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Text, Text, and Image in Prudentius' Tituli Historiarum[*]

The subject of this paper is a problem concerning the interpretation of Prudentius' Tituli Historiarum – poems consisting of four hexametric lines each that accompany (or at least pretend to accompany) pictorial representations of biblical scenes. The problem may not readily be noticed by modern readers, but must have appeared all the more striking in the historical context of late antiquity. To modern eyes there is nothing problematic if an image is accompanied by a few words. After all, we are well accustomed nowadays to this sort of commentary on images: from museums, for one thing, whose curators ever more commonly endeavour to aid the visitors' understanding of the works of art they exhibit by plaques that explain and interpret them; and also from our own scholarly work, whose goal it commonly is to provide interpretations of a similar sort, if not always of similar brevity. Both these practices are the result of the fact that since at least the eighteenth century hermeneutics and the assumption that the prime task of those who engage a work of art is to interpret it has become the default way by which artistic productions both of the past and of the present are approached.[1]

Nonetheless, to ancient eyes Prudentius' Tituli must have seemed nothing short of peculiar. Two observations will make this clear, both of which concern the relationship between Prudentius' Tituli on the one hand, and the more mainstream tradition of texts accompanying (or pretending to accompany) works of art on the other.

1. On the one hand, it is of course in keeping with ancient conventions to react to pictures with short epigrams – however, neither do Prudentius' Tituli conform metrically to those conventional epigrams nor, more importantly, do

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[1] For the development and history of hermeneutics see especially H.-G. Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik, Tübingen [6]1990, 9–269.

those epigrams share the focus of Prudentius' Tituli, which is on the content of the art-work at hand. The purpose of ancient epigrams accompanying artwork is, in the words of Irmgard Männlein-Robert, to capture „die Situation, in der ein Kunstwerk optisch und ästhetisch wahrgenommen wird, ausschnitthaft und wie in einer kleinen dramatischen Szene".[2] The aesthetic experience is foregrounded, along with a few features of the artwork with an especially large impact on the experience of the viewer, such as the material from which it was made, the technical achievements of its creator, or even the circumstances of its dedication with the name of the donor and the expenses borne.[3] Information of this sort is often highlighted in such epigrams through the employment of pointed witticism.

But as parallels to Prudentius' Tituli these epigrams will hardly do. In the first place, the Tituli invariably describe the content of images (whether real or fictional), while in conventional ancient epigrams on works of art descriptions of the content of an image are either completely absent or pushed firmly into the background. There is a whole series of conventional epigrams of this sort that fail to provide any information at all about the content of the representation at hand.[4] And in the second place, only in very rare and exceptional cases does Prudentius share the traditional epigram's concern to evoke the environment in which the artwork was appreciated, the material from which the images were constructed, the quality of the artist, still less the donor of the work and any expenses he has borne.[5] Indeed, some of the epigrams present mere narratives without indicating at all how, by whom, or for what purpose, the events narrated are represented on the artwork (e. g. 137–140)[6] – so marked is

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[2]   I. Männlein-Robert, Stimme, Schrift und Bild. Zum Verhältnis der Künste in der hellenistischen Dichtung, Heidelberg 2007, 38.

[3]   The literature on the ancient epigram in general, as well as that on epigrams connected to artworks, has grown at an astonishing rate, especially since the publication of the new Poseidippus papyrus. The presentation of the material with bibliography by Männlein-Robert (above n. 2), 37–120, is outstanding.

[4]   For an explanation of this phenomenon, see A. Petrovic, „Kunstvolle Stimme der Steine sprich!" Zur Intermedialität der griechischen epideiktischen Epigramme, A&A 51 (2005), 30–42.

[5]   One could point to tit. 77 (*regia mirifici fulgent insignia David*) and argue that Prudentius is playing on the brilliance of the artwork. But artistic technique plays almost no roll anywhere else in the epigram, and it is more probable that the brilliance of the royal *insignia* is a result of David's virtue, and not of the consummate craftsmanship of the artist.

[6]   *It mare per medium dominus fluctusque liquentes / calce terens iubet instabili descendere cumba / discipulum, sed mortalis trepidatio plantas / mergit at ille manum regit et vestigia firmat.*

the foregrounding in Prudentius' work of the images' biblical content at the expense of their material and artistic qualities.

