

The Visual Dynamics of the Wheel of Sevens in the *Speculum theologiae*

By: Sam Spears

The Wheel of Sevens in the *Speculum theologiae* was intended to be the object of a particular mode of monastic study. Like any other diagram, the wheel is perhaps primarily a pedagogical or mnemonic tool, which organizes a variety of Christian theological concepts into an easily accessible visual program.¹ Its more profound purpose, however, is not only to group these concepts together but also to suggest the abstract relationships between them. The interpretation of such a diagram was to be a spiritual exercise, whose purpose, paradoxically, would be to free the mind from its reliance on external images.

The wheel consists of seven concentric rings, each divided into seven radial segments. A prose caption beneath the diagram explains the thematic content of each ring: proceeding inward, they contain the text of 1) the seven verses of the Lord's prayer; 2) the seven ecclesiastical sacraments; 3) the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit; 4) the seven spiritual weapons of justice; 5) the seven works of mercy; 6) the seven principal virtues; and 7) the seven criminal vices. An eighth ring, filled not with text but with an elaborate decorative pattern, encloses the central portion of the wheel, empty except for the two lines of verse that constitute the second of the diagram's two captions. A vertical row of crosses, in red at the top of the diagram, indicates the starting point of each line of text in the wheel and forms a seam between the first and the last verses of each text. Five red

¹ Patrice Sicard, *Diagrammes médiévaux et exégèse visuelle: Le Libellus de Formatione Arche de Hugues de Saint-Victor* (Paris, 1993), 155.

“spokes” subdivide the wheel into its radial segments, visually echoing the vertical line of crosses. As with the other diagrams in the *Speculum theologiae*, the color scheme is restricted to red and green and the decoration is kept to a minimum. The aesthetic power of the wheel derives from its austere geometric arrangement of simple visual and conceptual themes.

Viewed as a collection of concentric rings, the wheel offers a hierarchy of concepts that proceeds from the outermost ring to the innermost.² Viewed as a sequence of radial segments, it presents a cyclic continuum, punctuated by the indication of a combined starting- and end-point at the top of the wheel.³ The geometrical logic of the diagram thus unites a principle of hierarchy with a principle of cyclic continuum. These principles correspond to two different ways of reading the diagram. On the one hand, the diagram can be read in a cyclical fashion, beginning at the vertical row of crosses and proceeding along the circumference of each ring. On the other hand, it can be read “radially,” treating each radial segment as a hierarchical progression from the verse of the Lord’s Prayer in the outermost ring to the corresponding criminal vice in the innermost. By virtue of its geometry alone, the wheel suggests a tabular composition that has been twisted into a circular shape, in which “concepts are stratified and aligned, but lack the directional element of the table or the tree.”⁴ It achieves its directional impetus—clockwise around the circumferences, inward along the radii—as a function of the text that it includes.

² Michael Evans, “The Geometry of the Mind,” *Architectural Association Quarterly* 12/4 (1980): 42.

³ Evans, “Geometry of the Mind,” 39.

⁴ Evans, “Geometry of the Mind,” 42.

The impetus that governs the clockwise progression around the circumference of each ring must be distinguished, however, from that which governs the radial progression inward across the rings. In both cases, the momentum of the diagram derives in large part from the need, in Latin, to read from left to right, top to bottom. Within each ring, the phrases proceed naturally from one radial segment to the next segment on the right; within each radial segment, the terms proceed naturally from “top” (outside) to “bottom” (inside) ring. This basic linguistic presupposition contributes a momentum that brings nothing to bear, however, on the conceptual order of the terms in each ring. Though it compels the reader of the wheel to move from pride, in the first radial segment of the innermost ring, to avarice and then to envy, it does not also suggest that envy could not otherwise precede pride or avarice. Ultimately, if the geometric structure of the wheel is to enforce different ways of reading, then it must also enforce different ways of understanding the conceptual relationship between terms.

