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MORE THAN INSPIRED PROPOSITIONS: SHARED ATTENTION AND THE RELIGIOUS TEXT

Adam Green and Keith A. Quan

The Christian intellectual tradition consistently affirms that God is present in and continues to speak through Scripture. These functions of the Christian Scriptures have been underexamined in contemporary philosophy of religion and philosophical theology. Careful attention to the phenomenon of shared attention is instructive for providing an account of these matters, and the shared attention account developed here provides a useful conceptual framework within which to situate recent work on Scripture by scholars such as Kevin Vanhoozer, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and Michael Rea.

Contemporary philosophical discussion of the nature and functions of a religious text have typically been concerned with whether or not some propositions contained in holy writ are true and with how one may or may not be justified in thinking those propositions true. One may also be concerned with whether or not the presence of redactors, a distant historical context, or the literary features of a text ought to affect one’s reliance on Scripture as a source of true propositions. In Christian analytic philosophy, the focal question has been whether a personal God underwrote the truth of some or all of the propositions expressed by the Bible and whether we can come to know these propositions through some kind of historical argument, through testimony, or through an inkling to believe implanted in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

In this paper, we want to focus attention on an epistemic function of an inspired religious text other than that of making true statements. Instead, our focus is on the way in which an inspired text facilitates acquaintance knowledge of the divine and propositional knowledge that builds on that acquaintance knowledge. We shall be offering a taxonomy of different ways in which Scripture can facilitate experiences of the divine that draws on work in developmental psychology, and we shall parlay that taxonomy into an account that sheds light on aspects of Scripture that are underexamined in contemporary Christian philosophy of religion and philosophical theology. We shall be operating in the Christian tradition, though parallel points might be made in a variety of traditions.
While there have been numerous volumes debating the authority and inspiration of Scripture, there has been relatively little extended reflection on what is one of the most pervasive affirmations about Scripture in the Christian theological tradition, that Scripture mediates experiences of God. In the reading and proclamation of Scripture, believers do not merely encounter words about God, but in some way encounter God Himself.

Consider, for example, the Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck, who wrote:

Scripture was written by the Holy Spirit that it might serve him in guiding the church, in the perfecting of the saints, in the building up of the body of Christ. In it God daily comes to his people. In it he speaks to his people, not from afar but from nearby. In it he reveals himself, from day to day, to believers in the fullness of his grace and truth. Through it he works his miracles of compassion and faithfulness. Scripture is the ongoing rapport between heaven and earth, between Christ and his church, between God and his children. It does not just tie us to the past; it binds us to the living Lord in the heavens. It is the living voice of God, the letter of the omnipotent God to his creature.¹

This quotation illustrates some interrelated motifs found across the Christian theological tradition. Scripture is not merely God’s past speech, but rather is the “living voice of God” through which He continues to address His people. As Paul Scherer, a Lutheran preacher, once noted, “God did not stop speaking when his book went to press.”² Furthermore, Scripture mediates God’s presence as He “daily comes to his people.” According to the Sacrosanctum Concilium of the Catholic Church, “He [Christ] is present in His word, since it is He Himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the Church.”³ As Barth argues, Scripture is the place where God meets His people:

The fact of the canon tells us simply that the church has regarded these scriptures as the place where we can expect to hear the voice of God. The proper attitude of preachers does not depend on whether they hold on to a doctrine of inspiration but on whether or not they expect God to speak to them here.⁴