2. On the other hand, there were texts in the ancient world whose aim it was, in contrast to the epigram, to describe the content of works of art. Such descriptions of images are known as ekphraseis. But these ekphrastic descriptions are usually much longer than Prudentius' epigrammatically concise quatrains. Even though works of representational art were explicitly identified as subjects of ekphrastic texts only very late (by the rhetorician Nikolaos Sophistes in the fifth century AD), artistic descriptions had long been subjected to the same fundamental rules that ancient rhetoricians had established for the category of all ekphrastic description in general. The goal was always to set the object described as clearly and vividly as possible before the eyes of the reader (ἐνάργεια).[7] In order to achieve this goal, it was essential (in the ancient rhetoricians' view) to go into detail about an object, and because of this it was also essential in most cases to extend the description to an appropriate length. Ekphrastic descriptions of images in the ancient world are extensive and elaborate, not short and pointed like epigrams – such brevity would have contravened the generic norms of ancient exphrasis.[8] In addition, since the time of the Second Sophistic at the latest, the composition of a discourse using all of the means available to descriptive rhetoric was considered a suitable response to an awe-inspiring work of art, as Lucian for example puts it at the beginning of his De Domo.[9] The more highly wrought the rhetorical response to an artwork is, the more strongly does it attest to the quality and value that the work of art possesses in the eyes of the rhetorician and that it should possess in the eyes of his audience; quite naturally, then, such rhetorical responses had a

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[7]   On the history of ἐνάργεια as an aesthetic criterion, see G. Zanker, Enargeia in the Ancient Criticism of Poetry, RhM 124 (1981), 297–311, and on the history of ancient definitions of ekphrasis see R. Webb, Ekphrasis Ancient and Modern. The Invention of a Genre, Word & Image 15 (1999), 7–18.

[8]   It is therefore wrong to characterize ancient epigrams connected to artworks as ekphrastic, as is sometimes done. In terms of ancient categories, they are definitely not ekphrastic. Männlein-Robert (above n. 2), 38, correctly indicates the difference.

[9]   Οἶκον δέ τις ἰδὼν μεγέθει μέγιστον καὶ κάλλει κάλλιστον καὶ φωτὶ φαιδρότατον καὶ χρυσῷ στιλπνότατον καὶ γραφαῖς ἀνθηρότατον οὐκ ἂν ἐπιθυμήσειε λόγους ἐν αὐτῷ διαθέσθαι, εἰ τύχοι περὶ τούτους διατρίβων, καὶ ἐνευδοκιμῆσαι καὶ ἐλλαμπρύνασθαι καὶ βοῆς ἐμπλῆσαι καὶ ὡς ἔνι μάλιστα καὶ αὐτὸς μέρος τοῦ κάλλους αὐτοῦ γενέσθαι … ("Then can it be that on seeing a hall beyond compare in the greatness of its size, the splendour of its beauty, the brilliance of its illumination, the lustre of its gilding and the gaiety of its pictures, a man would not long to compose speeches in it, if this were his business, to seek repute and win glory in it, to fill it with his voice and, as far as lay in him, to become part and parcel of its beauty?"; English translation by A. M. Harmon, Lucianus, vol. 1, Cambridge 1913 [repr. 2000], 177).

certain tendency toward lengthiness. That the narrator of Longus' Daphnis and Chloe finds himself inspired to write a novel after seeing a painting is entirely normal in such a context.

Meager quatrains though, such as Prudentius' Tituli, do not of course fulfil expectations of this sort at all. Leaving aside entirely the point that the detailed description of an image in four short lines is not even possible, neither the quality of the artwork, and still less the authorial ability of the rhetorician doing the describing, can be put on display in such limited space. Thus, ancient ekphrastic descriptions fare no better as parallels to Prudentius' Tituli than do conventional ancient epigrams accompanying works of art.

One could object against assessing Prudentius' epigrams on biblical subjects in light of the conventions of ancient rhetoric that Christian writers did not always share the pagans' enthusiasm for the use of rhetoric. Augustine, for instance, argues in the last book of his De Doctrina Christiana, that the middle style (in which many pagan exphraseis are written) often aims merely at – to use a modern term – the self-promotion of the speaker, and should therefore be rejected (4, 25, 55).[10]

Such considerations, however, do nothing to reduce the significance and influence of the traditional conventions of ancient rhetoric; on the contrary, the fact that someone like Augustine discusses and takes issue with them is a testament to their enduring power. It is therefore no surprise that despite such misgivings Christian authors, and among them in particular Prudentius, did not allow themselves to be prevented from composing descriptions of images thoroughly imbued with the principles of ancient rhetoric. For one thing, Augustine had himself left open a possible escape-route from his interdiction: that is, he explained that the middle style, if only it had some goal other than the self-praise of the speaker, was entirely justifiable. And for another, Prudentius himself gladly took advantage of this back-door route, as for example in Peristephanon 9, where the warden of the shrine dedicated to St. Cassian presents to the poet a long and rhetorically elaborate description of the picture of the martyr that can be seen there. Michael Roberts has demonstrated how this

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[10] *Illud vero quod agitur genere temperato, id est, ut eloquentia ipsa delectet, non est propter se ipsum usurpandum, sed ut rebus quae utiliter honesteque dicuntur, si nec docente indigent eloquio nec movente, quia et scientes et faventes auditores habent, aliquanto promptius ex delectatione ipsa elocutionis accedat vel tenacius adhaerescat adsensus…. Persuadet in genere temperato pulchre ornateque se dicere. Quo fine nobis quid opus est? Appetant eum qui lingua gloriantur et se in panegyricis talibusque dictionibus iactent, ubi nec docendus nec ad aliquid agendum movendus, sed tantummodo est delectandus auditor.* – See M. Roberts, Poetry and the Cult of Martyrs. The Liber Peristephanon of Prudentius, Ann Arbor 1993, 125–131.

