



*Routledge New Critical Thinking in Religion,  
Theology and Biblical Studies*

# VISION, MENTAL IMAGERY AND THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

INSIGHTS FROM SCIENCE AND SCRIPTURE

Zoltán Dörnyei



“Zoltán Dörnyei is one of the most formidable researchers I know. In this characteristically fascinating book he traverses a number of usually distinct intellectual worlds to offer us an account of vision which is rich, inspiring and also practical. I can think of no one else who could bring together neuroscience, social science, business and theology into a work so useful and interesting as this one.”

– **Karen Kilby**, Bede Professor of Catholic Theology, Durham University, UK

“In this book, Zoltán Dörnyei offers a masterful multifaceted exploration of vision through the prism of his cross-disciplinary expertise in science and theology. Substantial, insightful, and practice-oriented, this seminal work is essential reading for anyone wanting to more fully understand and experience the power of vision in Christian life and ministry.”

– **Carolyn Kristjánsson**, PhD, CEC, Trinity Western University, Canada

“We are living in times when many people, both individually and collectively, are seeking purpose in their lives and are longing to discern a vision for a more hopeful future. By bringing together two distinctive lines of inquiry across the social sciences and theology, this book represents a new kind of scholarship, one that reaches imaginatively across these disciplines while at the same time offering concrete practical proposals to any community compelled to respond to vision in action.”

– **Maggie Kubanyiova**, Professor of Language Education, University of Leeds, UK



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# Vision, Mental Imagery and the Christian Life

This book uniquely explores how the notion of vision is presented in modern science and the Bible, and how it can be applied to contemporary Christian contexts. The word “vision,” our ability to see, has been described by an increasing body of scholarship in the social sciences as our capacity for mental imagery and imagination. As such, this unique cognitive capability has been utilised in many fields for a variety of purposes, from arts and psychotherapy to politics and business management, and even for performance enhancement in sports.

The current book argues that a better understanding of vision can have far-reaching practical implications for Christian life and ministry by helping people to align themselves with God’s specific purposes. After a theoretical overview that integrates scientific and theological insights, the final chapters present a variety of strategies that can help believers to discern God’s call through the use of mental imagery and then to develop and cultivate the perceived vision.

The book examines the scientific and biblical principles of vision in a comprehensive manner, with a special emphasis on the practical implications of the issue. As such, it will be of great interest to scholars of Theology, Biblical Studies and Church Growth/Leadership, as well as Organisational Behaviour, Business Management and Psychology.

**Zoltán Dörnyei** is Professor of Psycholinguistics in the School of English, University of Nottingham (UK). During the past three decades he has published over 100 academic papers and 25 books on various aspects of the psychology of second language acquisition. Parallel to his main job, Zoltán has also undertaken training in theology: he obtained an MA in biblical interpretation and a second PhD in Theology at Durham University (UK). His publications in this area include *Christian Faith and English Language Teaching and Learning* (2013, New York: Routledge; with M. Wong and C. Kristjánsson) and *Progressive Creation and the Struggles of Humanity in the Bible: A Canonical Narrative Interpretation* (2018, Eugene, OR: Pickwick).

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# Vision, Mental Imagery and the Christian Life

Insights from Science and Scripture

Zoltán Dörnyei

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# Foreword

Walt Disney died while the Disney World Theme Park in Florida was under construction. At its opening in 1971, an official is said to have commented to his widow, “What a pity Walt Disney didn’t live to see this day.” “Oh,” she replied, “but he did see it.” He may have died before it was completed but he had a vision, a vision that led him to build the “Magic Kingdom” and EPCOT (the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow) in the first place. Vision is a powerful motivating factor, leading us to see a different world and release unrealised potential.

Vision, though, is a spacious word, which is defined differently and used variously in a wide range of fields. It most obviously refers to external physical stimuli which we see with our eyes. But it also relates to receiving inner stimuli which can be just as real and powerful, to a vision for the future as beloved by business people, to a mental image of victory which motivates sports competitors. It also occurs greatly in the Bible to describe the experience of the people of God. The Old Testament prophets had their visions, some described in spectacular and memorable detail, while Peter announced the democratisation of that gift on the Day of Pentecost. From then on, he said, Joel’s prophecy would be fulfilled and many, young and old alike, would have visions and dreams as a sign of living in the last chapter of earth’s history. Paul speaks of the vision he had, while John records one long and often mysterious vision which becomes the climax of Scripture in the book of Revelation. What, if anything, do these different uses of vision have in common, or are they entirely different, unrelated, experiences? It is here that Zoltán Dörnyei’s skills as a respected social scientist, qualified theologian and gifted teacher come into play.