²Quoted without citation in Elizabeth Achtemeier, “The Canon as the Voice of the Living God,” in Reclaiming the Bible for the Church, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 122.
³Sacrosanctum Concilium 7 [online at http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html]. Given that the context of the quotation is emphasizing the presence of Christ in the Church’s liturgy and sacraments and the Catholic theology of the sacraments, there is every reason to believe that this comment is meant quite literally.
These motifs also appear in the writings of the luminaries of the theological tradition. For example, according to Luther, when one hears Scripture proclaimed one encounters God Himself: “It is God himself who is speaking when it is God’s Word which someone uses to comfort you, and if it is God’s Word, then God is acting here, so remember that God himself is doing it.” Expressing it more vividly, Luther says that even though Christ “has ascended to heaven and no longer preaches on earth in person,” He still “wanders through the world unceasingly, preaching His Gospel until the Last Day.” Elsewhere he compares the oral word, the proclamation of the Gospel from the Scriptures, to the Old Testament tabernacle; both are divinely ordained “physical signs” by which one can “recognize and find God.” Similarly, for Calvin, the proclamation of Scripture functions as a “sure and infallible sign” that God is “near at hand to us, . . . that he seeks our salvation, that he calls us to himself as though he spoke with open mouth, and that we see him personally before us.”

Such claims are not limited to the modern period. As Augustine says in commentary on the Psalms:

Notice this, brothers and sisters, God never tires of addressing us. If he speaks to us no longer, what are we doing? What is the point of our holy readings, our sacred songs? But he continues to speak to us, so forget what lies behind and stretch out to what is ahead of you.

The point of reading Scripture, amongst other things, is precisely that God continues to address believers through the text. One might readily think of the stories of Antony and Augustine in book eight of Confessions; just as Antony, upon reading Scripture, “felt that he was being admonished as though what he read was spoken directly to himself” so also Augustine is divinely converted through the reading of a text of Scripture in the famous garden scene, which he takes to be intended for him at that exact moment.

Given these widespread affirmations in the tradition about Scripture mediating experiences of God and God’s continuing address through such

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6Martin Luther, Luther’s Works, 55 vols. (St. Louis and Minneapolis: Concordia and Fortress, 1958–1986), 13:324. While such vivid language could be taken to indicate that Luther is being metaphorical, Luther’s other affirmations of continuing divine speech through the proclamation of Scripture consistently use the emphatic “God himself” and phrases such as “as a matter of fact” and “but I view the picture correctly” (e.g., 22:526–27, 23:97–98).

7Ibid., 27:60.20–23.


experiences, it is surprising how relatively undeveloped the idea is compared to discussions of the authority, inspiration, and even perspicuity of Scripture. What it means for Scripture to mediate encounters with God is by no means obvious, however. It is less than clear what exactly these motifs referenced above mean or how they relate to one another. What does seem clear is that the tradition is affirming more than that one may encounter God in Scripture in the same sense that one might encounter Plato in reading *The Republic* or that Scripture is inherently impactful in the same manner that Hetty’s story in *Adam Bede* is inherently impactful.

To lay the foundation for our account of these matters, we shall turn to developmental psychology and the phenomenon of shared attention.

II

Shared attention occurs when one is engaged in an act of attending to something and, in doing so, one is cooperating with another who is engaged in a parallel act of attending.\(^\text{11}\) Shared attention involves coordinated “attention-focusing”\(^\text{12}\) where the coordination is present in the qualitative feel of the experience. Shared attention can involve a primary focus on the person or persons one is cooperating with or on an independent object or event. This distinction will be kept track of by distinguishing dyadic and triadic forms of shared attention.\(^\text{13}\) In dyadic shared attention, the participants focus attention on one another, and in triadic shared attention, both participants focus on an independent object or event.

The following three stage example of a ten-month-old and its mother interacting illustrates the phenomena. First, the child looks the mother in the eye. Second, the child turns and points to a bright object. Third, the child looks back at the mother to see that she has followed the direction of the point. If the mother has cooperated with the pointing of the child, then the child and the mother had dyadic shared attention at stage one, and triadic shared attention at stage two. At stage three, the child checks to make sure that stage two has been successful, to make sure that the mother really is attending to the object with the infant.

As Ingrid Brinck points out, the phenomenon in question is more than “mutual object-focusing” because “the subjects will have to attend to each other as capable of attending in a goal-intended way, that is, in a way

\(^{11}\)A similar description of shared attention one sometimes sees is “acting in concert with responsive partners,” (Vasudevi Reddy, “Before the ‘Third Element’: Understanding Attention to Self,” in *Joint Attention: Communication and Other Minds*, ed. Naomi Elian et al. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005], 262.) but this description seems to allow for satisfaction by actions such as participating in an organized military strike. It does not capture the fact that in shared attention the attending is what is shared.


