Dreams of the Hebrews and Other Ancient Peoples: A Contextual Panoply for Religious Minds

O.N. Shogunle, Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State, Nigeria; email: seyi.shogunle@oouagoiwoye.edu.ng.

B.S. Taiwo, Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Lagos, Akoka, Lagos State, Nigeria; email: taiwobabawale@yahoo.com.

Abstract

The Bible, as well as other great books of historical and revealed religions, shows traces of a general and substantial belief in dreams. Joseph saw eleven stars bow to him; he was the twelfth star. The famine of Egypt was revealed by a vision of fat and lean cattle. The parents of Christ were warned of the cruel edict of Herod, and fled with the Divine Child into Egypt. Pilate's wife, through the influence of a dream advised her husband to have nothing to do with the conviction of Christ. Consequently, most people have a haunting notion that there is more meaning in dreams than admitted. Students find volumes of research about dreams in various areas. Medical men are working on the psychology of dreaming in laboratories in many of the leading hospitals and universities, while others, following the likes of Freud and Jung, make studies from the standpoint of psychiatry, or anthropology, or history, and importantly, religion. In the Old Testament, a dream was a veritable avenue through which God communicated with His people in order to warn, direct and guide them. Furthermore, this same method of the divine dream is recorded among the Ancient Near Eastern Peoples (ANE), some of which existed before the biblical Hebrews. Such dreams were very much revelational and often with precise accuracy, just like those recorded by the Jews. This paper therefore theologically explores these ancient peoples and their dreams from a didactic context. The paper employs a descriptive research method as well as textual analysis of a diachronic type to interrogate the research focus. The paper concludes and recommends that contemporary Christians should be more intentional about cultivating their natural giftedness in the areas of dreams and visions, as well as the understanding of the import and impact of dreams as an oracular medium that is not demonic but an important revelatory and didactic process that is both divine and biblical.

Keywords: *ancient peoples, dreams, Hebrews, religious minds*

1. Introduction

Van de Castle (1994) explains that the earliest clues about the content of ancient dreams (in the context of the ancient near east (ANE)) are derived from materials dating back approximately five thousand years. The dreamers were inhabitants of the first urban centres in Mesopotamia, sometimes called "the cradle of civilization" and a region roughly corresponding to the central region of modern Iraq. With the development of irrigation canals, agriculture flourished in the previously arid land, and substantial cities, some containing over a hundred thousand inhabitants gradually developed. The Sumerians were the first cultural group residing in Mesopotamia and were followed by the Akkadians, the Babylonians, and the Assyrians as well as several invading tribes from the north and east. These nations and/or city-states had a rich practice built around their religious convictions and communal beliefs. One of such is the concept and significance of dreams and their symbolic interrelatedness to everyday life and fortunes. It is this practice that this paper investigated through the lens of Jewish culture and orthodoxy. This is done with the view to interrogating the discourse within its contemporary context and didactic orthopraxy.

2. Dreams and Their Interpretations in the Early Periods of Mesopotamia

In those days, kings ruled from impressive palaces such as the one at Mari, which covered roughly seven acres and contained nearly three hundred rooms. An elaborate pantheon of deities evolved. In the city of Babylon, there were fifty-five shrines to Marduk, one of the principal gods, fifty-three temples to other great gods, three hundred to earth gods, and six hundred to heavenly gods. Hundreds of altars to receive gifts and sacrifices were scattered about the city. The waking and dreaming Mesopotamian mind gave prominent attention to kings and deities.

Today's knowledge of Mesopotamian dream lore is based upon the fragmentary written material unearthed by various expeditions. The Sumerians' earliest records, which date to approximately 3100 BCE, involved pictographs, but by around 2700 BCE they had developed cuneiform, which is a form of writing utilizing wedge-shaped indentations pressed into clay tablets or cylinders. As the cuneiform system expanded to more than seven hundred different signs, the Sumerians were able to record not only business transactions and accounts of royal battles and other deeds, but also the mythology and religious beliefs of the time (Adler, 1936).