This book achieves a number of things which are highly unusual and, in some cases, even unique. First, it maps the importance of vision in Scripture and Christian experience. As an evangelical shaped by the Reformation, my emphasis has been on words. I have never dismissed visions, especially the Biblical ones, but neither have I really had a place for them or known quite what to do with them. Zoltán has opened my eyes to their importance in Scripture and led me to new understandings and an enriched balance of the complementarity of what is seen as well as heard.

Second, the book uses contemporary social science and its understanding of vision and motivation to portray the subject on a wide canvas and explain what is happening when people have a vision. Social science is used not to reduce or undermine Christian experience, as crude social science has sometimes illegitimately done, but to illuminate it. As an accomplished teacher, Zoltán is able to explain complex social science research in a very accessible form, without over-simplifying it, and apply it to our contemporary experience and lives.

Third, therefore, the book serves as a model of integration between Scripture and social science. It is like the end of a television detective drama where all the pieces fall into place and we say, “Ah, that’s what was going on!” We certainly need to be discerning rather than naïve in our use of the social sciences, but since “all truth is God’s truth,” we have a lot to learn from contemporary research. It is to be hoped that others will use this book as a model of integration which they imitate in their own field and writing. As one who studied sociology in the 1960s, I only wish such an example of integrating the two different fields of sociology and theology had been available then.

Fourth, the book helps to explain the shift of emphasis in the church between vision as an in-breaking, “supernatural” event – a revelation from beyond – and vision as having a dream about what the church should aim to look like in the future, which has contributed to the formation of many a mission statement. The motivational power of vision in business and sports is particularly relevant here.

Fifth, the book is full both of biblical faithfulness and pastoral wisdom. As a committed charismatic, Zoltán is very familiar with the gift of vision as experienced in charismatic churches and not sceptical about them. But neither is he unaware of associated problems. In several chapters he sets out practical and godly wisdom for discerning what visions are authentic and how to handle them and the over-enthusiasm of some who misuse them.

As mentioned in passing earlier, this book is like a good detective series on the TV. When my wife and I begin to watch one, we often comment on how many stories and people are in play at the start and how we are struggling to see how they are related to each other or the main story line. As the episodes unfold, we begin to see connections we had missed until in the end it all falls into place and makes sense. Clarity replaces confusion. That’s what happens here as Zoltán Dörnyei uses his training and experience to explore the theme of vision from several angles.

Within the church, the subject of vision, or visions, has been a controversial issue for many years. Some enthusiastically embrace them as a sign of the Holy Spirit at work without exercising any thought or discernment about them. At the other end of the spectrum, there are others who dismiss them wholesale as belonging to a different age and as having been rendered redundant by the completion of the canon of Scripture. In between, there are some who see their value in other cultures, since they cannot deny the

number of, say, Muslims who are converted to Christ by having a vision rather than by hearing a human preacher, but who do not entertain them in western culture. Still others are happy with the more “secularised” understanding of vision as when we use it to speak of a “vision statement,” whether in business or church, but are uneasy about what charismatic friends understand by a vision.

Zoltán Dörnyei’s book has something to offer and to challenge all, wherever we fall in the kaleidoscope of positions about vision. I hope it is widely read and studied, since it will enrich both our personal discipleship and the church’s experience of God, and in some measure help us to understand one another, therefore promoting the peace which the Holy Spirit gives.

– Derek Tidball, Former Principal of the London  
School of Theology and former  
Chairman of the Evangelical Alliance, UK

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# Introduction

## The nature and significance of vision

In the English language, the word “vision” is commonly used both in everyday parlance and in a variety of professional contexts, and it is a term that most people can readily relate to, even beyond its core meaning of “eyesight.” This is a reflection of the widespread belief that the term has profound relevance to a broad spectrum of human experiences and affairs. Indeed, the notion of vision has been employed widely in a number of different domains, from politics and psychotherapy to business management and anthropology. In our current age, not only does every prominent politician and company CEO purport to have a vision, but so do many human rights campaigners, artists and educators to name a few, and the spectrum of individual visions is further complemented by manifold examples of institutional vision held by, for example, universities, commercial enterprises, community centres and even ballet companies! Vision has also been an important theological concept due to frequent occurrences of the term in the Scriptures, each carrying significant meaning – some would go as far as to say that the Bible itself is largely a product of visionary experiences. Over the past three decades the term has also emerged as a dominant theme in the Christian literature on church growth and church leadership, often seen as a decisive factor concerning the state of the contemporary church in the west.