poem, along with many of the others in the Peristephanon, is indebted to the ancient tradition of rhetorical ekphrasis.[11]

Once such continuities have been noticed, it is not surprising that there are one or two points of contact between Prudentius' Tituli on the one hand, and the pagan tradition of rhetorical and epigrammatic interaction with works of representational art on the other. First of all, as far as the tendency of the rhetoricians to react to images in detail and at length is concerned, there are echoes of this already in Prudentius' first Titulus (1–4).[12] The quatrain's sequence of tenses, often remarked upon – initially the past, then in the last verse the present – distinguishes the subjects of the description, and it is as if Prudentius were providing in the first three lines the setting for what is described in the last line. It is, that is, as if Prudentius were allocating a more detailed treatment to the subject of the last lines (naturally taking into consideration the biblical model). And secondly, as far as the epigrammatic tendency to create short and sharp rhetorical points is concerned, there are also echoes of this in Prudentius' Tituli. So for example the epigram that narrates Moses' parting of the Red Sea (33–36)[13] ends with a pointed line that contrasts, in a rhetorically attractive manner, the open road in front of Moses with the fate of the Pharaoh. Nevertheless, in both cases, those echoes are only echoes, not real correspondences. It is, first off, a long way from the four lines on the fall worked up by Prudentius to the novel that Longus was inspired to write by the image described at the beginning of his work. And secondly, it is an even longer way from the modest point which caps Prudentius' epigram on the parting of the Red Sea, to the complex series of points with which the epigrams on Myron's cow (Anth. Pal. 9, 713–742 and 793–798),[14] for instance, throw light on the realism of the animal being represented. There is already a big difference in that the epigrams on Myron's cow never refer to its realism explicitly, preferring only to allude to it, while Prudentius' epigram is more explicit about its biblical material. One has then the impression that such echoes of the pagan tradition rather emphasize the peculiarity of Prudentius' text by contrast, than that they will do as explanatory aids to the Tituli.

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[11]   Roberts, Poetry and the Cult (above n. 10), especially 148–167.

[12]   *Eva columba fuit tunc candida, nigra deinde / facta per anguinum malesuada fraude venenum / tinxit et innocuum maculis sordentibus Adam; / dat nudis ficulna draco mox tegmina victor.*

[13]   *Tutus agit vir iustus iter vel per mare magnum. / Ecce Dei famulis scissim freta rubra dehiscunt, / cum peccatores rabidos eadem freta mergant: / obruitur Farao, patuit via libera Moysi.*

[14]   See recent discussion by S. Goldhill, What is Ecphrasis For? CPh 102 (2007), 1–19 (esp. 15–19).

Thus, Prudentius' Tituli may well seem odd to readers accustomed to the conventions of ancient ekphrasis and epigram: they are not conventional epigrams (since they describe the contents of images); but nor are they traditional ekphrases (not being detailed enough). They must have struck the contemporary reader as a category error.

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And yet there are good reasons why Prudentius' Tituli Historiarum are as they are. In the following pages, it will be argued that the peculiarities of Prudentius' Tituli can be explained by their biblical content and by the fact that with the biblical text a new, hitherto unknown factor modified a form of comparison that up to that point had consisted only of an image and a text composed with that image in mind. In order to prepare the way for this thesis, it is first of all necessary to confront three alternative explanations, all to some extent related to one another, and to point out their inadequacies.

1. It seems hardly possible in an ancient context to explain the peculiarities of the Tituli by saying (in analogy, as it were, to the plaques put up in modern museums that were mentioned at the beginning of this paper) that their intention is to offer interpretative explanations of the images at hand. One must, in other words, exercise the utmost caution to avoid the danger of imposing from modern criticism of art, familiar to us from our own work or from modern museums, a hermeneutic approach to art onto the period of late antiquity. For it should not be inferred from what has been said up to this point about the ancient tradition of texts reacting to works of representational art that the goal of such texts is the elucidation or indeed the interpretation of such works for the ignorant or confused reader. To the modern scholar in the Humanities, whose research is dedicated mainly to the explanation of art – whether representational art or texts – through interpretation, it might understandably appear as if art always provoked this kind of reaction. And something similar might be said about the broader public in the modern age, whose experience of art is conditioned by the work of professional critics.[15] But the ancients saw things in a fundamentally different way. There are indeed extant passages that appear to indicate that the ancients too approached artworks with hermeneutical preoccupations. To the mind of most students of ancient literature may come a famous