Two aspects of the wheel suggest that the clockwise or circular impetus of the diagram attains some degree of conceptual weight. The first is the apparently spontaneous emergence, in the final radial segment of each ring, of concepts associated with death and salvation: “deliver[ance],” “we are saved,” “extreme unction,” “the hope of salvation,” “the journey of salvation,” and “we bury the dead.” The prevalence of these concepts corresponds to the place in the diagram where the end of each phrase returns, geometrically, to its beginning: the figurative “death” of each phrase coincides with its rebirth in the continuing momentum of the cycle. At the same time, the association of the completion of the cycle with death expands the linguistic impetus of the diagram into a

chronological impetus, in which the progress of the reader from “left to right” around the circle mirrors the progress of the individual from birth to death. This interpretation implicitly sees the wheel as a circular table: as a diagram that participates in the traditional association of tabular representation with calendrical or chronological data: “every psalter or book of hours had its calendar...and these were set out on a linear grid embellished with decorative arts.”⁵ The circular impetus of the wheel thus draws its strength, obliquely, from the cyclical progression of the seasons and of human or ecclesiastical history. The chronological link between terms thus offers a decisive elaboration on an otherwise merely linguistic link. Pride precedes envy “naturally,” in the same way that winter naturally precedes spring.

This chronological or seasonal progression from one concept to another must be emphatically distinguished from a logically necessary progression, or from a progression based on scientific inference. Its more explicit corollary would be a form of conceptual necessity that relied on the authority of convention: for the purposes of this diagram, the seasons progress not primarily in accordance with scientific law, but because God wills it and because that is the way it is. This suggestion is borne out in the correspondence of the diagram’s chronological or seasonal progression to the progression, in the outermost ring, of the verses of the Lord’s Prayer. These provide the diagram with the second of the two forces that contribute to its circular or clockwise impetus. Though they participate in the linguistic and chronological momentum of the other rings in the diagram, they fundamentally derive their “direction” from the conventional order as established in

⁵ Evans, “Geometry of the Mind,” 39.

Matthew 6:9-14 and Luke 11:2-4. To express these verses in any other sequence would subvert the authority of the Bible.

In sum, the circular impetus of the diagram relies on the intriguing conflation of chronological sequence with the authority of convention (in the Lord's Prayer). The artistic function of the diagram is to project this conflation, through the diagram, into the realm of thought, in such a way that it conditions the relationship between ideas. In its circular progression, the diagram incites its reader to metaphorical or analogical, rather than purely rational, thought, in which the relationship between ideas is compared to the relationship between events in the progress of Christian historical time. To assert, however, that the necessary sequence of the verses of the Lord's Prayer—confined to the outermost ring of the wheel—determines the circular impetus of the diagram as a whole, is to presuppose the hierarchical order that the wheel establishes between its seven rings. It is only by virtue of its hierarchical supremacy that the outermost ring could determine the circular impetus of the six inner rings of the diagram. Thus the full explication of the diagram's circular impetus demands a consideration of the diagram's radial or centripetal impetus as well. Any account of the distinct forces that animate the diagram must recognize the fundamental unity of these forces within the same geometric scheme.

To consider the radial or centripetal impetus of the diagram requires that the reader shift his emphasis away from the tabular aspect of the diagram towards its circular aspect. The primarily arithmetic relationship between the terms in a table—that is, the relationship premised on the arithmetic accumulation of terms into lists, and the comparison of these lists “based on an equivalent number of parts”—is replaced by the

geometric relationship between literally parallel ideas.⁶ Similarly, the concern with the chronological sequence of terms gives way to the concern for their “spatial or conceptual” correspondence. Implicitly, the consideration of the wheel’s radial impetus installs the wheel in a tradition of circular diagrams in which “one or more cut-out circles, called volvelles, were attached to the page of a manuscript by a thread of membrane, and could be rotated as a kind of calculating machine.”⁷ The centripetal impetus of the diagram fixes the rings of the Wheel of Sevens in place, in an eternally correct “calculation.” The immobility of the terms in each radial segment implies that their association is not the arbitrary result of a contingent configuration of rotating rings. Rather, their conceptual correspondence is guaranteed by the hierarchical progression from the outermost ring inward.

Understood as a primarily hierarchical diagram, the wheel offers a protracted gloss of the Lord’s Prayer, with the inner rings of each radial segment contributing the example from their own lists of seven concepts that best corresponds to the stated verse of the prayer in the outer ring. The verses in the outer ring become conceptual categories within which a variety of different concepts—drawn from the ecclesiastical sacraments, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the virtues, the vices, etc.—are unified. At the same time, the unity of each radial segment takes for granted some process of interpretation that renders the geometric parallelism of the concepts, their correspondence to the verse in the outer ring, authoritative. The concepts in the inner rings are presented both as the analytical consequences of the verses in the outer rings—the virtue “fortitude,” for example, is

⁶ Evans, “Geometry of the Mind,” 39.