The most extensive and authoritative source on Mesopotamian dreams is the *Interpretation of Dreams in the Ancient Near East with a Translation of an Assyrian Dream-Book* by Leo Oppenheim (1956), a Professor of Assyriology at the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute. Most of the clay tablets containing information relevant to dreams were excavated from the time of Assurbanipal and were the relics of that Assyrian King who ruled in the seventh century BCE and was renowned as a dedicated scholar. Nearly twenty-five thousand clay tablets collected from many historical eras were found in his archives, including twelve broken tablets recounting the epic adventures of the legendary hero-king, Gilgamesh.

The Gilgamesh epic represents a remarkable chronicle of dream events, among them the first known references to sequential dreams from the same dreamers. The role of dreams in heralding impending tragic outcomes is also important. When the dream imagery involves such cataclysmic events as heaven roaring, the earth trembling, and lightning flashing, one is put on notice that tragedy will soon befall an important character. A similar awareness of the correlation between outer and inner turmoil characterizes many great works of literature, including Shakespeare's tragedies.

In the Gilgamesh saga, dream interpretations which turn out to be correct bring good fortune, while incorrect interpretations bring misfortune to the dreamer. Indications are given that dreamers could utilize various techniques to induce dreams or to increase the possibility that a deity will manifest itself in a dream to provide some form of guidance. However, according to Van De Castle (1994), the most salient aspect of the Gilgamesh epic, with regard to dreams, is the sophistication it demonstrates concerning the symbolic and metaphorical nature of dream imagery.

Gudea, a Sumerian king who reigned in the city of Lagash c.2200 BCE, was the first known historical figure associated with a dream. "His dream experiences were preserved on two clay cylinders that were not part of Assurbanipal's library" (Van De Castle, 1994:49). Gudea wished to build a temple for his god, Nin-Girsu. The god sent him an enigmatic dream in which a gigantic human-shaped figure, wearing the headgear of a deity but winged like a divine "cloud bird", appeared flanked by two lions. Gudea seemed perplexed, so the god continued, showing him the sun rising and introducing two additional figures. One was a woman pondering a tablet listing the "favourable stars" and the other a warrior drawing the outline of a temple on a lapis lazuli tablet. A basket to carry earth and a brick mould with a brick in it were placed before Gudea. The dream closed with an image of an impatient donkey pawing the ground, before the giant figure. Puzzled by his dream, Gudea approached the goddess Gatumdug for assistance in understanding its meaning by engaging in extensive rituals and prayers. She explained that the giant figure was Nin-Girsu and identified the other figures as deities, discussed the significance of the tools, and concluded that the impatient donkey

represented Gudea in his zeal to build the temple: Gudea seemed to be imperfectly satisfied by the goddess's interpretation and prayed for a clearer message from his god. Nin-Girsu then appeared in a dream, standing at the head of Gudea, and promised him a sign which would indicate the day on which the work should start.

Sometimes a deity might send a dream message to a priest or to a large number of dreamers simultaneously. On the eve of an important battle against Elamite invaders, Assurbanipal apparently felt some reluctance to attack. One of his priests reported a dream in which the goddess Ishtar appeared with a quiver on both shoulders and a bow in her hand. She indicated that Assurbanipal should "eat food, drink wine, enjoy music, and exult her divinity" because she would ensure victory for him the next day. A magnificently preserved series of large engraved panels in the British Museum graphically details the defeat of the Elamites which followed. In another account of this incident, Ishtar also appeared in the dreams of members of Assurbanipal's army and promised them victory (Capps, 2001).

It is difficult to catalogue or classify ancient dream reports because very limited datable source-materials are available. In the case of Mesopotamian dreams, there is the Sumerian description of King Gudea's dreams (2200 BCE), a Hittite text describing the dreams of King Hattushili and his wife (C12th BCE). Although no specific historical person or era was involved in the epic of Gilgamesh, this literary text in Sumerian and Akkadian does provide valuable information about ancient dream beliefs and practices.