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[15] This approach has been the object of increasing criticism in recent times. Cf. for example H. U. Gumbrecht, Production of Presence. What Meaning Cannot Convey, Stanford 2004, and A. Nehamas, Only a Promise of Happiness. The Place of Beauty in a World of Art, Princeton 2007.

passage in Pindar's Second Olympian Ode (2, 83–88),[16] where he seems to be saying that, while only an enlightened few are capable of understanding his poetry on their own, the great mass of men require interpreters to this end. The parallel with modern practices is particularly seductive here, since the word that Pindar uses for the interpreters (ἑρμανέων) is the linguistic ancestor of the modern word hermeneutics and might be taken to be its conceptual ancestor as well. However, that is not the right way to understand Pindar's passage, for his ἑρμανέων means something different from modern hermeneutics.[17] It must first of all be borne in mind that Pindar is here not setting up any dichotomy between the ignorant masses and an enlightened few. Secondly, and more importantly, Pindar is not at all sanctioning hermeneutical commentators in the modern mould, but expressing the wish that certain thoughts (the arrows of his metaphor) find poets that express them loudly and clearly and make them known to a listening audience. The modern scholar may feel flattered when a poet's work provides confirmation of an interpretation he has offered as a professional hermeneutic practitioner; but in this passage Pindar provides no such validation.

This finding can be generalized for the classical world as a whole, since ancient commentators rarely ever approached art and literature in a way that resembles modern hermeneutics.[18] Indeed, hermeneutic interpretation only achieved its contemporary status as the dominant approach to literary texts and other forms of artwork in the Enlightenment and in the Romantic period. This is not to say that there were not occasional exceptions or that antiquity was completely lacking in interpretive strategies that are comparable to hermeneutics. In general, though, ancient interactions with art depended on premises drawn not from hermeneutics, but were predicated instead upon the principles of rhetoric and allegory. Indeed, a rhetorician would prefer to write a speech that c o m p e t e d for brilliance and skill with a work of art, as Lucian does in his De Domo, and in most other cases allegory was a more attractive mode of expression than a hermeneutic approach. And the difference between herme-

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[16] Πολλά μοι ὑπ' / ἀγκῶνος ὠκέα βέλη / ἔνδον ἐντὶ φαρέτρας / φωνάεντα συνετοῖσιν· ἐς δὲ τὸ πὰν ἑρμανέων / χατίζει. σοφὸς ὁ πολλὰ εἰδὼς φυᾷ· / μαθόντες δὲ λάβροι / παγγλωσ-σίᾳ κόρακες ὣς ἄκραντα γαρύετον / Διὸς πρὸς ὄρνιχα θεῖον. ("I have many swift arrows under my arm in my quiver that speak to those with understanding, and they thoroughly crave oracular announcers. Wise is that announcer who knows many things by nature; but those who have only learned speak out futilities like many-tongued vociferous crows in comparison to the divine bird of Zeus"; English translation by G. W. Most, Pindar, O. 2.83–90, CQ 36 [1986], 304–316 [316]).

[17] See Most, Pindar (above n. 16).

[18] G. W. Most, Rhetorik und Hermeneutik. Zur Konstitution der Neuzeitlichkeit, A&A 30 (1984), 62–79.

neutic interpretation on the one hand and allegory and rhetoric on the other can be discerned in the way that as the former was on the rise, the latter went out of fashion or were even condemned.

This is also and especially the case when it comes to texts that engage with works of representational art. It might be claimed that it is texts of this very sort, especially those composed in late antiquity, which are particularly problematic for Most's hypothesis. Extant from this period is a whole series of texts in which not only are works of art described, but are also 'elucidated', as is often said, by an exegetical commentator. Works to be recalled in this context include the little-known *Tabula Cebetis*, the gallery scene in Petronius' Satyricon (83–90), the beginning of Longus' Daphnis and Chloe, the beginning of Achilles Tatius' Leukippe and Clitophon, Pseudo-Lucian's Amores, and the description of Kairos in the Imagines of Callistratus. Philostratus' Imagines is closely related to these texts. And yet the function of such commentators is not at all exegetical in the modern, hermeneutic sense. In the *Tabula Cebetis* the commentator engages with the image not in order to explain it, but in order to put at the disposal of his interlocutor (and therefore also of the reader of the text) guidelines for a better life.[19] The same is true of the gallery scene in Petronius, which is no explanatory caption in the modern sense but shifts into a moralizing indictment of greed and its contribution to the decline of the arts. In Pseudo-Lucian's Amores the contemplation of Praxiteles' statue of Venus leads to a debate about the advantages and disadvantages of adult heterosexuality and pederasty. The inclination of such 'explanatory' glosses is, then, not hermeneutical in the modern sense, but m o r a l i s i n g. In rhetorical works the outcome is different: Longus, for instance, as well as Achilles Tatius construct entire novels out of images described at the beginning, and something similar is true of Callistratus' description of Kairos. But even rhetorical approaches of this sort, which clothe themselves to a certain extent in moralizing outer-garments, are impossible to equate with modern scholarly elucidations of images. What is happening here is rather a case of rhetorical rivalry with an image, as is found in Lucian's De Domo.