⁷ Evans, “Geometry of the Mind,” 42.

somehow already implicated in the verse, “May his kingdom come” in which “we request to be inheritors of the kingdom”—and as synthetic elaborations on the meaning of these verses. This method of interpretation paradoxically combines the refinement of the meaning of each verse with its conceptual expansion. To some degree, it is anticipated by the inclusion within the outer ring of the brief explication that complements each of the verses of the Lord’s Prayer.

The interpretative pattern implied in each radial segment—which reveals the coexistence of similarity and dissimilarity between the terms that it relates—is reinforced by the repetition, at the beginning of each segment of each ring, of the appropriate scholastic conjunction: *hic* (here, in this verse), *et* (and), *sic* (thus), and *ita* (therefore). These conjunctions invest the inward progression of the radial segments with the appearance of logical necessity, in the absence of any purely logical relationship between the rings. Their subversive effect is to reduce logical necessity to a merely rhetorical effect, and to promote the visual parallelism between the terms in the radial segment as the more purely “dialectical” relationship. They suggest, furthermore, that the merely rational relationship between ideas gives way before the profoundly moral and religious significance of the diagram, whose ultimate purpose is to instruct its reader—“the wise man”—in the exercise of the Christian faith. Though they provide a linguistic (grammatical) glue between the parallel rings, in doing so they undermine their own essential function, which should be to indicate the conceptual rather than linguistic relationships. Though “logical” thought might pertain, in this diagram, to the linguistic connection between terms, the conceptual relationship between the moral concepts and

religious practices that the diagram aligns derives from the correct assertion of the meaning of the Lord's Prayer.

The geometric composition of the diagram thus implies a variety of different ways of reading it. As a result, it connects the diagram to a tradition of medieval visual exegesis that distinguishes rigorously—if not always consistently—between the different modes of understanding of a religious diagram. Operating in this tradition, Hugh of St. Victor distinguishes between the processes of *lectio*, *meditatio*, and *contemplatio*. This trilogy assumes a great variety of forms within Hugh of St. Victor's work, but at base the three processes are inextricably intertwined and pragmatically inseparable from one another.⁸ *Lectio* can be either “historical” or “spiritual” depending on the context in which it occurs.⁹ *Lectio historica* describes a process of reading that compels itself to follow the chronological sequence of events or terms (*historia ordinem temporis sequitur*), in which the eye follows “a line on which are presented the events of the history of spiritual salvation according to their chronological order.”¹⁰ By contrast, “allegorical” or “typological” *lectio* describes a process in which “the progression marks not the succession in time, but the [hierarchical] advance towards a higher value.”¹¹ Compared to both styles of *lectio*, *meditatio* is characterized by a greater liberty to treat widely separate concepts in relation to one another. It comes closer to accessing the truth that *lectio* sets out to discover.¹² The crucial difference between *lectio* and *meditatio*,

⁸ Sicard, *Exégèse*, 196.

⁹ Sicard, *Exégèse*, 195.

¹⁰ Sicard, *Exégèse*, 206.

¹¹ Sicard, *Exégèse*, 207.

¹² Sicard, *Exégèse*, 194.

however, is that where *lectio* applies itself directly to the image, *meditatio* aims at the construction of an “internal edifice” within the reader. It suggests the process whereby the reader “appropriates and internalizes” the historical, allegorical, or typological dynamics that the diagram sets in motion, adopting the “mystical body” of the diagram as his own. To the extent that the diagram avoids being only an intellectual scaffold on which rational ideas and their relationships are displayed, it must galvanize in its reader the very process of moral edification whose stages it spells out.¹³

The Wheel of Sevens invites the application of *lectio historica* to its rings, and of “spiritual” *lectio* to its radial segments. These forms of reading provide the diagram with its clockwise and its centripetal impetuses. By definition, it becomes more difficult to assert the particular type of *meditatio* that the wheel inspires: *meditatio* relies in part on the individual way in which the diagram is received. Nevertheless, the diagram inspires *meditatio* to the extent that its composition determines not only the sequence of its terms, but also the conceptual relationship between them: that is, to the extent that the process of *lectio* assumes a metaphorical significance, a significance that extends beyond the visible boundaries of the diagram. The circular impetus of the diagram not only gestures to the possibility of a chronological or “seasonal” relationship between concepts, but also equates this chronological progression to man’s progression through the stages of his life. The central key to the diagram suggests that a similar analogy is at work in the radial impetus of the diagram: “propelled through the six supernal regions, the wise man juts forth.” Similarly, the radial impetus implies a process of “interpretation” of the Lord’s

¹³ Sicard, *Exégèse*, 213.

