THE PREACHING OF JOHN THE BAPTIST:
HERRI MET DE BLES’S VISUAL EXEGESIS AND EXPANDED TYPOLOGY

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The abundant and inventive visual analogies in the Typologishe tafelen uit het leven van Jezus and the various editions of the Speculum Salvationis demonstrate the important role of the image as exegesis in Netherlandish culture of the early modern period, with a strong and fundamental emphasis placed on the exegetical process of typology. They also remind us that typology is basically a formal comparison, a mode of thought that found in the visual arts its natural terrain. Erich Auerbach and several authors after him have stressed the material and visual dimensions of typology, the etymology of which – *typos* or *figura* – refers to the act of shaping or making. The formal composition, a simple detail, a character, or a building strongly suggest the link between the shadow and its fulfillment: the anthropomorphic door of Sodom in flame announces the Boca Inferna from which Christ pulls souls of the deceased; the soldiers prostrating themselves before Ezekiel anticipate the three Magi in front of the child Jesus; Hur sitting on a bench and spat upon by a circle of executioners prefigures the humiliated Christ of the Passion; Prince Achior tied to a tree by the servant of Holophernes announces Christ scourged against the column. Typology in these images is often implemented by formal analogies that do not exist in the text, but rather, challenge us to

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discern typological relationships in ways that words cannot.\textsuperscript{3} This model of explicit juxtaposition, common in engravings and illustrated books and also present in important stained glass windows, appears less frequently in paintings. Lucas Gassel's *Landscape with Christ Healing the Blind Man of Jericho*, for instance, shows in the far distance the tiny (pre)figure of Tobias carrying the miraculous fish that will cure his blind father.\textsuperscript{4} A more developed example is Gassel's version of the *Allegory of the Law and the Gospel* (after Cranach and Holbein),\textsuperscript{5} where the fundamentally typological figure of John the Baptist connects Elijah (the prophet who prefigures John) and Christ (whom John himself prefigures). An analogy connects John the Baptist, as a threshold figure, with the tree (dessicated on the side of the Law and alive on the side of the Gospel), which is the central axis from where a series of well known typological analogies issues. Herri met de Bles's landscapes also show examples of visual typology, especially in his various *Landscapes with the Sermon of John the Baptist*.\textsuperscript{6} The typology here is less explicit, and at the same time, it takes a more subtle and

\textsuperscript{3} Sixteenth century theologians already underlined this specifically visual dimension of the typology; see, for example, William Tyndale, “A Prologue to the Book of Leviticus”, in Tyndale (ed. – trans.), *The Five Books of Moses* (Antwerp, Merten de Keyser: 1530) 60, as quoted in Eck C. van, *Classical Rhetoric and the Visual Arts in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: 2007) 175.