Thus, in an insightful review article, Ruud van der Helm rightly concludes that “visions show up in diverse contexts, taking many different shapes,”<sup>1</sup> so much so that we can talk about “the vision phenomenon” to cover “the ensemble of claims and products which are called ‘visions’ or could be called as such.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, despite this relatively high profile, there have been surprisingly few focused treatises written on vision in biblical scholarship, and even in the social sciences we find a great deal of misunderstanding, superficial interpretation and somewhat contradictory conceptualisation surrounding the term. It is therefore useful to begin the exploration of the topic with an introductory chapter that lays the foundations for the subsequent discussion

1 van der Helm, “The Vision Phenomenon,” 96.

2 Ibid.



## 2 Introduction

by examining the exact nature and significance of vision. After an initial stocktaking of the multiple meanings that the term covers, we will move on to address four pertinent issues: the benefits of integrating scientific and theological insights in understanding the nature of vision; the significance of the notion of vision in both fields; the difference between vision and other related concepts (e.g. imagination and revelation); and finally, possible ways in which vision can enrich Christian life and ministry. The Introduction will conclude with suggestions on how to read the material selectively if time is at a premium.

### The meaning of the term “vision”

Even the most cursory exploration of the term “vision” reveals that it has several different meanings. In contemporary English, the word occurs in at least three distinct senses:

- (a) *Physical perception*, which is commonly used to refer to someone’s eyesight, for example in sentences such as “*My vision has deteriorated since last time*” or “*Pilots need perfect vision.*”
- (b) *Mental picture*, which concerns various forms of internal images and visualisations such as memory images, daydreams, fantasies, creative imagination and spiritual revelations (e.g. prophetic image). This “internal sight” has been captured expressively in the phrase “mind’s eye,” as coined by Shakespeare in a dialogue from his play *Hamlet*, where the title character explains: “*My father – methinks I see my father. / Where, my lord? / In my mind’s eye, Horatio.*”<sup>3</sup>
- (c) *Future aspiration*, which is a meaning frequently ascribed to the ambitions of politicians or business leaders in contexts such as “*Walt Disney’s vision was to establish a theme park in California.*”

Thus, in the English language “vision” can refer either to seeing something through one’s *physical eyes* or in the *mind’s eye*, and in the latter case it can also denote *foreseeing* a picture of a desired future in one’s imagination.<sup>4</sup> In the *British National Corpus*, which is a digitalised, 100-million-word collection of samples of written and spoken language from a wide range of sources,<sup>5</sup> we find more than 4,000 occurrences of the word, mostly

3 Act 1, Scene 2. Although Shakespeare is usually credited with coining the term, a version of the phrase also appears in the Man of Law’s Tale in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (end of 14th century), where we read about a blind Christian man who could only see with the “eyes of his mind” (“*eyen of his mynde*”).

4 We should note, however, that although these three different meanings are expressed by the same word in English, this is not necessarily the case in other languages; in Hungarian, for example, we find a different word for each semantic referent.

5 See [www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/](http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/).

corresponding to these three semantic domains; interestingly, however, the meaning that most people would probably judge to be the basic reference of the term, physical perception, is in fact only the second most common usage. The most popular meaning of vision concerns the third option listed earlier, that is, a hoped-for, desirable future state or plan. This meaning has become particularly popular in business and political discourse over the past four decades to refer to the envisaged future goals and mission plans of prominent leaders or successful companies (e.g. “*Mr. A’s predecessor had the vision of a large, permanent staff . . .*”), but the *British National Corpus* confirms that the term also occurs widely in everyday parlance (e.g. “*. . . what we talked about was a kind of vision of what we might do . . .*”).