Against this backdrop it is not surprising that even in those of Prudentius' poems that engage with representational artworks, explanations of the relevant images are not given a prominent place. Firstly, though Prudentius situates his

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[19]   See the excellent discussions of the Tabula from this perspective by A. Rouselle, Images as Education in the Roman Empire (Second-Third Centuries AD), in: Y. L. Too (ed.), Education in Greek and Roman Antiquity, Leiden 2001, 373–403, here 389–391, and L. Koch, Der Weg zur Bildung. Die Tabula Cebetis aus pädagogischer Sicht, in: R. Hirsch-Luipold et al. (edd.), Die Bildtafel des Kebes. Allegorie des Lebens, Darmstadt 2005, 194–221.

poem on St. Cassian in the tradition of apparently exegetical texts mentioned above, here too the warden of the shrine provides no explanations in the modern sense, but a rhetorical elaboration along ancient lines of what is represented[20] – very similar to what Prudentius has already done in his poem on St. Hippolytus.[21]

Secondly, it is improbable that the late antique Tituli, and not just those of Prudentius, served a purpose that was hermeneutical in the modern sense. As it happens an ancient description of the function that *tituli* such as those of Prudentius might have fulfilled is extant in the work of Paulinus of Nola. In carm. 27, Paulinus writes that the purpose of the titles with which he has furnished the series of pictures in his local church at Nola was *ut littera monstret / quod manus explicuit*.[22] If one follows the Latin of the passage closely, it must be concluded that here it is the pictures that explain something (for *explicare* in this sense cf. OLD s. v. 7 and 8); and that already is an unusual usage of that verb, which rarely has that meaning at the time.[23] The letters displayed alongside the image, and rhetorically nicely distinguished from it in Paulinus' description by beginning a new line, are meant merely to present and draw attention to it, or simply to "show" it – after all, that is also the most common meaning of the Latin verb *monstrare*. And that the texts here offer explanations of the pictures to the ignorant is in any case not very probable because Paulinus states in another passage that the majority of the visitors for whom he has built his church are illiterate (carm. 27, 547f.)[24] – an assessment that modern research has confirmed.[25] It is much more probable that the letters placed alongside the images – and it is important that Paulinus refers to them as letters and not as texts – were taken by observers as just the letters they were, and that the importance of those letters rests in their simple presence: since somebody took the trouble to put them up beside the pictures, they underline the pictures' importance; but since few could read them, they do little to explain those

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[20]   Cf. Roberts, Poetry and the Cult (above n. 10), 132–148.

[21]   Cf. on this also C. Kaesser, Narrating Disiecta Corpora. The Rhetoric of Bodily Dismemberment in Prudentius's Peristephanon 11, in: G. Liveley - P. B. Salzman-Mitchell (edd.), Latin Elegy and Narratology. Fragments of Story, Columbus 2008, 223–240.

[22]   The full passage runs (carm. 27, 582–585): *Si forte adtonitas haec per spectacula mentes / agrestum caperet fucata coloribus umbra, / quae super exprimitur titulis, ut littera monstret / quod manus explicuit.*

[23]   M. Roberts, Biblical Epic and Rhetorical Paraphrase in Late Antiquity, Liverpool 1985, 75.

[24]   *... sed turba frequentior hic est / rusticitas non cassa fide neque docta legendi.*

[25]   W. V. Harris, Ancient Literacy, Cambridge/Mass. 1989, 285–322.

pictures.[26] And in general the plurality of the verbs with which Paulinus and Prudentius, as well as Pagan authors (such as Petronius), describe the relationship of such texts to the images they accompany, reveals a multiplicity of approaches and a plurality of motivations which are very far from the unvaryingly hermeneutical intention of their modern equivalents.[27] It is for those reasons that it is unlikely that the purpose of Prudentius' Tituli was the elucidation of images in the modern sense.

That does not mean, however, that exegesis in ways familiar elsewhere from ancient literature is absent from Prudentius' Tituli (cf. for example 5–8; 53–56 or 65–68). In particular allegory, a widespread exegetical mode of the ancient pagan world and liked no less by the Christians, can be found in the poems.[28] But allegory is different from hermeneutics, and its presence in the Tituli makes Prudentius' text not more like, but more unlike modern approaches to the exegesis of works of art.