The typical dream report in the above sources contains what Oppenheim (1956:179-373) refers to as "frame:" information is provided about the dreamer, the locality and circumstances of the dream, the dreamer's reaction, and the eventual outcome of the promise or prediction contained in the dream. Based upon Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Old Testament sources, Oppenheim proposed classifying dreams from the ancient Near East as message dreams. Most message representatives would appear at the ruler's head and deliver a message about an event of personal significance to the dreamer. The dreamer generally woke suddenly after the deity disappeared.

Oppenheim (1956) proposed that message dreams are most easily explained at an incubation site. Although, descriptions of incubation procedures are rare in the cuneiform texts, there are enough brief references to suggest that the practice of incubation or dream-seeking was familiar to the Mesopotamians. A person wishing to undergo the process would sleep in a special temple and offer a prayer such as the following to the deity associated with that site:

> "Reveal thyself to me and let me behold a favourable dream. May the dream that I dream be favourable; may the dream that I dream be [on] time. May Makhir, the goddess of dreams, stand at my head and let me enter the temple of the gods and the house of life."

A ruler who sought a message-dream would go to a temple or sanctuary of the deity, engage in various preparatory rituals, and stay there overnight. The setting would be strongly suggestive, so the dreamer might well experience imagery of the type expected to be associated with that deity's appearance or attributes. If the dreamer were less than completely successful in securing the desired dream, subsequent accounts of the ruler's incubation experience would probably be modified and edited to correspond with the particular theological traditions of that time and region.

Citizens of the ANE frequently tried to discern their personal destiny by scrutinizing various signs, called *omina,* which could range from patterns of stars in the sky to the movements of birds in flight to the shape of a puddle in front of one's door. *Omina* associated with the patterns found on sheep's livers held as much interest for diviners as did dreams, but only a few omen-texts involving dreams have survived.

Omen-texts consisted of lists specifying the outcomes associated with a number of signs, in short, cause-and-effect statements. Generally, categorically related signs were listed together. With regards to dreams, various outcomes were listed for a man who dreams of turning into various kinds of animals, wearing various types of clothing, or visiting various locations. The text might say, for example, "if a dead person kisses a man, one near to him will die" or, if a man dreams he "spatters himself with his own urine, he will forget what he has said". These interpretations sound plausible if certain assumptions are made; in the latter case one might take the determination of personal hygiene to be symptomatic of intoxication or senility, both of which are accompanied by memory loss. Many of the *omina*, however, seem to us to have no rational relation to the events they were thought to foretell, perhaps in part because it is impossible to uncover the puns and verbal associations buried in a dead language (Van De Castle, 1994).

The third class of dream was called symbolic by Oppenheim (1956:179-373). These complex dreams involved unusual interactions with gods, stars, people, animals, or innumerable objects; in short, they expressed the dreamer's personality dynamics. These dreams were considered dangerous and indicative of disease or encounters with evil and demonic powers. To mention them increased their potency, and they were hardly ever recorded unless their interpretation somehow served to diminish the threatening quality.

The Mesopotamians not only attempted to understand dreams and their future implications, but also to forestall any negative events that they predicted. The root word used in various ancient Near East languages for dealing with dreams had two associated meanings: one that implied comprehension and the other that suggested removal. In English, there is a similar linkage in the word "solve" and its derivative "dissolve". The Mesopotamians dreamer wished both to "solve" a dream by determining its meaning, and to "dissolve" its potential evil consequences.

We might sometimes share our dreams with a family member or a friend in an attempt to understand them and thereby destroy the emotional power they have over us. The Mesopotamians had a ritual in which they told their dreams to a lump of clay and rubbed it over their entire body, saying, "lump! In your substance my substance has been fused, and in my substance your substance has been fused!" The dreamer then told the clay all the dreams and said to it, "As I shall throw you into the water, you will crumble and disintegrate, and may the evil consequences of all the dreams seen be gone, be melted away, and be many miles removed from my body." Another variation is to tell the dream to a reed and then burn it, blowing on the fire to ensure its complete destruction. Amulets or charms to protect against bad dreams were also used. These rituals were particularly common when the dream was a nightmare or involved forbidden activities or sexual practices. The disturbing content of such dreams could not be mentioned to others and had to be dispelled magically to ward off possible evil consequence. Just as pleasant dreams were viewed as a sign of divine favour and good health, evil dreams were considered to arise from the presence of demonic forces (Castenada, 1993). They occurred because protective spirits, who would guard the person's happiness and well-being, were absent. If these protective spirits abandoned a person, then ill health and other misfortunes could occur. Various demonic figures were always ready to swarm up from the underworld to attack people in their dreams, and evil dreams could also be sent by enemies if the dreamer were unprotected. The evil dream was not really in a separate category but rather fit into the general Mesopotamian demonology, in which magic and counter magic beliefs and practices were heavily emphasized.

