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Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine (review)

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is no real attempt to link these authors. They stand as interesting individuals, whose works are less "nationalistic" and "barbarian" thanks to Goffart's account. Still, he appears to have overreached his texts too often in a desire to find "programs" and links with contemporary affairs. *Narrators of Barbarian History* is founded upon a shaky principle, one clearly stated by Goffart in his analysis of Paul the Deacon: "It is risky to judge a book only by the description its author provides" (348). This is undoubtedly true, but the risk is perhaps greater to ignore the interpretative brake that this description provides.

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Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987. Pp. xx + 289.

In *Sister of Wisdom* Barbara Newman examines the female images in the writings of St. Hildegard of Bingen (d. 1179), and seeks to construct from them a coherent theology of the feminine. The result is an interesting and erudite volume which places Hildegard's thought within the tradition of sapiential theology and relates it to modern feminist spirituality.

Newman organizes Hildegard's use of the feminine around several symbolic characters. The first and most important is Sapientia or Wisdom. Hildegard presents Sapientia as decidedly female and firmly part of the divine. Sapientia is closely associated with the material of creation and mediates between the world and the more spiritual aspects of God. As such she takes on roles traditionally assigned to the Holy Spirit or the incarnate Son. "The feminine divine brings the world into being that God may be born in it and leads it back to God through the Word-made-flesh" (87). Newman goes on to examine Hildegard's reflections on Eve, Mary, and Ecclesia or "mother church." For Hildegard these three are key figures in salvation history. Eve loses God's grace for her children less through malice than through weakness. Her punishment is intercourse and child-birth. Mary, preexistent with her son, corrects Eve's misfortune through virginal maternity. As Sapientia gives the material to creation, Mary gives flesh to God. Ecclesia continues Mary's maternal virginity and regenerates lost souls through the purity of baptism.

Newman juxtaposes the abstract female images found in Hildegard's theological tracts with the more practical concerns displayed in her medical treatises and personal correspondence. While Hildegard is ambiguous as to the relative roles of God and Satan in human sexuality and sympathetic to the problems of contemporary women, both married and cloistered, she is adamant in her affirmation of traditional female roles. The feminine might be part of the divine and key to the incarnation, but female power is only possible in weakness, submission, and subordination to a male hierarchy. Hildegard identifies herself as "the poor little female," comments on the paradox of God's use of weakness, and views her own visionary vocation as an illustration of the scandal of the "effeminate" times in which she lives.

Newman concludes her work with some reflections on the relationship between Hildegard's theology and modern feminist thought. Newman eschews as distortion those attempts that present Hildegard as the champion of the female divine but ignore her embrace of traditional female social roles. Newman recognizes several trends in modern reflections on the feminine. There are the liberals who see male/female categories as social constructs. To speak of the "eternal feminine" is to reenforce gender stereotypes that limit women, and thus the liberals would have little use for Hildegard's visions. At the opposite end of the spectrum are the "romantics" who fall into two categories: conservative antifeminists who espouse a subservient feminine nature, and romantic feminists who seek the feminine divine as Goddess in various forms of witchcraft and neopaganism. "Oddly enough, however, the evangelicals and the witches prove to be joint heirs of the old theologies of the feminine. What they share, in contrast to the liberals, is a predilection for 'the feminine' as a valid symbolic construct that conveys certain necessary truths about God and women" (269). Both groups of romantics find some aspects of Hildegard's thought attractive and some highly objectionable.

Newman's work is a valuable contribution to scholarship on Hildegard of Bingen. Her systematic presentation of Hildegard's use of the feminine is thorough and enlightening. She takes ample care to locate Hildegard's thought in the historical tradition of sapiential theology and to relate it to the reflections of Hildegard's contemporaries. The biggest weakness of *Sister of Wisdom* lies in Newman's ambivalence to her own enterprise. In her conclusion, one is left with the impression that while Newman sees value in Hildegard and the romantic view of the "eternal feminine," she also has been affected by liberal arguments about the stifling potential of such

a view. Newman's struggle to find some middle ground, while not entirely successful, points out a continuing dilemma within contemporary feminist spirituality.

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Robert Chazan. *European Jewry and the First Crusade.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987. Pp. ix + 380.

With *European Jewry and the First Crusade*, Robert Chazan has made an important contribution to our understanding of medieval Jewish history and of the evolution of Jewish-Christian relations. The work is notable both for its thorough and detailed analysis of the Hebrew and Latin accounts of the attacks on the Rhineland Jewish communities in 1096 and for its revision of accepted notions of the impact of these events on Ashkenazic Jewry. Rather than viewing Ashkenazic Jewry as intellectually and socially isolated from the wider cultural milieu, Chazan shows how the Jews, along with their Christian neighbors, were deeply affected by the spirit of intellectual and spiritual innovation characteristic of the late-eleventh and twelfth centuries. This spirit of innovation is evident both in the popular crusaders' attacks on the Jews and in the Jewish response to Christian violence. Thus, according to Chazan, the ideational roots of the German crusaders' anti-Jewish violence consisted of a radical reinterpretation of the still fluid doctrine of crusade, whereby Jews, as the enemies of Christendom, became the objects of the holy war and therefore could be slaughtered or, preferably, converted. Such views were a departure from the Church's traditional toleration of Jewish existence within Christendom. More interesting is Chazan's analysis of the Jewish reaction to the assaults. Not only did the Jews passively choose death instead of religious conversion in accordance with halachic and aggadic tradition, but, moved by the intense spirituality characteristic of the period and by innovative interpretation of religious symbols and imagery (the sacrificial system of the Temple; Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac), they actively sought martyrdom in unprecedented fashion, even taking their own lives and those of fellow Jews. Through their extreme and fervent response the Jews displayed their loyalty to the Jewish faith and secured an ultimate triumph out of disaster.