2. Against this background it is also unlikely that for the interpretation of the exceptional place of Prudentius' Tituli in the ancient context (described above) it makes any difference whether the works of art described by him there are real pictures or fictional ones that the reader has to imagine. This question has been much discussed in the literature, and from the point of view of someone who reads the Tituli as explanatory texts in the modern sense, it is indeed important to know whether what he is elucidating actually existed or not. And the research that has been undertaken has yielded significant results, taking some to assume that a series of real pictures to which the epigrams refer might well have existed.[29] Others have objected, arguing that as a whole Prudentius' poems do not refer to an actually existing series of images.[30] However, what really matters is only the fact, proven by the archaeological evidence, that its existence would have seemed plausible to Prudentius' ancient readers. After all, for those who are intrigued by the unusual nature of Prudentius' epigrams compared with the rest of the ancient tradition, the mere plausibility of the series of pictures referred to is an exciting enough discovery. Since as long as it

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[26] This has, moreover, a long tradition in the ancient world, from the time of the so-called nonsense-inscriptions on Attic vases.

[27] A selection: *explicare*, *excutere*, διεξιέναι.

[28] Cf. the remarks by G. Bernt, Das lateinische Epigramm im Übergang von der Spätantike zum frühen Mittelalter, München 1968, 70; D. Dawson, Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria, Berkeley 1992.

[29] Cf. especially R. Pillinger, Die Tituli Historiarum oder das sogenannte Dittochaeon des Prudentius. Versuch eines philologisch-archäologischen Kommentars, Wien 1980.

[30] Chr. Gnilka, Prudentiana II, München 2001, 198–200.

is probable that the pictures could have existed, the question of why Prudentius reacts to them in epigrams of such an extraordinary sort can be posed.

3. One further remark is necessary to take issue with another possible ancient parallel and explanatory framework for the Tituli. In the course of the discussions about whether Prudentius' Tituli commented on an actually existing series of pictures or only on fictional images, sight has been lost of the fact that there do exist attestations of texts in the ancient world in which pictures and associated verses were combined in book-form.[31] Cornelius Nepos attributes a work of this sort to Atticus, in which he accompanied pictures of outstanding Romans with four or five verses describing their achievements (Att. 18, 5f.).[32] And the elder Pliny attributes a similar work to Varro (nat. 35, 11).[33] It is clear from what Nepos says that what one deals with here must have been some kind of illustrated book, and for example the codices which have preserved Filocalus' calendar from the year 354 demonstrate that a relatively faithful transmission of pictorial representations beside texts was possible in the ancient world.[34] But it is questionable to what extent the existence of such texts justifies the supposition that Prudentius' Tituli may actually have been a text of this kind. Firstly, it must be admitted that such texts are only sparsely attested. And secondly, it has to be borne in mind that the works mentioned by Nepos and Pliny were biographical, their purpose being to call attention to the lives of great men and praise their characters, not to compose works of literary art. It is true that one can occasionally find in the pages of Prudentius' Tituli a focus on individual men – in the epigram on Herod's massacre of the innocents, for example (113–116).[35] But even when Prudentius calls Herod *inpius* in this epigram, the concern of the piece is less to describe Herod's character than to show pity for the murdered infants. There is then a distinct difference between Prudentius' Tituli and the ancient biographical tradition, and one should be

[31] Cf. the succinct remarks of N. Horsfall, Cornelius Nepos. A Selection Including the Lives of Cato and Atticus, Oxford 1989, 102.

[32] *Namque versibus, qui honore rerumque gestarum amplitudine ceteros Romani populi praestiterunt, exposuit ita, ut sub singulorum imaginibus facta magistratusque eorum non amplius quaternis quinisque versibus descripserit: quod vix credendum sit tantas res tam breviter potuisse declarari.*

[33] *Imaginum amorem flagrasse quondam testes sunt Atticus ille Ciceronis edito de iis volumine, M. Varro benignissimo invento insertis voluminum suorum fecunditati etiam septingentorum inlustrium aliquo modo imaginibus ...*

[34] Cf. M. R. Salzman, On Roman Time. The Codex-Calendar of 354 and the Rhythms of Urban Life in Late Antiquity, Berkeley 1990, 73.

[35] *Inpius innumeris infantum caedibus hostis / perfurit Herodes, dum Christum quaerit in illis. / Fumant lacteolo parvorum sanguine cunae / vulneribusque madent calidis pia pectora matrum.*

cautious about trying to understand Prudentius' Tituli in the light of the texts
attested by Varro and Atticus.

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A new strategy must therefore be found to explain the peculiarities of
Prudentius' Tituli. To this end it is helpful to bring up another unusual charac-
teristic of the Tituli, mentioned in the title of this paper: namely the fact that
Prudentius' Tituli feature the construction not only of a bilateral relationship
between the author's text and the pictures it evokes, but also of a trilateral
relationship that alongside the two elements already mentioned also engages
with the scriptures. It is indeed obvious that the pictures evoked and the epi-
grams themselves are not organized according to an arbitrary schema or have
any old subject as their theme, but that they are oriented towards stories from
the Bible. Because of this, the interpreter of the Tituli must bear in mind that it
is not just a question of the relationship between text and image, but it is rather
a question of the relationship between text, text, and image. Indeed, to give full
weight to the status of the biblical text, it would almost be necessary to say that
the problem encountered here is a question of the relationship between a text
(that of Prudentius), the text (the Holy Scriptures), and images.