\(^{13}\)It should be noted that these labels pick out how many types of thing are involved in a sharing of attention, not how many objects or persons. One can have dyadic attention with more than one person in principle, or may have triadic shared attention where the object of attention is a class of objects.
that is not controlled by the object of attention.” If a zebra follows the startled gaze of the zebra beside it to see a lion in the distance, that does not qualify by itself as shared attention because the joint behavior is not an instance of cooperative attending. In the pointing example, the awareness of the bright object is evidenced by the point, and the mother attends to the bright object because the child manifests a desire for the parent to attend to the bright object to which the child was attending. If the child tries to check the gaze of the mother in stage three only to find that the mother has silently left the room, the child’s experience of attending to the object in stage two will seem to have been a different experience than it initially appeared to be. Similarly, if one points to an object and then subsequently figures out that the other person’s subsequent looking was not done in response to one’s pointing, one will have an experience as of having experienced an illusion. The cooperation of the other in attending is a phenomenal constituent of the experience of shared attention itself.

R. Peter Hobson argues from his research with autistic children that the shared attention impairment in the autistic is rooted in an inability to enter into intersubjective engagement through recognizing the expression of attitudes in bodily cues. Borrowing from Wittgenstein, Hobson characterizes the activity that makes intersubjective engagement possible as a kind of perception. He writes, “perception is relational, and to perceive a smile as a smile . . . is to respond with feeling, in such a way that through the smile one apprehends the emotional state of the other.”

On Hobson’s model, attitudes “are manifest in bodily expressions, orientations, and actions.” The idea is that, unless one has a related impairment like autism, one can naturally perceive some mental states by perceiving the physical expressions of those states. The perception of mental states makes one available to share attention with the other. The infant involved in dyadic shared attention can literally see that the other is responding cooperatively to her attention, perhaps through the combination of the other’s gaze and the pattern of affect displayed by herself and the other person.

In triadic shared attention, generally a dyadic stage of mental state perception allows one to perceive the intention of the other to cooperate with one in attending to some other thing. Consequently, when one attends to the third thing, one is aware of oneself as engaging in a cooperative

14For an extended discussion of this feature of shared attention, see John Campbell, “Joint Attention and Common Knowledge,” in Elian et al., Joint Attention: Communication and Other Minds.


17Ibid., 186.

18For a defense of this claim, see Adam Green, “Perceiving Persons,” Journal of Consciousness Studies, forthcoming.
enterprise, and the discovery that there was no cooperation would reveal that some of the success conditions of one’s attentional state failed to hold. Thus, the experience will be revealed to have misrepresented reality even though the same sensory information may be coming to one by way of the third object.

The abilities that one acquires as shared attention develops can come to be employed in many situations that deviate from the developmental scenario, including cases that do not satisfy the criterion for shared attention. For example, if Rachael Ray is on television and asks one to attend to the golden brown crust of her zucchini bake, one can cooperate with her wish in a way that is different from merely following her gaze to what she happens to be looking at. One is cooperating with her attempt to direct the attention of her viewers. The abilities that enable joint attention are at work, even though they are operating in an artificial extension of their natural environment. One still uses the pattern of Rachael’s visible behavior to coordinate one’s attention with her directing of that attention, but one doesn’t enter into the sort of dyadic state that the mother and baby from the previous example do. One attends to something in a cooperative mode, but the state that comes about when one attends to the zucchini bake because of Rachael is not one where she is cooperating with and aware of one in a way that’s parallel to the way one is cooperating with and aware of her.

III

There are various ways in which a written text may couple with one’s abilities to engage in shared attention. Consider two permutations of the Rachael Ray case and the ways in which each of them compare to the standard case of shared attention illustrated by the mother and the child.