Prayer that gestures towards the virtuous introspection—meditation—of the wise man. To some degree, the self-subversion of the scholastic terminology in each radial segment acknowledges the problematic relationship between purely rational thought and human moral improvement. Reason functions to educate man in moral virtue, but this function secondary to the appropriation and internalization of a hierarchy of moral rules—and then to the active through the hierarchy. When the circular and the radial impetuses of the diagram are meditated on in their unity, they suggest the analogy between man’s chronological journey through life, and man’s spiritual edification to virtue.

Hugh of St. Victor’s tripartite formulation can be contrasted to St. Bernard’s distinction between three modes of “spiritual ascent,” a distinction that Bernard formulates with reference not to visual exegesis but to the spiritual relevance of art. “Directive” spiritual ascent describes the synthetic approach that “usefully and bravely employs the senses” by constructing and limiting that which is perceived; “estimative” ascent describes the scientific approach that “uses the senses, but in a philosophical way, to investigate everything”; the “speculative” approach “rejects objects and the senses as much as is humanly possible in its flying in contemplation to the sublime.”¹⁴ Bernard agrees with Hugh of St. Victor that the “speculative” or “contemplative” mode of thought is the spiritually most advanced. Bernard suggests, however, that though art can be useful in fostering directive and estimative spiritual ascent, it falls short where speculation is concerned. Art encourages a preoccupation with the senses and with the external objects that inhibit pure contemplative thought. For Hugh of St. Victor, *contemplatio* is, rather,

¹⁴ Conrad Rudolph, *Things of Greater Importance: Bernard of Clairvaux’s Apologia and the Medieval Attitude Toward Art* (Philadelphia, 1990), 116.

the consummation of the process of visual exegesis, to which both *lectio* and *meditatio* converge (*quasi quodam precedentium fructu*).¹⁵ Where St. Bernard limits the spiritual function of art, Hugh of St. Victor asserts the paradox that visual diagrams provide the spiritual means to transcend the visible.

The precise nature of the *contemplatio* that the reader of the Wheel of Sevens achieves is by definition not possible to describe or represent. Hugh of St. Victor can only advise his reader, in *De vanitate*, to “establish yourself as though in a sort of spiritual observatory, and direct your gaze, while sweeping aside all the distractions of this world, in such a way that, directly before you, this world emerges to offer itself to your contemplation.”¹⁶ The persistent paradox associated with *contemplatio* is that it simultaneously involves the renunciation of the totality of all things, and the profound perception or experience of this totality. In his numerous characterizations of the contemplative experience, Hugh of St. Victor draws on the tradition, through Gregory the Great and Saint Benedict, of a “cosmic vision.”¹⁷ The vision of the contemplative man comes to participate, however briefly, in the divine gaze on the universe.¹⁸ For the contemplative man to propel himself towards God, however, is simultaneously for man to return to his true self.¹⁹

The persistent references, in the Wheel of Sevens, to “transport” and “salvation” thus acquire, through *contemplatio*, an additional layer of significance. They come to

¹⁵ Sicard, *Exégèse*, 195.

¹⁶ Sicard, *Exégèse*, 236.

¹⁷ Sicard, *Exégèse*, 238.

¹⁸ Sicard, *Exégèse*, 197.

¹⁹ Sicard, *Exégèse*, 237.

propose not only the salvation “through” the cyclical impetus of the wheel, or through its “six supernal regions,” but also, at the same time, the salvation “from” the visual dynamics of the wheel. To “contemplate” the Wheel of Sevens would be to renounce it totally, and thereby to apprehend it in its totality. In particular, it would place the Wheel in the tradition of cosmological diagrams, in which it participates by virtue of its circular shape. If the wheel offers in part, however, a vision of the universe, then it also offers primarily a map of the moral virtues. In his progress through *lectio* and *meditatio* to *contemplatio*, the reader of the wheel internalizes and applies the instruction in virtue that the wheel organizes and contains. The diagram offers the promise of salvation through contemplation, a promise which recognizes the continuum between the virtuous individual and God.