There were apparently very few dream interpreters in Sumer and Akkad; such individuals were held in low regard and were often women who also practiced necromancy or communication with the dead. Dream interpreters were also conspicuously absent at the later court of Assyria, although there were numerous diviners, soothsayers, and exorcists present.

3. Dreams in the Old Testament

Dreams, and the gifts God bestows in dreams, figure prominently in the Old Testament. Psalm 127 says that the Lord "giveth unto his beloved in their sleep." God granted Solomon's gift of wisdom in a dream. Elsewhere, God announced, "if anyone among you is a Prophet, I will make myself known to him in a vision, I will speak to him in a dream (Num: 12:6)." The story of Jacob offers a striking example of God's speaking in a dream. Jacob dreamed of a ladder extending from earth to heaven with a procession of angels ascending and descending the ladder. God stood above the ladder and told Jacob that his offspring would spread throughout the world (Gen 28:12-13). The ladder can be viewed as a powerful visual metaphor for the dream as a connecting link between God and his selected prophets (Van de Castle, 1972).

In addition to giving guidance to the Hebrew prophets for the benefit of their own people, God also appeared in their dreams to provide interpretation for dreams which were troubling their Gentile rulers. Daniel gained political power in Babylon by interpreting Nebuchadnezzar's dreams (Dan 2:27-42), as did Joseph in Egypt when he explained Pharaoh's (Gen 41). In both cases this power eventually led to the freeing of the Jews from bondage.

Dreams are viewed in a broader context in the sixty-three volumes of the Talmud; the collection of rabbinical literature that connects the Old Testament with contemporary Judaism. Representing the contributions of over two thousand scholars from various countries, the Talmud is divided into a Palestinian Talmud, dating from around 500 BCE, and a larger Babylonian Talmud, compiled during the Greco-Roman period from 200 BCE to about 300 CE. There are 217 references to dreams in the Talmud, attributed to many different sages and scholars, "so it's not surprising that many different viewpoints toward dreams are expressed (Lorand, 1957:92-97)."

Mesopotamian influences may account for the belief that supernatural entities such as evil spirits, demons and the returning dead could instigate dreams. One demon, thought to cause erotic dreams, was described as hairy and resembling a goat. Another demon associated with sexual dreams was Lilith, who preyed upon those who sleep alone in a house. She appeared in a female form when approaching men and in a male form when approaching women. Lilith's sister, Naamah, and another female spirit called Igrath also caused sexual and emission (wet) dreams.

The Jews also believed that good supernatural entities could be sources of dreams. Angels, who resided in a special department in heaven, were sent in dreams as messengers from God. The chief angel, Gabriel, was known as the prince of dreams. Soul travel was yet another explanation for dreams. The Jews believed that it was possible for a part of the soul to depart during sleep and travel all over the world. What it saw would constitute the dream.

Some dreams were thought to have a physical cause, such as when bad dreams originate from overindulgence in food. Temperature could also influence dreams; heat and moisture produced pleasurable dreams, while coldness and dryness yielded unpleasant dreams. Events from the previous day could also contribute to the creations of dreams. Many factors, including the dreamer's occupation, economic circumstances, and state of unhappiness, had to be taken into account when making an interpretation and interpretations could vary (Van De Castle, 1994).