In sum, there is a fair amount of fluidity surrounding the word “vision,” and discussions of vision often conjure up different meanings for different people – even scholarly arguments often mix up different aspects of the notion and thus render the findings somewhat ambiguous. However, despite the somewhat equivocal nature of the term, we do not find any calls in the literature to abandon its use on account of it being too broad or vague. It will be argued in this book that there is good reason for this: the various layers and facets of the notion are ultimately interlinked as they are all connected to one of humanity’s most remarkable capabilities, the “faculty of mental imagery.” It is the desire to understand better this special faculty that has motivated the combined approach taken in the current book, namely to integrate considerations of science and theology, so let us begin the discussion by examining the potential benefits of this approach.

## The complementary relationship between science and theology in understanding vision

My first encounter with the notion of vision occurred in my scientific research on the psychology of language learning,<sup>6</sup> and this encounter convinced me that vision was more than simply a metaphor to describe human imagination. I discovered that the concept of vision had concrete neuroscientific validity, as the brain uses virtually the same neural regions to generate mental images as it does to produce “real” images of what one actually sees.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, over the past three decades cognitive neuroscience has provided ample evidence that from the brain’s perspective there is relatively little difference between *physically sensing* something (i.e. seeing, hearing, smelling, etc.) and *mentally simulating* the same sensation. Having completed a major

6 E.g. Dörnyei, “Future Self-Guides and Vision”; Dörnyei and Chan, “Motivation and Vision.”

7 In their authoritative overview of cognitive neuroscience, Gazzaniga, Ivry and Mangun (*Cognitive Neuroscience*, 239) sum this up as follows: “The evidence provides a compelling case that mental imagery uses many of the same processes critical for perception. The sights in an image are likely to activate visual areas of the brain; the sounds, auditory areas; and the smells, olfactory areas.”

## 4 Introduction

research project examining the practical implications of vision in language education,<sup>8</sup> I came to the realisation that my findings could potentially also be relevant to theology and that, in fact, theology could provide further clarification of the concept of vision: while neuropsychology can speak about the distinctive and indeed remarkable human faculty of visualising imaginary pictures and scenes, theology can give meaning to this capability by linking it to God's created order. Scientific insights still remain useful for a theological understanding, though, as they can offer a coherent framework to accommodate various, rather fragmented theological considerations related to different aspects of visions, dreams and prophecy.

Thus, this book is based on the tenet that science and theology can offer different but complementary insights into the nature of God's creation, and the integrated approach adopted in the following chapters replicates my understanding of the fuller notion of vision by moving from the material realm (science) to the ethereal (theology). This is, in fact, not unlike how divine vision often operates: it draws on imagery that humans are familiar with in the physical world, but then shifts the receivers' attention from this material world to an alternative reality, thereby creating, in effect, an interface between the earthly and heavenly spheres.

### The significance of vision

At the heart of almost every discussion of the significance of vision lies an observation summarised by Gregory Boyd as follows: "it's not so much what we intellectually believe is true that impacts us; it's what we experience as real,"<sup>9</sup> a principle that is reflected in everyday sayings such as "I'll believe it when I see it." As mentioned briefly earlier, the uniqueness of the faculty of vision is in its ability to create an experience of an envisaged reality that can be as vivid and life-like as the material reality that we perceive through our physical senses. This is explained by the fact that the brain uses virtually the same processing regions to generate the "imaginary" experience as for processing the concrete experience of the world. As a result, the alternative reality can have the same intensity of impact on humans as the physical reality of the material world.<sup>10</sup>

This unique imaginary faculty naturally lends itself to be utilised in *artistic expression*, and although this topic is beyond the scope of the current book, by way of illustration of this interrelationship of vision and art, here is what C. S. Lewis said about the creation of his famous *Narnia* series:<sup>11</sup>

8 Dörnyei and Kubanyiova, *Motivating Learners*.

9 Boyd, *Seeing Is Believing*, 12.

10 E.g. in a paper in the journal *Brain Research*, Decety and Grézes ("The Power of Simulation," 4) conclude, "One fascinating characteristic of human nature is our ability to consciously use our imagination to simulate reality as well as fictional worlds."

