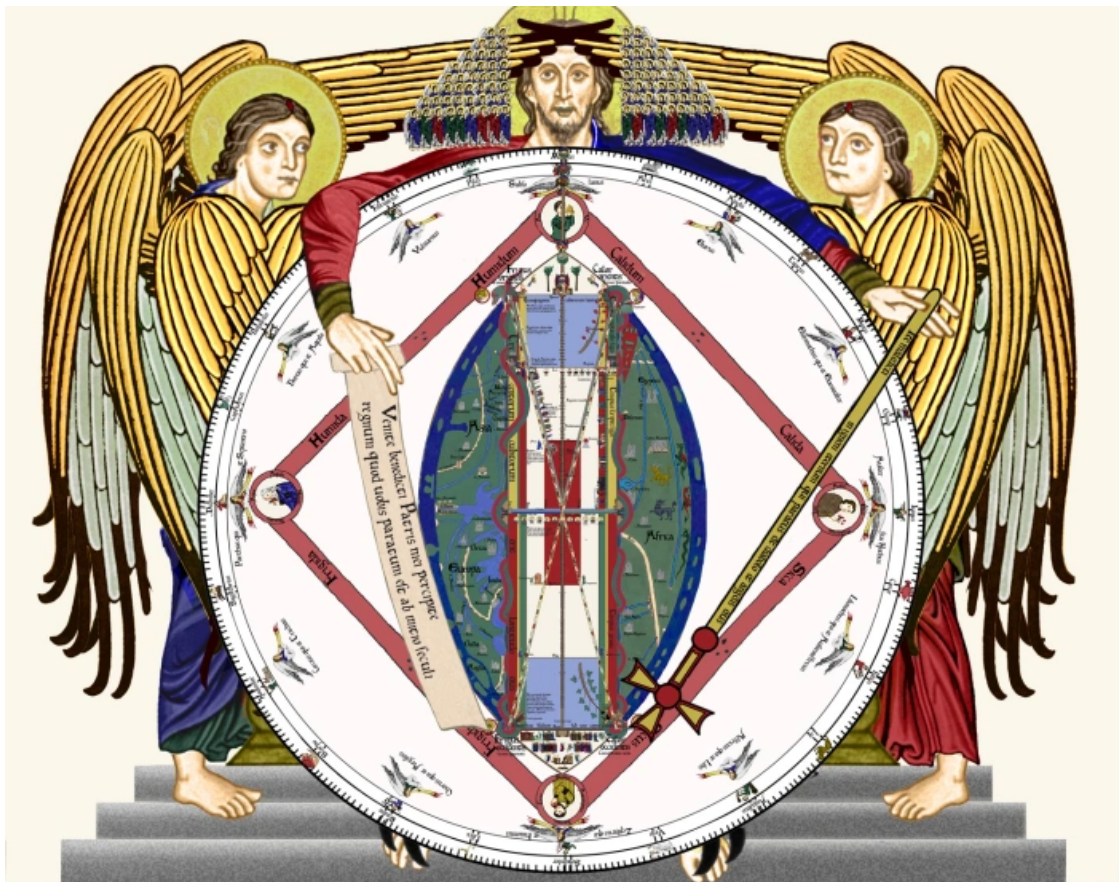


Christian Platonism

Rediscovering Ancient Wisdom

Hugh of St. Victor: Noah's Ark as an Allegory for Contemplation

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Art: (c) Conrad Rudolph

the ark is the secret place of our own heart

IN THE early High Middle Ages, before Scholasticism arose to dominate Christian theology, the Abbey of St. Victor in Paris was a leading intellectual center. Some work performed there built on the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius (translated into Latin two centuries earlier) to develop what we might call a science

of contemplation, laying important groundwork for later Christian mysticism. Allegorical interpretation of Scripture supported this. Hugh of St. Victor's (c. 1096–1141) exegesis of the story of Noah's Ark is an example.