4. The Hebrew Theory of Dreams

Throughout the Old Testament the belief that Yahweh is concerned with human beings and makes direct contact with them in other to give them direction and guidance is common. Dream and vision experiences were one medium of this communication. Through this means, which was not subject to ego control, God brought men special knowledge of the world around them, and also knowledge of his divine reality and will

(Kelsey, 1974). Dreams and visions were an avenue of revelation that Yahweh continued to use because from time to time they were the best, or even the only way he could make connection. Furthermore, because of their importance, false prophets and charlatans sometimes manufactured false dreams and false interpretations of dreams in order to meet their own needs, or the needs of those who hired them, and so the Bible does not express only reverence for dreams; it also offers critical evaluation of them so that men will not be duped by false religions and false religious leaders.

In the first place, there is no clear-cut distinction between the dream and the vision in the Hebrew language; where moderns see a great gulf of separation, the Hebrews did not. Although the two experiences were sometimes distinguished, more often they were seen as aspects of the same basic perception of reality, different sides of the same encounter from beyond the world of sense experience. The word dream (חֲלוֹם *chalom, or the verb* חָלַם *chalam*) is related to the Aramaic and Hebrew verb "to be made healthy or strong." The dream is spoken of almost as if this were the form of the experience whose content comes through as a vision. The dream then is the mode or expression of the experience, while the vision is the content, the substance of what is seen or visualized or experienced. Dreams are the normal way to receive such experiences, but the same content can break through in waking moments, and this can happen either out of the blue or as a man turns to this reality for direction. This same overlapping of meaning is also found in the Greek of the New Testament (Shogunle, 2008).

There are many examples in which a dream experience is referred to as a vision of the night, as in I Samuel 3:15, Job 20:8, Isaiah 2:19 and Daniel 7:2. There are also several places in which dreams and visions are equated through the characteristic parallelism of Hebrew style (Job 20:8, Numbers 12:6). On the other hand, the visions of Zechariah are simply introduced by the statement: "I saw by night…" When the Old Testament speaks of visions, one cannot be sure by modern standards that this does not signify those which occur in the night, and therefore are actually what we would call dreams, and when the Hebrew does speak of a dream, this may carry more the idea of givenness and religious authority that one has come to associate with visions. It is really impossible to discuss the dreams of the Old Testament without describing the vision also. They are of one piece in the Hebrew imagining.

Technically, of course, a vision is simply a visual image, something seen which is not an immediate perception of any outer physical object, but closely associated with visions is the auditory experience that is described as listening to God or speaking with him/her, in which something beyond one's ordinary self appears to speak to the individual in his own language. Many people know of this experience in dreams when there is a voice and no visual image at all sometimes, instead of being the object to which the speaking is directed, the individual becomes the subject through which the speaking is done. This is prophecy if the power speaking is God.

Since it is not too uncommon for people to talk in their sleep, or to perform somnambulistic actions, this idea of prophecy is actually strange only because so few believe that there is any reality beyond the physical which could make such contact with the individual. In fact, glossolalia in the New Testament is the same experience except that the individual speaks in an unknown language.

Probably the most common vision described in the Old Testament is the experience of an angel. In spite of the modern fear that the Bible may be talking nonsense when it describes the appearance of angels, they were seldom viewed as concretized "pieces" of spirituality, materializing and then disappearing into thin air. It is true there are stories in the early chapters of the Old Testament in which angels appear as actual human beings, but these are greatly overshadowed by the passages in which they are not viewed in this way. Later authors left no doubt about their understanding that the reality of an angelic being arises from someone's visionary experience. This in no way devalues these experiences. It is simply stating that it is through visionary experiences that one comes into relationship with these non-physical entities (Woods, 1947).

5. The Great Dreamers-- the Patriarchs

The first description of a dream in the Old Testament occurs in the same passage with the first of the references to visions. In Genesis 15:1, Yahweh appeared to Abram in a vision to assure him of a great future and to tell him that his own offspring would be the ones to share in it. Abram believed. He made his sacrifice, and then "as the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram, and lo, a dread and great darkness fell upon him." God spoke again, this time of the tribulation that would come before the vision was fulfilled, and now there appeared "a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch," which passed between the pieces of the sacrifice.