Case 1
Becky likes to cook along with the Rachael Ray show. The show is on the Spanish-speaking channel during her dinner hour, and Becky does not speak Spanish, so she follows the English subtitles. When Ray says “Consider the golden brown crust of this zucchini bake” Becky is able to use her abilities to engage in shared attention as mediated by the subtitles to attend to the zucchini bake pictured on the screen. She then imagines what Rachael Ray would say about the zucchini bake that Becky is cooking and is led to look at the crust of her own zucchini bake, pondering whether it is golden brown as it should be.

Case 2
Alex wins a private cooking lesson with Rachael Ray. He is deaf, so Rachael communicates with him using written notes. At a certain point in the lesson, she hands him a note that reads, “Consider the golden brown crust of this zucchini bake,” at which point he attends with Rachael to the crust. He looks back at Rachael who smiles and holds out a note between them that reads, “You done good.”
Both of these cases illustrate how a line of written text may interface with the interactive ability one displays when one engages in shared attention. In the first case, Becky must use some of the same abilities that subserve shared attention in order to follow Rachael Ray’s directions, though Ray is not actually present for Becky to share attention with and Becky does not take the episode to be one of sharing attention. It could be, however, that watching the television would be insufficient to direct Becky’s attention without the help of the subtitles. Becky is able to recognize the way the subtitle is supposed to couple with her experience of the video. Becky’s ability to cooperate with the subtitled video not only allows her to look at what Ray wants her audience to look at, but it also allows her to navigate her own environment in a new way in light of what she observes on the video and reads in the subtitles.

In the second case, Alex does enjoy shared attention with Rachael Ray. This shared attention is facilitated by the notes that she writes for him. The first note serves a function much like an infant’s pointing a finger at an object to which it wants its mother to attend. The note makes clear that Rachael would like Alex to attend to the color of the bake. The first note facilitates triadic shared attention. The second note shapes an experience of dyadic shared attention. It helps Alex construe Rachael’s smiling at Alex in the proper way. These two notes are partly constitutive of experiences of shared attention of the triadic and dyadic variety respectively. They constitute part of the cooperative activity between Rachael and Alex that is experienced as shared.

It is important to distinguish two different ways in which a written text can facilitate dyadic or triadic shared attention. The first is by being partly constitutive of the cooperative activity registered as a shared experience. The second is by being solely instrumental to the experience occurring. For example, if Rachael Ray hands Alex a note that says, “My producer Buddy is in the next room and he wants to give you a new blender,” Alex may then be empowered by the note to have dyadic and triadic shared experiences with Buddy, but the note is not part of any cooperative activity shared by Alex and Buddy. The note is only a means of putting Alex in a position to engage in shared attention with Buddy. The note is doing more than the subtitles in the first case, however. Buddy is an agent that is represented as being proximal and available for sharing attention.

These cases should not be thought to be exhaustive of the ways in which a written text may productively combine with one’s ability to engage in shared attention. What we hope to have drawn attention to is a number of ways in which a written text may partner with these abilities and, in fact, may play a critical role in facilitating genuine shared attention. We are now in a position to draw up a rough taxonomy. The written text may facilitate pseudo-shared attention or genuine shared attention. Pseudo-shared attention does not necessarily produce an illusion, just as watching Rachael Ray on the television need not be accompanied by an impression that one is sharing attention with Rachael Ray. Rather, pseudo-shared
attention occurs when one processes an input in an “as if” mode (e.g., “as if” the person on the TV were present). Processing something in an “as if” mode can take a more passive form, as when Becky watches the television, or a more active form, as when Becky imagines Ray in Becky’s own kitchen. A written text can facilitate genuine shared attention in either a constitutive way or a merely instrumental way and shared attention can come in a dyadic or triadic variety.

The foregoing taxonomy suggests a corresponding taxonomy in the case of the divine and the inspired religious text. For each pairing of a text and a use of that text that depends on one’s ability to engage in shared attention, there is a corollary experience in which the text is Scripture and the agents involved are oneself and the divine. One’s interpretation of what it might mean for the divine to continue to speak through the Scriptures and to be present in the Scriptures will be more metaphorical to the extent that the relevant function of Scripture is associated with the left side of the diagram and more literal to the extent that one associates the relevant function of Scripture with the right side of the diagram.