Philo (*Questions and Answers on Genesis* 1.89–2.78) and St. Ambrose (*De Noe et Arca*; PL 14.361–416) had, much earlier, allegorically interpreted the story of Noah and the Ark. In the light of these writings, the story emerges as a far more subtle and relevant myth than people ordinarily suppose. It's very important to attend to specific details — such as the ark was three stories high, had a window and door, and that Noah first sent out a raven.

According to art historian Conrad Rudolph, Hugh lectured on the topic using a large, 10-foot square painting summarizing the symbolism. The figure shown above is Rudolph's reconstruction.

Now the figure of this spiritual building which I am going to present to you is Noah's ark. This your eye shall see outwardly, so that your soul may be fashioned to its likeness inwardly. You will see there certain colours, shapes, and figures which will be pleasant to behold. But you must understand that these are put there, that from them you may learn wisdom, instruction, and virtue, to adorn your soul. ...

The third [ark] is that which wisdom builds daily in our hearts through continual meditation on the law of God. ...

[W]hoever makes it his endeavour to cut himself off from the enjoyment of this world and cultivate the virtues, must with the assistance of God's grace erect within himself a building of virtues three hundred cubits long in faith of Holy Trinity, fifty cubits wide in charity, and thirty cubits high in the hope that is in Christ, a building long in good works and wide in love and lofty in desire, so that his heart may be where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. ...

If, then, we have begun to live persistently in our own heart through the practice of meditation, we have already in a manner ceased to belong to time; and, having become dead as it were to the world, we are living inwardly with God. We shall then easily make light of anything that fortune brings upon us outwardly, if our heart is there fixed where we are not subject to change, where we neither seek to have again things past, nor look for those to come, where we neither desire the pleasant things of this life, nor fear things contrary. Let us therefore have right thoughts, let us have pure and profitable thoughts, for of such material we shall build our ark. These are the timbers that float when they are put into the water and burn when placed in the fire; for the tide of fleshly pleasures does not weigh down such thoughts, but the flame of charity enkindles them. ...

As we have said before, the ark of the flood is the secret place of our own heart, in which we must hide from the tumult of this world. But because the feebleness of our condition itself prevents our staying long in the silence of inward contemplation, we have a way out by the door and window. The door denotes the way out through action, the window the way out through thought. The door is below, the window above, because actions pertain to the body and thoughts to the soul. That is why the birds went out through the window and the beasts and men through the door. ...

But the fact that the door is situated in the side denotes that we must never leave the secret chamber of our heart through our own deliberate choice, but only as necessity may happen to demand. ...

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Now we go out by action in four ways. For some actions are carnal those, that is to say, which are concerned with physical need; others are spiritual, and are concerned with the instruction of the mind. Good men and bad go forth for both. Those who are enslaved to the outward fulfilling of their lusts are like the unclean animals that went forth from the ark. Those, however, who discharge them from necessity are animals indeed, but clean. ...

Eve 'saw that the tree was pleasant to the eyes, and was good for food, and she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat'. Those who in this way issue forth through thought are like the raven which did not return. For when they find outside what gives them evil pleasure, they never want to come back again to the ark of conscience. ...

The other three kinds of contemplation, however, are symbolized by the going forth of the dove who, when she was sent out and found no rest for her foot, returned at evening carrying in her mouth an olive branch in leaf. She went out empty, but she did not return so. For she found outside that which she did not have within, although the thing that she brought in she did not love outside. The olive branch in leaf denotes a good state of soul.

Source: Hugh of St. Victor, *De arca Noe morali*. In: *Hugh of St. Victor: Selected Spiritual Writings*, Translated by a religious of the Community of St. Mary the Virgin, Harper, 1962. [[ebook](#)].

Latin: Hugh of Saint-Victor. *Omnia opera*. *Patrologia Latina*, ed. J. P. Migne, vol. 176. Paris, 1854. Cols. 618–680.

Art: Rudolph, Conrad. *The Mystic Ark: Hugh of Saint Victor, Art, and Thought in the Twelfth Century*. Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Written by John Uebersax

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