11 I am grateful to Sam Wong for drawing my attention to this quote.

All my seven Narnian books, and my three science fiction books, began with seeing pictures in my head. At first they were not a story, just pictures. The *Lion* [i.e. *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*] all began with a picture of a Faun carrying an umbrella and parcels in a snowy wood. This picture had been in my mind since I was about sixteen. Then one day, when I was about forty, I said to myself: "Let's try to make a story about it." At first I had very little idea how the story would go. But then suddenly Aslan came bounding into it. . . . I don't know where the Lion came from or why He came. But once He was there He pulled the whole story together.<sup>12</sup>

The faculty of vision has also been utilised in *science* and *politics*. Chapters 1 and 2 will elaborate on scientific applications, but it might be interesting to note here as a preliminary illustration that while Albert Einstein was still a teenager, he repeatedly imagined himself chasing after a beam of light in space and visualised how the scene would look from this perspective. He recalled later that this thought experiment had played a decisive role in his development of the theory of special relativity.<sup>13</sup> Regarding politics, one of the most memorable examples of the application of vision was in a speech given by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. about civil rights and racial equality in the 1960s. As will be further discussed later, at the end of this speech he departed from his prepared text and finished by describing an extended vision of a brighter future, punctuated with eight occurrences of the now legendary phrase, "*I have a dream. . . .*" His vision of an alternative future touched his hearers in a way that rational arguments, however convincing, could not have.

Finally, and most importantly for our current purpose, the existence of a dual sensory system in humans – consisting of outward physical senses on the one hand and an inner system of mentally simulated senses on the other – also has special *theological* relevance. The significance of the physical senses does not need any particular justification in view of the fact that humans were created to serve as stewards of material creation, and therefore it is clear that in order to be able to oversee the world around them, they need to receive ongoing multi-sensory (i.e. visual, auditory, tactile, gustatory and olfactory) stimuli. However, the internal senses are somewhat different in this respect in that they are not directly required for experiencing the physical environment. Yet, as will be argued in Chapters 3 and 4, the alternative sensory system is in fact equally important for the successful functioning of God's stewards, because the human ability to envisage and behold non-material reality opens up a further, mental, channel that enables humans to receive divine communication from the Creator. Indeed,

12 Lewis, *On Stories*, 53–54.

13 See, Norton, "Chasing the Light"; Robertson, *The Mind's Eye*, 89–90.

## 6 Introduction

Chapter 3 will show that visions in the Bible almost always occur having this function, allowing prophets – and after Pentecost, also Christian believers in general – to receive direct messages from God; as William Arnold succinctly summarises, visions are “audiovisual means of communication between a heavenly being and an earthly recipient.”<sup>14</sup>

Such an understanding of the faculty of vision is by no means new. As early as at the beginning of the 5th century, Augustine of Hippo submitted that “The one thing certain, which I think it is enough to insist on for the time being, is that there is a kind of *spiritual element* in us where the *likenesses of bodily things* [i.e. visions] are formed”<sup>15</sup> (emphasis added). In other words, and we shall see this later in more detail, Augustine believed that the faculty of internal vision is ultimately a “spiritual element” embedded in corporeal humans, and as such it resonates with the celestial realm. The thesis of my previous work on *Progressive Creation and the Struggles of Humanity in the Bible*<sup>16</sup> accentuated the declaration of Jesus Christ in John 6:17 that “My Father is still working, and I also am working,” and the current book understands divine vision, as described in the Scriptures, as *one of the main vehicles of God’s intervention in human history*. This belief is consistent with Karl Rahner’s assertion that “the history of Christianity would be unthinkable without prophetic and visionary elements (in the broadest sense).”<sup>17</sup>

### How is vision different from other related concepts?

Given the broad range of meanings that the term vision can subsume, it is important to distinguish the notion from other related concepts with which it has been linked – and often confused – in the past. We shall start by examining three terms – imagination, religious experience and revelation – that have frequently been used in biblical scholarship to include a visionary dimension. The section will then conclude with distinguishing “vision” from “mission” as used in the (church) leadership literature.