Comparison with Latin biblical epic demonstrates the extent to which the
presence of the Holy Scriptures and the special status that they possessed can
transform a pagan classical genre. The difference between the pagan and Chris-
tian worlds should not be overestimated; there were of course canonical hierar-
chies of genre in antiquity that were reflected, or at least inserted themselves
into, the educational system. For all that though, Juvencus in the Prologue and
the concluding verses of his Evangelia presents the text of the Holy Scriptures
as something new, thanks to which his work does not only better the traditional
epic or compete with its forbearers in the traditional manner, but differs from
them in a radical way.[36] Homer and Vergil may well be great writers, Juvencus
implies, but they nevertheless combined truth with falsehood in their epics. For
his own poetry, by contrast, the traditional epic question of the truth of what is
reported is settled almost by itself, since the truth of the text of the Bible is
beyond questioning (praef. 15–20).[37] What remains for the poet to do is to put

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[36] R. Herzog, Die Bibelepik der lateinischen Spätantike. Formgeschichte einer erbaulichen
      Gattung, München 1975, xlv/xlvi; R. P. H. Green, Latin Epics of the New Testament.
      Juvencus, Sedulius, Arator, Oxford 2006, 20f.

[37] *Quod si tam longam meruerunt carmina famam, / quae veterum gestis hominum menda-
      cia nectunt, / nobis certa fides aeternae in saecula laudis / inmortale decus tribuet meri-
      tumque rependet. / Nam mihi carmen erit Christi vitalia gesta, / divinum populis falsi
      sine crimine donum.*

such divine truth at the public's disposal with the appropriate *ornamenta* (4, 802–805).[38] That the poet himself attributes to himself in the Prologue a quasi-liturgical function through the quotation of the *munda cor* prayer[39] underlines the novelty of the topic.

It is in general suggestive in the attempt to understand Prudentius' Tituli to bring in biblical epic as a parallel. For a start, Prudentius's poems and bible epic share the metre – certainly not the least significant of ancient literary categories; there are also, as has already been observed, a few verbal parallels between the Tituli and biblical epic texts.[40] Some of the Tituli also display a tendency – lines 89–92, for example, which are concerned with Ps. 136, 1–4[41] – to adapt formally non-narrative biblical models to the narrative nature of the epic genre.

In view of this, it would not be surprising if biblical epic also provided a parallel for the striking difference between Prudentius' Tituli on the one hand and the ancient tradition of rhetorically elaborated ekphrasis on the other. For in biblical epic there is for the most part no rhetorical expansion and detailed elaboration of biblical content such as is familiar from ancient ekphrasis. More often, the text of the Holy Scriptures is reduced to summaries or pericopes, so that the morally improving content of the biblical passage stands out more clearly.[42] As a consequence, as Michael Roberts has observed, "this initial abbreviation tended to limit the expansiveness that was fundamental to the ekphrastic mode."[43] So the absence of ekphrastic descriptions in Prudentius' epigrammatic adaptations of biblical content has a parallel in the absence of descriptions of this sort in biblical epic.

It is important to take an appropriately nuanced view of this relationship between the Tituli and biblical epic, above all avoiding the mistake of looking at

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[38] *Has mea mens fidei vires sanctique timoris / cepit et in tantum lucet mihi gratia Christi, / versibus ut nostris divinae gloria legis / ornamenta libens caperet terrestria linguae.*

[39] K. Smolak, Unentdeckte Lukrezspuren, WS 86 (1973), 216–239 (237f.); K. Smolak, *Sic itaque audiar!* Zum Phänomen 'Sprache' in Augustins Confessiones, in: Charisteria Augustiniana, Festschrift J. Oroz Reta, Bd. 2, Madrid 1994, 509–517, here 511, n. 9.

[40] Cf. Index b) in Pillinger (above n. 29).

[41] *Gens Hebraeorum peccamine capta frequenti / fleverat exilium dirae Babylonis ad amnes; / tum patrios cantare modos praecepta recusat / organaque in ramis salicis suspendit amarae.*

[42] Herzog (above n. 36), xlvii and passim; Green, Latin Epics (above n. 36), 232–234. It fits with the moral stance of biblical epic that its writers take a stance in contemporary dogmatic debates; see e. g. R. P. H. Green, The 'Evangeliorum Libri' of Juvencus. Exegesis by Stealth?, in: W. Otten - K. Pollmann (edd.), Poetry and Exegesis in Premodern Latin Christianity. The Encounter between Classical and Christian Strategies of Interpretation, Leiden 2007, 65–80.