To illustrate different ways in which one may have an experience in an “as if” mode that incorporates Scripture, consider the many different ways in which one might approach the healing of the paralytic in the second chapter of the gospel of Mark. One might simply read this as a putative record of what was said on a particular occasion. One might also read the line in a tacitly or explicitly “as if” mode. One could read the line imagining oneself as if one is in the room for this healing. One might imagine the scene as it unfolds simply in virtue of reading a narrative without even

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**Fig 1: Taxonomy**

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realizing that one is engaging the text imaginatively. One might also intentionally imagine oneself as one of the characters, perhaps as the paralytic having a dyadic experience with Jesus that is shaped by the surprising announcement that one’s sins have been forgiven. One could also read the words “Son, your sins are forgiven” as if they are being spoken into one’s present situation quite independently of the first century context of the story. Once again, all of these “as if” modes of approaching the text may be more active or passive, tacit or explicit, voluntary or involuntary. One may realize that one is using an “as if” mode of cognition or one may mistake one’s experience for an actual one.

Each of these “as if” experiences could rely on the offline application of the skills that allow one to engage in social interaction in general and shared attention in particular. Imagining oneself into the position of the paralytic or imagining what it would look like for God to speak these lines into one’s present situation involves imagining oneself into a dyadic encounter that is rendered intelligible partly by relying on one’s prior knowledge of what such an encounter might be like. Even taking the implicit stance of the onlooker in reading the paralytic’s story draws from one’s ability to imagine and interpret social scenarios much like Becky does when she cooks along with Rachael Ray.

On the one hand, it should not be controversial that we can engage in “as if” cognition based on Scripture because we can do so with almost any text. There is no reason that one cannot imaginatively experience Dostoevsky’s Raskilinokov in the same way one imaginatively encounters Jesus or Peter. Furthermore, interpreting the facilitation of acquaintance knowledge through Scripture in terms of “as if” experiences is inclusive. One need not have the esoteric experiences of the mystic in order to make use of Scripture in this way, and the writers surveyed in the first section of the paper appear to have a wide class of people in mind. In the Scriptures, God “daily comes to His people,” not some especially intuitive or holy subset thereof. Insistence on the usefulness of an imaginative encounter with Scripture is seen in figures as diverse as Ignatius of Loyola and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Moreover, one can imagine “as if” experiences leading to genuine experiences of the divine, helping to facilitate acquaintance knowledge of the divine. If one looks at one’s life as if the divine is present, such a cognitive attitude may well prime one to encounter the actual presence of the divine.

One further virtue of thinking of Scripture as designed for use with pseudo-shared attention is that it would help to explain features of the Scriptures that might otherwise prove puzzling, such as the prominence of narratives about flawed human beings. A story lends itself to imaginative engagement, and the presence of characters with whom one can identify enhances one’s ability to engage the text imaginatively. If the purpose

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19 For a novel, contemporary take on the role of imagination in Scripture reading, see Gregory Boyd, Seeing is Believing (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004).
of Scripture is all and only to convey correct doctrine, one might find the prevalence of narratives about fallen human beings at best excessive, but, if the text is meant to lend itself to imaginative identification, a narrative format of this type is only to be expected. In fact, the diversity in the formats, styles, and perspectives of the Scripture makes sense if one thinks of the document as being intended to facilitate imaginative engagement for a maximally diverse audience across the lifespans of that diverse audience.

On the other hand, the presence and continuing speaking of Scripture witnessed to by the Christian tradition is not naturally parsed in terms of “as if” experiences alone. One could have an “as if” experience of Plato when reading the Republic, and one could look out at the world as if it was animated by Hegel’s *zeitgeist*. The Christian tradition appears to assert that Scripture is unique in that God is actually present and speaking in Scripture, not just that Scripture lends itself toward imagining that God is present and speaking.