#### *Vision and imagination*

In a treatise on *imagination* within his work *On the Soul* (350 BC), Aristotle defined the notion in relation to “image” – as “the process by which we say that an image is presented to us”<sup>18</sup> – and, consequently, imagination and mental imagery have often been treated as equivalent terms in philosophy

14 Arnold, “Visions,” 802.

15 Augustine, *On the Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 12.49 (p. 490).

16 Dörnyei, *Progressive Creation*.

17 Rahner, *Visions and Prophecies*, 15.

18 [www.loebclassics.com/view/aristotle-soul/1957/pb\\_LCL288.159.xml](http://www.loebclassics.com/view/aristotle-soul/1957/pb_LCL288.159.xml). For a detailed discussion of Aristotle’s conception of imagination, see Karnes, *Imagination*, 23–61; as she

and theology; as Nigel Thomas summarises, particularly prior to the 20th century, imagination was predominantly used “to name the faculty of image production (or the mental arena in which images appear),”<sup>19</sup> and this practice has remained prevalent also in some modern scholarship. For example, Garrett Green has defined imagination as a faculty that “makes present through images what is inaccessible to direct experience,”<sup>20</sup> and Colin McGinn declared, “I would suggest regarding the mind as centrally a device for imagining. We are *Homo imaginans*. It is the mental image and its various elaborations that sums up what the human most characteristically is.”<sup>21</sup>

Representing a somewhat different perspective, Kevin Vanhoozer argues that “the imagination is not merely a factory for producing mental images,”<sup>22</sup> because the notion assumes particular importance “when we consider its verbal rather than pictorial application,”<sup>23</sup> especially when it is associated with creative language such as metaphors. As he further asserts, the Bible is replete with metaphors,<sup>24</sup> which is no accident given that perceiving the divine requires humans to relate the essentially unfathomable to the experiences and realities of their own world, which is precisely what metaphors achieve with great effectiveness. It is, then, the imagination which ultimately produces the creative link between the unfamiliar and the familiar, and therefore, Vanhoozer submits that “Disciples need imagination to stay awake to the reality of what is in Christ.”<sup>25</sup> He also adds that “reading Scripture theologically further requires imagination, the faculty which makes sense of things, locating particular bits and pieces within larger patterns.”<sup>26</sup> Indeed, if we understand imagination as the ability to go beyond reality, it is in itself an act of imagination to engage with the written text of Scripture and see the larger whole.

Vanhoozer’s overall conclusion is that imagination is “a cognitive faculty for creating meaning through making and then verbalizing conceptual associations (i.e. likening).”<sup>27</sup> This understanding of a broad mental function has been supported by psychological research; in a recent review, for example, Luca Tateo has defined imagination as “a fundamental psychological higher function that elaborates meaning by linguistic and iconic signs,

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concludes, Aristotle uses the notion for a wide range of purposes, “so wide that it is difficult to find a coherent theory of imagination at the heart of them” (p. 33).

19 Thomas, “Theories of Imagery,” 207–208; see also Thomas, “The Multidimensional Spectrum of Imagination.”

20 Green, *Imagining God*, 62.

21 McGinn, *Mindsight*, 5. Another example is Karnes’s comprehensive book on *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages*, where she states at the beginning, “The focus of this study is solely on mental images” (p. 17), which she then discusses as being subsumed under the notion of imagination.

22 Vanhoozer, “C. S. Lewis on the Imagination,” 99.

23 Vanhoozer, “Imagination in Theology,” 442.

24 Vanhoozer, *Pictures at a Theological Exhibition*, 28.

25 Vanhoozer, “C. S. Lewis on the Imagination,” 104.

26 Vanhoozer, “Imagination in Theology,” 442.

27 Vanhoozer, “C. S. Lewis on the Imagination,” 99.

related to memory, fantasy and intelligence, playing a crucial role in scientific thinking, art, and societal change as well as in education and promotion of wellbeing.”<sup>28</sup> In this sense, Tateo underlines, “it is distinct from fantasy, imagery and simulation, being the basic function underlying them”.<sup>29</sup> In a similar vein, other scholars have used “imagination” as an umbrella-term that subsumes a long list of related phenomena such as creativity, originality, fantasy, innovation, inventiveness and idiosyncrasy, as well as a variety of mental activities such as supposing, pretending, thinking of possibilities, considering hypothetical options, conjuring up images, stories and projections of things not present, planning for and anticipating the future, and even thinking counterfactually.<sup>30</sup> In *The Oxford Handbook of the Development of Imagination*, Marjorie Taylor is thus right to conclude that various authors differ in their views of how to define imagination and its relation to mental imagery, creativity and memory.<sup>31</sup>

