BIBLICAL CYCLES ON CHURCH WALLS:
PRO LECTIONE PICTURA

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Saint Augustine writes in his De consensu evangelistarum that they who have sought Christ and his apostles not in sacred books but in pictures on walls, thoroughly deserve to err.1 Elsewhere he states: "When you see a picture there is nothing else to do but to see and to praise".2 Gregory of Tours gives an example of people who did no more than just see. In his Historia Francorum (591), he tells that a certain Eberulf, accused of murder, had sought refuge in the sacristy of Saint Martins’s church in Tours; his servants forced their way into the church through the sacristy and gaped at the frescoes on the walls.3 Nine years after the completion of the book of Gregory, his namesake pope Gregory I wrote that pictures in churches did have a useful function: pro lectione pictura est, pictures are the books of the illiterate.4 In accordance with this statement one can speak of the 'pedagogical-didactical' function of pictures. In this paper I will work out—on the basis of classical and Early Christian texts—how images can or cannot instruct the viewer.

Pictures as books

Gregory of Nyssa (c.334-394) refers to a certain series of pictures illustrating the martyrdom of Saint Theodore. He mentions a double function of these pictures:

All of these he [the painter] wrought by means of colors as if it were a book that uttered speech, and so he both represented the martyr's feats with all clarity and adorned the church like a beautiful meadow; for

2 In Iohannem, tractatus XXIV, 2. Translation: Chazelle, op. cit., p. 146.
painting, even if it is silent, is capable of speaking from the wall and being of the greatest benefit.\(^5\)

What Gregory says here is also applicable to biblical cycles on church walls.

First, he points at the decorative function of the pictures: the church was adorned like a beautiful meadow. Several Early Christian, Byzantine and medieval texts indicate what was experienced as striking: light and color, variety, lively figures. These recurring characterizations no doubt tell us what a decoration was supposed to look like, but may also say something about what the decorations actually looked like, or how they were perceived.\(^6\)

The second notable thing is that Gregory compares the pictures with words or books: painting is like a book that utters speech. This aspect I will work out: images as books. In the first place, it is worth noting that Gregory of Nyssa is not the only writer who lets the silent painting speak from the wall. For Basil (c.330-379), “what the sermon shows of the story through hearing, the silent picture puts before the eyes by imitation”.\(^7\) The concept of painting as silent poetry, and, inversely, of poetry as a speaking painting, has already been formulated by the Greek poet Simonides (c. 556-468).\(^8\) Also Horace’s *ut pictura poesis* represents the same concept.\(^9\)

Although word and image were paralleled, they were not considered to be equivalents. On the one hand, literature stands above visual art, because the written word does not stop at the outward appearance, as the arts of painting and of sculpture do. But on the other hand, seeing transcends hearing, because the eye is more reliable than the ear,\(^10\) and the observation through the eye is more

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\(^8\) Lange, op. cit., p. 16.

\(^9\) Horace, *Ars Poetica*, 361. See for a history of this idea C.O. Brink’s commentary ad loc.