

# SEEING THE WORD: Visual Theology

The illuminations of the Saint John's Bible bring the text to life by giving them a visual form. They aren't simply pictures or illustrations of the stories in the Bible, but are paintings that come out of a long process of reflective living with the text. The illuminations are really spiritual meditations on the word of God. What do images really have to do with prayer, and what can the arts tell us about God, the divine, and the sacred? These are two of the questions that visual theology attempts to ignite.

God is revealed to us not only in the realm of words and language, but in countless other ways as well. The history of Christian faith and theology is also a history of the eye, the ear, of bodily gesture and movement, the mind imagining, and the senses conjoining.<sup>1</sup> Visual theology is a field that examines how the sense of sight is used to see the existence of God in the world and give it meaning to us as God's people. In our lives as Christians, visual theology claims that beauty is essential. Beauty not only excites and nourishes our feelings, thoughts, and imagination, but without beauty, truth and goodness become dull, lifeless, boring, and cold.<sup>2</sup> God's beauty is displayed in all of creation; it draws us to God and to the mystery and glory of Christ on the cross.

But the beauty of the world is not the only concern of visual theology. When we use visual theology, we change our mode of

communication from language and mathematics to the realm of imagination, so that intuition, the senses, and our own experiences and knowledge become primary.<sup>3</sup> A work of art isn't just an object that is beautiful to its viewer; it becomes a tool to see - a technique of examination and contemplation - that may lead the viewer in prayer.

*May the eyes of your hearts be enlightened, that you may know what is the hope that belongs to his call, what are the riches of glory in his inheritance among the holy ones and what is the surpassing greatness of his power for us who believe.*  
(Ephesians 1:18-19)

*Visio divina,*

Latin for "Holy Seeing" or "Divine Looking," is a Christian prayer practice that creates an openness to encounters with God and the Word.<sup>4</sup> It is similar to the sixth-century Benedictine practice of *lectio divina* in which one meditates on a passage of scripture allowing the Spirit to speak through the story, except in *visio divina* the Spirit is essentially revealed through images and feelings. The illuminations of the Saint John's Bible are suited perfectly for this unique form of visual contemplation and prayer, and they can even give us new insight into Biblical stories. Both the field of visual theology and the practice of *visio divina* enable us to know God and ourselves better as well as experience God's love more fully.

Written by Kasey M. Devine  
M.A. Scripture, School of Theology•Seminary,  
Saint John's University, Collegeville, MN

1. Vrudny, Kimberly J., and Wilson Yates. 2005. Arts, theology, and the church: new intersections. Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 180.

2. Mel Ahlborn, Ken Arnold, eds., *Visio Divina: A Reader in Faith and Visual Arts* (Leeds, Massachusetts: LeaderResources, 2009), 63.

3. Mel Ahlborn, Ken Arnold, *Visio Divina*, 29

4. Mel Ahlborn, Ken Arnold, *Visio Divina* 28.