. To all people of both sexes who received him, believing him to be God and man (for God first is grasped by faith, and afterwards God-made-man), he potentially gave this power by his own will and potency: namely, to become children of his Father in the heavenly kingdom. That is, having become fellow heirs of his own inheritance, they could enjoy a share with him in his kingdom by the same law that constitutes a child as his father's heir. Because they recognized him as their God and Creator, embraced him in charity, kissed him in faith, and diligently and carefully inquired of him about all that is his, the dew of the Holy Spirit fell upon them, so that from these people the whole church could begin to germinate and bear the fruit of heavenly joys. Therefore, it was given to them, by virtue of true faith, to become children of God.

*To those who believe in his name*, that is, who firmly believe that they will be saved by baptism in his name, is given a share in the heavenly kingdom. The elect do all their works in burning love just as if they could see God, not in a shadow of faith, worshipping the name of God without works when they merely reject alien gods, who cannot create themselves and do not exist from themselves, but are only companions of men. The name in which true faith believes has three properties: It is without beginning; it gave rise to all creatures; and it is the life by which every living creature breathes. Therefore, it is worshipped by its whole creation. Now, in accord with the three powers that belong to this name, every creature with a name subsists by three powers. But a withered, rotten creature has no name, for it is not alive. Three powers, then, belong to the name of a living creature: One of them is seen, one is known, but the third is unseen. For the body of a living thing is seen and the procreative power is known, but the power that makes it live is neither known nor seen.

In this regard, God manifested great wonders through the feet, for just as the feet support the whole body and carry it wherever it wishes, faith mightily supports and magnificently carries the name of God everywhere with miracles, both seen and unseen, known and unknown. Both the body of man and his works are visible, but there is much more in him that is neither seen nor known. Since there is so much obscurity even in man, how should the one who created him be manifest? For no one living in the world can know him as he is.

*Who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.* For the Son of God said: *What is born of flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.* Flesh born of flesh is conceived in sin; but since God is spirit, all spirits are born of him. Spirit is not changed into flesh, nor flesh into spirit, yet man is composed of flesh and spirit together; otherwise he would neither be nor be called human. God fashioned Adam to live forever immutably, but he sinned by disobedience when he listened to the serpent's counsel. Therefore, the serpent judged that he would perish altogether; but this is not what God willed. Instead he prepared for him the exile of the world, in which he conceived and begot his children in sin. In this way, Adam with all his progeny, conceived through the foam of sin, became mortal. All return to corruption until the last day, when God will renew man so that he might live thenceforth by an immutable life, just as Adam was created. But this life could by no means exist among the children conceived and born in sin. Rather, it arose in the humanity of the Son of God, through whom the heavenly Father remembered to deliver man, who had perished. Those who become children of God by virtue of good works attain this power to be God's children, not from the coagulation of their parents' blood (in which they themselves are bloody), nor from the will of the weaker flesh that is fertile to bear, nor from the will of its stronger part that is robust to beget. Rather, they receive this gift by the recompense of divine revelation, in the washing of baptism and the fiery outpouring of the Holy Spirit. This is how they are born of God and become heirs of his kingdom.

God had foreseen all his works before they were formed, and the forms fashioned later in creation did not remain empty, but were brought to life. For flesh without life would not be flesh, because, when the life has departed from it, it falls away to nothing. But the breath that God sent into Adam, fiery and intelligent, was his life. Therefore, by its warmth the red clay of the earth was changed into blood. Thus, all creation existed before time in the foreknowledge of God, as all people yet to be born are in his foreknowledge still.

Now man is intelligible and sensible: intelligible because he understands all things and sensible because he perceives his surroundings. God fills all of human flesh with life when he sends the breath of life into it. Therefore, through the knowledge of good and evil, a person chooses whatever pleases him and rejects what displeases him. But God takes heed of what each one proposes. If a person makes plans that are not from God, then God withdraws from him, and at once he is approached by the spirits who began the first evil, that is, who wished to destroy heaven. This evil did not affect God, for it would have been unfitting for God to destroy himself. But if a person sighs for the name of his Father and calls on him with good desire, angelic helpers come to him lest he be hindered by enemies. God at first lets him grow gently, as if on milk, through the delightful desire for good works, and later drenches him with the rain of his grace, through which he ascends valiantly from virtue to virtue. In this way, he is continually renewed in such virtues until his death. A person who is able to achieve some little thing, not very great, always rushes ahead boldly to do what he can, but one who can accomplish many great deeds exercises moderation and balance in them. Now the devil wants only one thing, namely, to seduce souls to their death, and he neither seeks nor is able to do anything else. He can barely rest until he achieves what he can.