This ceremony of covenant which Abram saw in his vision of the night was an ancient magic practice, so convincing that it had become the basic ritual for agreements between men. In practice the contracting parties sacrificed an animal and cut it in half; then, if they were equals, both walked between the pieces of the carcass, demonstrating their willingness to be bound by the agreement or else to suffer the same treatment. Thus, in a numinous and mysterious experience that touched a person to the depth, God turned his promise to Abram into the Covenant, the effective contract between God and humanity (Kelsey, 1974).

For Abram, this was the verification of the reality of his call from Ur. Hagar, the Egyptian servant, was twice comforted by the angel of God and was helped to bear Abram's child who was to grow up in the wilderness (16:7 and 21:17). After Hagar's flight three angels appeared to both Abraham and Sarah (whose names were now changed). These were described as angels, and also as two men accompanying the Lord himself, who became known only when Sarah's thoughts were read. In spite of her disbelief, she was to bear a child. Abraham then learned of their terrible errand and was able to intercede for his cousin Lot (Genesis 18 and 19).

Again, it was through an angel that Abraham's eyes were opened as he was about to sacrifice Isaac. Of that place-where the angel spoke and Abraham looked up to see a ram caught in the thicket and understood the test to which God has put him-it was said, "On Yahweh's mountain there is vision" (22:11ff.). Not only was Abraham a seer in the technical sense, but King Abimelech also learned through a clairvoyant dream the true identity of Sarah, whom he has taken for his concubine (20:3).

While Isaac was not recorded as being much of a dreamer, some of the greatest moments in his younger son's life were marked by dreams. As Jacob fled from the birthright he had stolen, and stopped for the night to sleep on the rocky ground, he dreamed of a ladder from earth to heaven with angels going back and forth. The Lord stood above and reiterated the promise given Abraham in his vision. So deeply moved was Jacob, awakened, that he said, "Surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it" (28: 11 ff.).

In accordance with the idea of incubation common in these cultures, he felt that place in which he had dreamed such a dream was the very "gate of heaven". He vowed that if God would remain with him, that place at Bethel should become a sanctuary, and he would give to God a tithe of all he had. To Jacob this experience was no mere dream, but a religious experience of the most profound kind; one which had the extraordinary result of establishing the idea of tithing, a practice central to the very heart of Judaism.

Jacob spent twenty patient years in his new home with Laban. Then he was given God's help in two dreams to leave his possessive father-in-law peacefully and with wives and wealth. In the first, which he interpreted well, he saw the spotted he-goat's mate with the flock and was given God's assurance that he should take the increase and return to the land of his birth (31:10). The second dream was Laban's, in which God warned him on the night before he overtook the fleeing families not to press matters with Jacob, either for good or bad (31:24).

The magnificent passage which then follows - the story of Jacob's wrestling through the night with his unknown adversary to win both a blessing and a name - strongly suggests a dream or vision as its origin (32: 24). Jacob had briefly encountered the angels of God after Laban turned back (32:2), and then he had faced all the practical details of his meeting with Esau. There is realism about his night in the desert alone, and yet not alone, which recalls other descriptions of the dark night of the soul. Later biblical authors referring to this experience held that Jacob wrestled with an angel (Hosea 12:4).

Jacob, now become Israel, was an old man before another of his dreams was recorded. For at this point his favorite son arose to stand out among all the patriarchs as both dreamer and interpreter of dreams. In good measure it was just this about Joseph that brought down the hatred of his brothers on him. Joseph did not dream directly of God, but symbolically of his brothers' sheaves bowing down before his sheaf, and of the sun and moon and eleven stars doing obeisance before him (37:5). His naiveté in telling his dreams set the scene for the action that followed. Sold into Egypt as a slave, his similar frankness with Potiphar's wife landed him in an Egyptian prison.

Here he was consulted by Pharaoh's erring butler and baker about their own dreams, which they could not interpret. "Do not interpretations belong to God?" Joseph asked, and correctly foretold the future (40:5). Again, when Pharaoh himself was troubled by dreams, the butler remembered the interpreter back in prison. This time Joseph's wise interpretations explaining the fat and lean cows and the full and thin ears of grain were rewarded directly, and he was placed in a position of authority over Egypt (41:1). These dreams are central to the whole story of Joseph and his brothers.