If Scripture is meant to facilitate genuine shared attention in a more direct fashion, the instrumental reading of Scripture’s role is the less controversial one. On this way of thinking about things, Scripture is like a note alerting one to the presence of an agent in one’s environment. Whereas an “as if” experience need not have the facilitation of genuine acquaintance in its success conditions, this is not the case for the instrumental reading. A note alerting one to the presence of an agent who wants to share attention can be effective only if there actually is such an agent and shared attention with that agent is possible. Thus, the connection between the instrumental reading and acquaintance knowledge of the divine is stronger than it is on the “as if” reading.

The instrumental reading also shares in the virtues of the “as if” reading to some extent. No special pleading is necessary for the claim that a religious text can be designed to facilitate shared attention instrumentally. Even an atheist might allow that Scripture is designed to direct one towards encountering a divine being. The atheist would simply not grant that such a being exists. When the psalmist writes, “Taste and see that the Lord is good,” it represents the world as being a place that includes a divine being whose goodness is available for the experiencing.

Scripture being instrumental for facilitating shared attention still appears to fall short of God being present in and continuing to speak through Scripture, however. Compare an instrumental use of Scripture with an ordinary case. If one is handed a note asserting that a gentleman in a fedora is looking at one, that note need not come from the gentleman in the fedora. It might be a warning, “Watch out! There is a gentleman in a fedora watching you!” The note’s alerting one to the presence of an agent with whom one could share attention is not by itself a reason to think that the agent in question is attempting to be present and speak to one, let alone that the agent is successful in doing so. Similarly, if Scripture facilitates shared attention instrumentally, it does not follow thereby that God is present in and speaking through Scripture.
If Scripture plays a role in facilitating shared attention with God by partly constituting the sharing of attention, one has a straightforward way of accommodating the idea that God’s presence is mediated by the text. Much like Rachael Ray hands Alex a note about the zucchini bake to direct his attention to the zucchini bake in Case 2, so God might, through the Scriptures, direct one’s attention to one’s pride. Just as Ray hands Alex a note saying he “done good” that shapes how Alex experiences Ray’s kindly smile, so God might elect for the contents of Scripture to shape a dyadic experience of the divine. Shared attention requires that the agent one is sharing attention with be experienced as present, even if implicitly. Thus, the constitutive reading draws a tight link between the role that the text plays in facilitating shared attention and God’s being present. Given this link, the constitutive reading seems best positioned to take the presence of God in the Scripture and His continuing speech through Scripture at face value. On the constitutive reading, the text can be as intimately involved in the sharing of attention as a point or a recognizable facial expression.

One might object to the constitutive reading on the grounds that the Scriptures do not read like a text written to a modern reader for the purpose of sharing attention with that reader. One might think it strains credulity, for instance, for Paul’s personal notes to Philemon or Titus to be construed as also being personal communiques for oneself. Likewise, on the face of it, the various texts of Scripture address particular or general audiences. Twenty-first-century goyim are at best part of the general audience of the text and at worst are unintended onlookers.

These are only surface problems, however, for two reasons. First, shared attention can involve more than two participants. This is perhaps easiest seen with triadic shared attention. Just as an infant can point out a bright object to its mother so it can do the same for both of its parents. The number of participants who can share attention is restricted only by the cognitive limitations of the participants, and the complexity of the shared attention that may be possible for an infinite being should be enough to undercut this problem. Second, it is possible for a text to constitute part of a shared attention experience without having been penned for that purpose. Just as one person might use a sonnet of Shakespeare’s as part of a dyadic expression of love for another despite Shakespeare not having either person in mind when he took up his pen, so God could use lines written by the apostle Paul in order to condition the way He is present to someone in the twenty-first century despite the fact that Paul may not have had present day readers in mind.