God, however, is omnipotent in all his works and has power in and through everything, so he practices moderation and acts with balance and discretion, in order that man may become stronger and more stable in the good. For one who rushes ahead recklessly often falls into ruin. Now man is the signature that declares all the honor of God. For the good knowledge in him signifies the angelic hosts who laudably serve God, but his evil knowledge manifests God's power, because God vanquished the knowledge of evil when he expelled the first man from paradise. So it happens in every person: God's goodness is revealed in one who chooses and accomplishes good through good knowledge, and God's power is declared in one who fastens upon evil and fulfills it, because God sometimes judges and sometimes pardons the sin.

In this way, then, man himself is life, and all that attaches itself to him comes alive through him. For God created man with all creatures beneath the sun attached to him, so that he would not be lonely on the earth, as God himself is not lonely in heaven, but is glorified in all the heavenly harmonies. Now these creatures that surround man on earth will survive with him until the number of the elect fixed by God has been fulfilled.

After the future resurrection, however, the blessed will not need to grow or be fed by any creature, for then they will enjoy that glory that will never end nor alter. In that glory, blessed humanity will be clothed by the Holy Trinity and behold the One who never had beginning or end. Therefore, they will never be afflicted by old age or weariness, for they will make music with the harp and sing praises ever new.

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***"in Adam . . . [God] looked upon the flesh in which he himself would be clothed, and he cherished it in burning love."***

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As we have said, then, the flesh is alive through life and would not truly be flesh without life, so these two are one—the flesh with the life, the life with the flesh. This is what God intended in Adam when he strengthened his flesh and blood with the breath he sent into him. For at that moment he looked upon the flesh in which he himself would be clothed, and he cherished it in burning love.

*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.* For the Word, which was eternally with God before time and indeed was God, put on flesh from the Virgin's womb through the warmth of the Holy Spirit. It assumed this flesh in the same way that the blood vessels provide a frame for the flesh and carry the blood, yet are not themselves blood. God had created man so that all creation might serve him; therefore, it was fitting even for God to receive a garment of flesh in man. The Word assumed flesh in such a way that the Word and the flesh are one, yet neither could be transformed into the other; rather, they are one in unity of person. Now the body is the garment of the soul, and the soul has capacities for action through the flesh. The body would be nothing without the soul, and the soul would be unable to act without the body. So body and soul are one in man; in fact, they *are* man, and in this way man, the work of God, was made after God's image and likeness. For when the breath of a person is sent by God, the breath and the flesh become one person. The Word of God, however, put on flesh from the unplowed flesh of the Virgin with no fiery heat, so that the Word might remain Word and the flesh, flesh, yet they are one. For the Word that existed timelessly in the Father before all time did not change itself, but only put on flesh.

*And he dwelt among us.* For the man born without sin dwells among us as a man, not neglecting our humanity, because we too are human beings endowed with the breath of life, made after his image and likeness. Therefore, we also dwell in him, for we are his workmanship; he has always held us in his foreknowledge and never forgotten us.

*And we have seen his glory,* for we who were with him have seen him coming specially in his marvelous nature without sin, manifesting *glory as*

*of the Only-Begotten Of the Father.* For the only-begotten Son, marvelously bom of the Father before the ages and marvelously coming from the Father, revealed his glory when the Virgin conceived him by the warmth of the Holy Spirit. Nor did she need the work of a man, although every other person is begotten sinfully by a man, that is, by his father. God had formed man from clay and sent into him the breath of life. Therefore, the Word of God put on the royal garment in man along with the rational soul, and drew it entirely to himself and remained in it. For the breath, which in man is called the soul, permeates the flesh and possesses it as a delightful garment and a beautiful ornament. Therefore, the soul loves the flesh and consents to it, even though it cannot be seen in the body. By the nature and desire of the soul, man seeks the garment of life; and since God created no creature devoid of power, man is forever working wonders.

And the Word is *full of grace and truth.* For he was present in the fullness of grace, creating all things in his divinity and redeeming them in his humanity; and he stood in the fullness of truth because no falsehood bom of sin or evil touched him or joined itself to him. For he is the Lord whose victory defeated all evils, which without him are nothing. The Word himself, the true Son of God, is full of grace, giving and forgiving according to his mercy. He did not empty himself of divinity, but put on humanity, and his humanity is full and perfect, for no blemish of sinful human nature touched him. He is likewise full of truth, for he gives, forgives, and judges justly—something man does not do because he is conceived and bom with the blemish of sin. Thus, God is round like a wheel, creating all things, willing the good, and perfecting the good. For the will of God prepared all things that the Word of God created.

Now, let everyone who fears and loves God open his heart devoutly to these words, and know that they are uttered for the salvation of bodies and souls not by any human being, but by Me—I Who Am.

#### ABSTRACT

This article is a translation of Hildegard's commentary on the Johannine prologue, taken from her *Book of Divine Works*, with an introduction emphasizing the themes of the divine image and the holiness of the human body as an analogue of both the cosmos and the creative power of God. The note introducing the translation comments on Hildegard's prophetic, pictorial style and explains why her highly gendered thought cannot be rendered in contemporary gender-neutral language.