Finally, when Jacob heard that his son was alive, he believed it only after God again appeared to him in a vision of the night with reassurance (46:2). And Jacob went down to Egypt knowing that God would go with him and in time would bring his people forth. Indeed, if there is any reality in this tradition of the patriarchs, which many modern scholars have come to view with great respect, it is certainly inseparable from the idea that dreams and visions are expressions of man's contact with some reality beyond the physical world.

6. Moses and the Dark Speech of God

The story of the exodus essentially begins with Moses' visionary experience of the burning bush and the angel, a content that recurs with authority however, with whom it was believed that God spoke face to face, and so did not use his dark and parabolic speech of dreams and vision with which he communicated to most men. The passage in Numbers that makes this clear (12:6) gives both a deep insight into the Hebrew reverence for Moses, and at the same time an understanding of their attitude towards dreams. The Lord was about to become angry with those who questioned Moses, and he said,

> "Hear my words: if there is a prophet among you, I the Lord make myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses; he is entrusted with my entire house. With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in dark speech; and he beholds the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?"

There are many references throughout the time of the exodus to the angel of the Lord, who drove back the Red Sea and went before the people of Israel as their protection and guide (Exodus 14:19, 23:20, 32:34, 33:2, Numbers 20:16). The repeated experience of the pillar of cloud also has a visionary quality, and the appearance of the pillar to Miriam and Aaron was undoubtedly a vision (Numbers 12:5).

But following the account of Joshua's period, one comes upon the stories of the book of Judges, which continue the spirit of the earlier Biblical narrative. Here angels and signs abound, and the direction of the

Lord, which elsewhere had been asked directly, was sought through them, often in experiences that were clearly visionary. Gideon found his destiny when an angel appeared to him (6:2), while the birth of Samson was announced by the appearance of an angel to both Manoah and his wife (13:2). In Judges 7:13 it was a dream that determined Gideon's defeat of the Midianites; in the night the Lord told him to get up and go spy on the enemy camp and he would hear something to strengthen his hand. As Gideon was following these instructions, he overheard an enemy soldier telling his dream of a cake of barley bread that fell on their tent and crushed it. "This can mean no other than the sword of Gideon," the man's comrade interpreted. Hearing these words, Gideon worshipped, and then he set forth to defeat the enemy.

The story of Samuel opens with the magnificent description of the child's dream, in which the Lord speaks to him and the old priest clearly recognizes the action of God (I Samuel 3:1). In this vision of the night, it is difficult for the child to distinguish between external reality and the visionary experience. Then he learns that the house of Eli will be overthrown, and he is afraid to tell the dream. Up to this time, we are told, the word of the Lord had been precious in Israel; there was no open vision, or more literally, "no vision breaking through." This vision-dream of Samuel's opened up a new era, and in several places Samuel is described simply as the seer, the one who sees beyond ordinary things (Dee, 1989).

7. The Dreams of the Great Kings

According to Stekel (1949), in some ways even more striking than the actual situation is the casual way in which the statement of Saul in his distress is recorded in the text. Samuel is dead, and Saul sees his enemies come upon him, and when he "inquired of the Lord, the Lord did not answer him, either by dreams, or by Urim, or by prophets" (I Samuel 28:6). Saul had lost his guidance, and so he went to the medium of Endor to ask her to bring forth the spirit of Samuel. Confronting the ghost of Samuel- "for the Philistines are warring against me, and God has turned away from me and answers me no more, either by prophets or by dreams; therefore I have summoned you to tell me what I shall do (28:15)." So desperate was Saul's condition that he broke his own law and consulted with a medium. The distress of Saul at not dreaming is paralleled among modern natives who lose their power when they can no longer dream big dreams. It means to them that gods have left them, and there is repetition of Saul's tragic state in the adjustment they face.