It is our suggestion that the Christian Scriptures are meant to facilitate acquaintance knowledge of the divine through “as if,” instrumental, and constitutive uses of the religious text. We suggest not that this is the sole purpose of Scripture, but rather that the function of Scripture attested to by the material in the Christian tradition referenced in the first section of the paper is underwritten by all three uses of a religious text. “As if” imaginative engagement with the religious text is the most readily available, and
constitutive uses of the text are generally most potent. “As if” experiences prime one to experience the divine in the normal course of one’s life, but, given the nature of Scripture as divine communication, they also prime one to make instrumental and constitutive uses of the text in shared attention with God. There is a natural progression between “as if” engagement with the text, recognizing the instrumental qualities of Scripture, and entering into cooperative activity with the divine in which the God uses the text of the Scriptures to reveal Himself dyadically or triadically. The following passage from J. I. Packer could be readily interpreted as describing just such a progression.

In Bible study, we start as flies on the wall, watching God deal with men of the past, overhearing his words to them and theirs to him, noting the outcome of their faithful or faithless living. But then we realize that the God whom we were watching is watching us, and that we too are wholly in his hands, and that we are no less called and claimed by him than were the Bible characters. Thus we move into dialogical interpretation. Having seen what the text meant for its writer and first readers, we now see what it means for us. We study Scripture in the presence of the living God, as those who stand under both it and him. Each time it is as if he has handed us a letter from himself and stays with us while we read it to hear what our answer will be.

In the next section, we will relate the above account to some contemporary philosophical and theological literature, illustrating its potential for explicating theological claims about Scripture and comparing it to similar ideas by analytic philosophers of religion.

IV

In his dramatic spin on theological method, Kevin Vanhoozer, a systematic theologian, proposes seeing biblical interpretation like performing in a play with the canon of Scripture as the script. This performance interpretation involves one’s careful attention to the first three acts of the play (creation; God’s dealings with Israel; Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection) so that one can participate in the performance of the fourth act (the church’s Spirit-led activity), improvising in a manner consistent with the first three acts and in light of the final closing act (God’s consummation of all things).

According to Vanhoozer, Scripture’s primarily narrative form not merely conveys historical or propositional information but also enables one to “see,” “taste,” or experience “something of the reality itself.” Furthermore, this trains one in “seeing as” and “experiencing as,” that is, to see and experience the present world as the world presented in Scripture. In this way, Scripture is not only the script which one performs, but also the means by which one is trained for one’s role.

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22Ibid., 284–285.
While Vanhoozer himself does not develop what it means for Scripture to convey “something of the reality itself,” this might be helpfully thought of in terms of Michael Rea’s concept of mediated experience. Borrowing from Derek Parfit’s notion of q-memory, Rea develops the idea that Scripture allows the reader to gain a sense of what the presence of the divine is like through the way in which Scripture evokes mediated experiences of God. A mediated experience conveys what something is like in a way analogous to the way implanting someone else’s memories in one’s mind could convey a sense of what pineapple tastes like even if one had never tasted pineapple. The implanted memory mediates not merely propositional knowledge but the qualitative feel or phenomenal character of the thing itself.\(^{23}\)

All of this resonates nicely with our explanation of Scripture facilitating pseudo-shared attention. In the same way that implanted memories of tasting different wines could train one’s palate without one ever having tasted any wine directly, pseudo-shared attention facilitated by Scripture could train one’s faculties to detect the presence of and to interact with the divine. In experiencing what it would be like if one were the paralytic forgiven by God, one is trained to enter into the drama of Scripture, to live as one forgiven by God.

Just as Vanhoozer’s performance interpretation and Rea’s mediated experience complements our category of pseudo-shared attention, so also Nicholas Wolterstorff’s concept of presentational discourse complements our constitutive use category, explaining how God might use a fixed text largely concerned with the past to share attention with a person here and now. Presentational discourse, as distinct from authorial discourse, involves saying something by presenting to someone a previously authored text, whether authored by oneself or someone else.\(^{24}\)

Consider two examples of how such a presentation might look. One might be reading a text privately and then get a sense that one’s attention is being drawn to a particular verse to which one is supposed to pay attention. If the prompting comes from God, a conscious prompting to attend to a passage is conveying a message by presenting that text for one’s notice. To do so by a conscious prompting is to make the presentation a potential instance of shared attention in which one attends to the presented text because one is cooperating with the prompting. Divine causation need not be something of which one is aware, but to prompt one consciously is to make the prompt a relational act with which one may or may not cooperate.