To summarise, there is no doubt that imagination is an important feature of the human mind, yet it is also clear that the faculty of vision is different from, although often contributing to, this higher mental function. The proposal that “imagination” in the broader sense is necessary for relating to God and the Scriptures is a convincing one; in fact, Paul Avis starts his book on *God and the Creative Imagination* by declaring, “My thesis in this book is that Christianity lives supremely from the imagination,”<sup>32</sup> and then proposes an understanding of imagination that is very close to the view of vision that was put forward earlier in the current work:

My starting point is the conviction that divine revelation is given above all (though certainly not exclusively) in modes that are addressed to the human imagination, rather than to any other faculty (such as the analytical reason or the moral conscience).<sup>33</sup>

In the end, however, it was deemed best for the current book to avoid using imagination as a technical term for two main reasons. First, the attraction of the notion of “vision” is partly that it can be defined with consistency within a neuropsychological framework, whereas the semantic breadth of the term imagination defies such efforts, as illustrated for example by Trevor Hart:

What is imagination? There is no single or simple answer to this question. . . . Having stopped and thought about those activities and

28 Tateo, “Just an Illusion?” 1

29 Ibid.

30 See e.g. Modell, *Imagination*, 110; Moulton and Kosslyn, “Imagining Predictions,” 1279; Runco and Pina, “Imagination and Creativity,” 379; Taylor, “Transcending Time,” 9; Taylor et al., “Harnessing the Imagination,” 429–430; Thomas, “Imagination.”

31 Taylor, “Transcending Time,” 9.

32 Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination*, 3.

33 Ibid.



phenomena that we intuitively associate with the imaginative, attempts to list its key contributions reveal its basic and pervasive influence on much if not most of what, humanly, we do in the world and experience of it.<sup>34</sup>

Second, in spite of the relevance of imagination to Christian thinking, the term itself is, strictly speaking, not biblical; as Alison Searle sums up, there is “no direct correlate in either Hebrew or Greek for our English word imagination. Various English translations of the Bible have rendered different words from the original by this term or its cognates, but they are not consistent.”<sup>35</sup> In fact, Vanhoozer adds that not only is there no Hebrew or Greek biblical term for imagination, but the influential King James Version has actually created *prejudice* against the word by using it pejoratively<sup>36</sup> in contexts such as “imagination of the evil heart” (Jer 3:17), “wicked imaginations” (Prov 6:18) or “proud in the imagination of their hearts” (Luke 1:51).<sup>37</sup>

### *Vision and religious experience*

When vision is used in the sense of seeing in the mind’s eye (i.e. not as physical sight), the notion is often conflated with unique and out-of-the-ordinary human experiences that may accompany a vision; that is, when we hear that someone has “seen a vision,” we normally assume this to be more than merely a mental picture. Rather, we suppose that the visionary experience was accompanied by some form of altered state of consciousness in the context of a “psychedelic” vision or a religious experience in spiritual contexts. There is no question that vision sometimes occurs as embedded within some unique physical experience; for example, in the Old Testament, Balaam is described as receiving a divine vision while in some kind of altered bodily state – “the oracle of one who hears the words of God, who sees the vision of the Almighty, who falls down, but with eyes uncovered” (Num 24:4 and 16) – and similarly, the prophet Daniel narrates that “So I was left alone to see this great vision. My strength left me, and my complexion grew deathly pale, and I retained no strength. Then I heard the sound of his words; and when I heard the sound of his words, I fell into a trance,<sup>38</sup> face to the ground” (Dan 10:8–9). In the New Testament, the Apostle Peter also “fell into a trance [*ékstasis*]” (Acts 10:10) when he received the momentous

34 Hart, “Imagination,” 321.

35 Searle, *The Eyes of Your Heart*, 32–33. For a summary of the various Greek and Hebrew concepts related to imagination in the biblical corpus, as well as the different ways in which they have been translated into English, see *ibid.*, 32–34.

36 Vanhoozer, *Pictures at a Theological Exhibition*, 19.

37 See also Gen 6:5; 8:21; Jer 3:7; 7:24; 9:14; 11:18; 13:10; 18:12; 23:17; Lam 3:60–61; Rom 1:21; 2 Cor 10:5.

38 The meaning of the Hebrew word (*râdam*) literally means “falling into heavy sleep,” but the context shows that in this case it refers to more than ordinary sleep; this is further indicated by the fact that during the vision Daniel actually “stood up trembling” (Dan 10:12).