[43] M. Roberts, The Jeweled Style. Poetry and Poetics in Late Antiquity, Ithaca 1989, 131.

biblical epic as an undifferentiated mass. First of all, there are exceptions to the tendency mentioned above to avoid ekphrastic techniques, for example the description of paradise in the first book of Dracontius' De Laudibus Dei (1, 167–175), an epic in general distinguished by its stylistic design,[44] or by Claudius Marius Victorius (esp. 2, 90–202). In other ways too it is unadvisable to look at Latin biblical epic, in which at least three strands of literary historical development can be discerned,[45] as in any way a homogenous genre. On top of this, when Prudentius was composing his Tituli, Latin biblical epic was only about to come into being, and in his lifetime developed only gradually out of the work of Juvencus. It would therefore be difficult to prove that Prudentius consciously used the generic conventions of biblical epic in his Tituli.

It is therefore much more probable that Prudentius' epigrammatic adaptation of biblical content in the Tituli shares an intention to present biblical material in a morally improving way. Against the background of traditional classical epigrams, whose goal was hardly moral edification, Prudentius was able to achieve a powerful effect of contrast and novelty. But that he set himself such a goal as this is in the context of his own work quite likely. It is difficult to say whether the Tituli were part of the edition of his works for which Prudentius wrote the Praefatio that has been preserved with them.[46] But if, as has been widely accepted for some time now, the Tituli really are by Prudentius,[47] one may be justified in applying to them also what Prudentius says in this Praefatio about his work in general, that is that they serve to lead the reader to the true faith, and so to a better life (praef. 37–42).[48] That Prudentius has selected from the Bible as a rule material that is well-suited from the start for being adapted into a work with moralizing intentions only encourages such a move. Right at the beginning of the Tituli, for example, Prudentius passes over the biblical account of the creation of the world in Gen. 1 and describes instead in his first epigram the temptation of Eve by the diabolical serpent.[49]

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[44]   Roberts, The Jeweled Style (above n. 43), 131f.

[45]   K. Smolak, Bibelepik als „verfehlte Gattung", WHB 41 (1999), 7–24.

[46]   It is missing in many of the manuscripts; cf. M. P. Cunningham, Aurelii Prudentii Clementis Carmina, Turnhout 1966 (CC SL 126), 390. – K. Thraede, Studien zu Sprache und Stil des Prudentius, Göttingen 1965, 75–78, offers a detailed overview of the problems of the transmission of the text.

[47]   Cf. Pillinger (above n. 29), 11f.

[48]   *Hymnis continuet dies / nec nox ulla vacet quin dominum canat; / pugnet contra hereses, catholicam discutiat fidem, / conculcet sacra gentium, / labem, Roma, tuis inferat idolis, / carmen martyribus devoveat, laudet apostolos.*

[49]   How real such a moralizing position on the part of the poet and his work actually was is another question; see Thraede (above n. 46), 12, 73–78 and passim. For spiritual edification in the Tituli see too Gnilka (above n. 30), 199.

So it could be said that Prudentius' decision to present biblical stories in the form of *tituli* mirrors to some extent the decision of the writers of biblical epic to adapt biblical material to epic form. Prudentius, like the writers of biblical epic, takes up a traditional Pagan genre – in the first case epigram, in the second epic – and yet transforms it in a way that takes account of the distinctive presence of the Holy Scriptures and of their significance. In the background in both cases may have been the idea that, as Lactantius said, the everyday style in which the Holy Scriptures were written presented a problem with regard to their authority among educated people.[50] There was a demand for a more attractive presentation of biblical material.

As a final point, one has to wonder how significant it is that Prudentius decided to present his biblical material in epigrammatic and not epic form. Two mutually complementary answers can be given to this question. On the one hand, it must be noted that Prudentius employs the same metre as the writers of biblical epic, and that therefore the difference is not so great as it would have been had he composed his epigrams in elegiac couplets. But on the other hand, one should not underestimate that there is a difference between biblical epic on the one hand and Prudentius' Tituli on the other that possesses significance. In his presentation of biblical material, Prudentius was concerned in the first instance to gain and hold the attention of readers. To the extent that the Bible was a narrative text in any case, it was natural for Christian poets to present its content in epic form, since epic was the traditional ancient medium for narrative poetry. If Prudentius then presents biblical material in a form whose traditional function is not narrative, his undertaking is made the more unusual and interesting, and takes on a certain attractiveness. In this way, Prudentius succeeded in pleasing those of his readers who, although they knew the content of the Bible well enough, were nonetheless unhappy with its form, and he achieved this in two ways: firstly, by presenting once again biblical content for which they had a predilection, and secondly, through a redefinition of the traditional form of the epigram accompanying an image into a form which could awaken and stimulate interest by its novelty.

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[50] Cf. Lact. inst. 1, 1, 10 and 5, 1, 9–28 and the remarks of P. G. Van der Nat, Divinus Vere Poeta. Enige Beschouwingen over Ontstaan en Karakter der Christelijke Latijnse Poëzie, Leiden 1963, 19f., and id., Zu den Voraussetzungen der christlichen lateinischen Literatur. Die Zeugnisse von Minucius Felix und Laktanz, in: Christianisme et formes littèraires de l'antiquité tardive en occident, Genève 1977, 215–225.