To use an even less esoteric example, suppose one is listening to the preaching of Scripture in a service and one has theological background beliefs such that one takes the proclamation of Scripture by an authorized


representative to be a means of divine speech. If God has, in fact, authorized preachers to present the text of Scripture on His behalf in order that He Himself might engage the persons assembled, then God can present His Word through a fairly pedestrian experience as far as phenomenal fireworks are concerned. This situation would be much like Ray, in the case of Alex, handing notes to Alex through an assistant as she and Alex are cooking.

This case illustrates how the right background beliefs can allow one to engage in shared attention in a case that lacks any mystical tenor whatsoever. It is worth remembering that shared attention in human cases is quite flexible as regards the intensity of the presence conveyed. Staring into the eyes of one’s beloved at the altar is a much more potent experience than pointing out a notable bumper sticker while stuck in traffic, but both are cases of shared attention. The point of the shared attention account is not to assert the importance of esoteric experiences that involve the text, but rather to stress the relational utility of all sorts of shared attention, however plebian they may seem.

Not only is the work of Vanhoozer, Rea, and Wolterstorff consonant with our shared attention account, but this account helps make sense of their proposals. The shared attention account provides a framework that can incorporate the work of all three into a broader relational whole. Rea’s analogy to implanted q-memories is limited when taken as a complete account of the way God’s presence is communicated to a believer with Scripture. Q-memories communicate something of what it is like to taste pineapple or be in the presence of someone. What q-memories do not give one is actual experience of pineapples or an actual relationship with someone. A q-memory of someone may help one know how to interface with that person if he shows up, but it does not give one a relationship with that person, nor does acquiring a q-memory of someone one knows constitute interacting with that person. Yet the mediated experiences Rea has in mind might function to prime one for genuine shared attention, analogous to the way we have suggested pseudo-shared attention might prime one for genuine shared attention. Similarly, while Wolterstorff’s presentational discourse might explain how God could continue to speak through a fixed text, viewing such discourse within the framework of our

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25Such background beliefs might take various forms. For example, Luther and Calvin stress that God has sent preachers for the purpose of dispensing His Word so that preaching, when faithful to Scripture, is the Word of God and Christ is really present. Thus, as noted earlier in section one, for Luther this belief enables one to expect to meet God in the proclamation of Scripture much like the Old Testament tabernacle functioned as a divinely ordained meeting place. Alternatively, Augustine’s view of divine providence and illumination might also generate such expectation. Throughout Confessions, Augustine portrays diverse creaturely realities as vehicles of divine admonition, such as human advice (Monica and Vindicianus), secular books (Platonist writings), and Scripture (Antony and Augustine). For Augustine’s concept of admonitio in Confessions see Patrick E. Van Fleteren, OSA, “Augustine’s Ascent of the Soul in Book VII of the Confessions: A Reconsideration,” Augustinian Studies 4 (1974), 29–72. See the references from section one for the theologies of Luther, Calvin, and the Catholic Church.
account emphasizes the way in which it can be constitutive of an *encounter* with God and helps to explain how it is one might come to be in a position to have such an encounter and to hear such speech. Fundamentally, what our account brings to the table is the ability to unify the insights of Vanhoozer, Rea, and Wolterstorff in a relational framework that can make sense of the rich emphasis on the relational uses of Scripture found in all strands of the Christian tradition.

In conclusion, paying careful attention to the phenomenon of shared attention and to the way in which episodes of shared attention can incorporate a written text allows one to make sense of an affirmation found across the Christian tradition, that God is present in and continues to speak through the Scriptures. We hope to have provided a conceptual framework that captures many of the different ways that an inspired religious text can facilitate acquaintance knowledge of God and to have situated some of the recent developments in philosophy of religion and philosophical theology within this framework in a way that helps make sense of these developments and relate them to one another.

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