

Women of faith 2: Hildegard of Bingen and Inés Esteban

The Rhinebeck Reformed Church
in partnership with the Jewish Federation of Dutchess County
and the Institute of Advanced Theology at Bard College

For millennia, since the time of the foundation of the first cities around 8,000 BCE, women have been relegated to a secondary position. Cities prioritized standing armies of men, male kings considered to be sons of gods, and an understanding of genealogical descent from fathers. Despite that clear bias, women from the biblical period until our time have emerged as the instruments of change, mandated not by society but from a power greater than society. This series will investigate examples of such women, from Miriam (the sister of Moses) to Eleanor Roosevelt.

Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)

Letter to Abbot Adam of Ebrach, Hildegard's account of a voice explaining her vision of a gowned young woman, holding the sun and moon (translation by Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook):

The girl whom you see is Divine
Love, who abides in eternity.
For when God wished to create the world
he bent down in tenderest love
and foresaw every need,
just like a father preparing an inheritance for his son.
In this way he carries out all his works
in a great burning fire of love.
Thus all creatures in every species
and form acknowledge their creator,
because Love was the primal stuff
from which every creature was made.
When God said: "Let it be done," it was done,
because Divine Love was the matrix from which every creature was made,
in the blink of an eye.

Antiphon to Divine Wisdom (translation by Barbara Newman):

O energy of Wisdom! You
circled, circling encompassing all things,
in one path possessed of life.
Three wings you have:
one of them soars on high,
the second exudes from the earth and the third
flutters everywhere.

Inés Esteban (1488-1500)

The testimony of Pero Fernández (translated by Sharon Faye Koren):

This witness was asked, “Who was this Elijah, and for what reason was he coming?”
And she told him the he was to come by God’s command to preach in the world and
the *conversos* were to leave and they were to go to some lands. And this confessant
asked: “What are there in these lands?” And she was told that there were people and
the sustenance of bread and fruit and all the things that they needed.

The testimony of Juan de Segovia (translated by Sharon Faye Koren)

Her mother who was already dead came to her and took her hand and told her not to
be afraid because it was God's will that she ascend to heaven to see the secrets and to
see marvelous things. And in this like manner another young man who had died a few
days before took her other hand, and the angel who was drawing them upward thus
said that they were taking her up to heaven where she would see the souls who were
suffering in purgatory. And in the like manner in another place she would see other
souls in glory seated on chairs of gold. And likewise she told me that there seemed to
be another higher place above her head where there was much murmuring, and that
she asked the angel: “What is that sounding above?” And the angel said to her: “Friend
of God, those who make sounds up there are those who were burned on earth and
now are in glory.”

Bruce Chilton

Bernard Iddings Bell Professor of Philosophy and Religion
Bard College, Annandale, New York