The Personal Correspondence of Hildegard of Bingen

Joseph L. Baird

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SELECTED LETTERS WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY BY *Joseph L. Baird*

The letters in this volume are selected from
The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen *(3 vols.),*
translated by Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrman

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To my daughter Eve,
that other tough, spiritual lady

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Introduction

In 1106, when she was eight years old, Hildegard was enclosed—for life—in a small cell on the grounds of a monastery of Benedictine monks at Mount St. Disibod, a short distance from her birthplace and the home of her parents. She was placed in the care, and under the tutelage, of an older, yet still relatively young, recluse, one Jutta of Sponheim, who as a young woman had insisted on the life of an anchorite. Evidence for the little hermitage at St. Disibod is quite meager, but other sources from the Middle Ages give us what is likely a reasonably accurate picture of the situation there. The structure in which the two were to live out their lives would have had one door, locked from the outside, and one window, through which they received their food and passed out their refuse. At the entry into such a life, a solemn liturgical ceremony was performed, with the rites of the dead being read over the entrants. For they were, henceforth, considered as dead to this world, destined to live out the brief moment of this life in paradisal seclusion from the evils of the outside world to insure their eternal life in the world beyond.

And that was that!

With Hildegard entombed for life at the age of eight.

Whose "brief moment" lived in seclusion would have been seventy-three years, since she lived to be eighty-one.

Whose days from that point forward were to be spent on attending her psalter and concentrating on her interior religious life.

That was the way it was supposed to be. That was the way it started out.

Yet this is the woman whom we later see traveling throughout Germany, making four long and arduous journeys to preach to the people, a woman preaching to, of all things, exclusively male audiences, as well as to the general populace.

This is the woman who was invited to the palace of the great Emperor, Frederick I, Barbarossa, where she made certain prophecies to her imperial host.

This is the woman who as head of her own monastery, surrounded by her chorus of nuns, dressed those lovely young ladies in the finery of paradise, with flowing tresses and flowing white garments that reached to their feet, and with golden crowns on their heads—to the dismay of some religious conservatives of the time.

This is the woman who produced and staged an elaborate morality play, for which she wrote both words and music—the first of its kind, inventing the form.

This is the woman who founded two separate monasteries in her own right, with herself as head.

This is the woman whom priests consulted about peculiarly male prerogatives and fields of inquiry, how to conduct Mass properly and how to resolve certain esoteric religious mysteries.

This is the woman who wrote three major books of striking originality of thought and image.

This is the woman who knew and corresponded with many of the most important people of her time: with Eleanor of Aquitaine,

that other high-spirited woman of the Middle Ages, with Henry II of England, with Frederick Barbarossa, with four different popes, with the Empress Irene of Greece, with archbishops and dukes and monks and, in some ways most significant of all, with people of no particular importance whatsoever—which is what this book is about.

Quite a set of accomplishments for a "dead" woman!

How could this have happened? Just what caused this "resurrection" of Hildegard from the dead? As with so many events so far removed in time, the evidence is very scanty. What we do know is this: the fame of the sanctity of those two recluses (presumably Jutta, rather than Hildegard, at this early stage) spread abroad very quickly, and other noble young ladies began suing for entry into their community. Certain logical conclusions follow from this fact: as the number of those seeking admission increased, the monks would have had to enlarge the quarters in which they were to be housed, and, let us be clear, the monks had solid financial, as well as holy, incentives to make such accommodations. These young ladies came with dowries, a sordid matter Hildegard would have to deal with once she established her own independent community, as can be followed in the correspondence. In any case, the growth in numbers would have totally subverted the original plan, with the former straitened cell being transformed into a full-fledged convent of Benedictine nuns, and with such a change, as the end result forces us to conclude, came the gradual relaxation of the earlier restrictions.

But let us return for a moment to that small cell where the two are enclosed. On thinking of the situation there, certain questions nag at the back of the mind of any but the most dry-as-dust, disengaged scholar. What was it like for a little girl to be incarcerated in such a fashion? There is, of course, no real way to answer that question, not even if we had a confirming document from the Middle Ages, for all such medieval prequels to a saint's life present

their subjects as insufferable little prigs who always dutifully attend to their prayers and pious obligations. Still, it is sometimes worthwhile to ask the unanswerable questions, if only to refocus the mind and give flesh and life to these otherwise bloodless creatures. Did high animal spirits sometimes course through the veins of the little girl and cause her to dance delightedly about in the narrow confines of that little domicile? Did Jutta sometimes have to smack her and grumble, "Attend to your psalter, girl"? Did the young Hildegard sometimes gaze longingly out that single window and wish to run out in the meadows and chase a butterfly she saw at a distance? Did, at some time, the stark realization of what "for life" meant come fleetingly into her consciousness? On this last point we may have a pertinent letter (#36) if we read carefully between the lines. Many years later, Hildegard learned of a nun who had broken all her vows and returned to a secular life, giving as an excuse that she had been forced to take the veil against her will. Hildegard sits down immediately and writes a fiery letter to the lapsed nun threatening her with all the pangs of hell if she does not return to her former blessed state, and this despite the fact (for she refers to it in her letter) that the person was brought into the state (in childhood perhaps, like Hildegard?) without her consent. Of course, as a nun herself, and in charge of nuns, Hildegard may have felt compelled to write such a letter in any case, but what is shocking is the fierceness of the threatened punishment, without any alleviation, from a woman who is usually merciful to even the most flagrant sinner. Does this letter, then, reflect somehow on her own childhood experience?

We do, I think, have at least one small bit of information about the mutual relationships between the two in their cloistered setting. In the beginning, the young Hildegard would have been shy and restrained in her relationship with Jutta, keeping her own little secret to herself, for she had learned to be guarded in her contact with other people. Hildegard herself tells us that she began