David was not left in the lurch by his prophets as was Saul. The word of the Lord came to Nathan the prophet in the night with instructions for David that he should not build the temple but should leave it for his heir (II Samuel 7:4, 1 Chronicles 17:3). In accordance with this vision or dream, Nathan spoke and David obeyed. Later, when the Lord became angry with David's actions and Gad prophesied the people's destruction, David himself saw the angel of the Lord and was given the chance to repent and stay the Lord's hand (II Samuel 24:16 and I Chronicles 21:15).

As for Solomon, the reputed source of his wisdom was at the instance of a dream he had at Gibeon in which the Lord appeared to him by night and said: "Ask what I shall give you". And in this experience, which sounds very much like incubation, Solomon asked for an understanding mind and received it. Then he went to Jerusalem to make offerings and hold a feast for his entire servant (I King 3:5ff). God had come to him and acted; what Solomon did with his wisdom was another part of the story.

After Solomon had finished building the temple, God appeared to him a second time, "as he had appeared to him at Gibeon (I King 9:2)." In the same kind of dream experience he was given the promise of God's protection to his house if he would follow only Yahweh. Solomon saw and listened, although he evidently forgot that the experience of dreams could even be a catastrophe. But as the kings of Israel got into more and more trouble, the record of their own dreams ceased. Instead, we are told that the word of the Lord came to Elijah and to Elisha, and marvelous things happened. After Elijah had fled from Jezebel's outburst, an angel came and touched him in sleep to show that he was taken care of in the wilderness, and he was comforted (I Kings 19:5). His experience of earthquake, fire, and still small voice in the cave there at Horeb

also has the quality of a numinous vision (19:11). Again, after Ahab's death an angel of the Lord came to Elijah, to direct him in his dealings with the new king in Samaria (II Kings 1: 15). The wonderful things that Elijah did were told right up to the end of his life, and then in a tremendous visionary experience of the assumption of the prophet, Elisha fell heir to the same spirit and power (2:12). As Elijah was taken up by a whirlwind, Elisha saw the horses and chariots of fire, just as they were later seen by the young man who served him (6:17). At that time, when they were surrounded by the forces of the Syrian king, Elisha opened the eyes of his servant to the same numinous vision of the spiritual power which was available to him (Shogunle, 2008).

8. The Prophetic Tradition and Deuteronomy

There are not many religious leaders who have had as much impact on the history and religious life of mankind as the prophets who thrived in Israel from the end of this period through the sixth century BCE. These men are universally admired for their insight into the moral nature of God and the religious endeavour, and it was among them that dreams were first openly valued in the Old Testament. Up to this time, dream experiences had been recorded and acted upon but not analyzed. But now the prophets, who all describe the inspiration of some kind of dream-like experience, began to voice real concern for distinguishing the true dreamer from the false dreamer, the genuine interpreter from the false interpreter, and the true prophet from the false prophet. They considered it one of the specific tasks of the prophet to be open in dreams and vision to intrusions of another realm of reality, and to be able to interpret them correctly.

The writings of these men agree in expressing, in one way or another, the basic idea that when the spirit of God is poured upon men, "your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions (Joel 2:28)." In a new time of the outpouring of God's spirit at Pentecost the authors of the New Testament turned back to point to the significance of this passage. But when God is not with his people, the prophets maintain with Saul that "disaster comes upon disaster, rumour follows rumour; they seek a vision from the prophet, but the law perishes from the priest, and counsel from the elders" (Ezekiel 7:26). The same basic thought is contained in Isaiah 29:10 and 32:15, Lamentations 2:9, Jeremiah 31:34, Ezekiel 39:29, and Micah 3:5. Thus, if life were not to be all bitter, it was essential that there be men who were open to something beyond the physical, and that there be those who could distinguish the true vision and true dream from the false, the true prophecy from the false.

9. Dreams and the art of Biblical *Oneirocritica* in Context

The concern about the proper understanding of dreams is first expressed in the book of Deuteronomy. Whether this book actually comes from the insights of the seventh-and eighth-century prophets, or whether it is an older tradition to which they turned, makes no difference in its basic importance and authority among Jews and Christians. Deuteronomy expresses the faith given in the wilderness and says explicitly how it shall be kept. Hence, when it came to the prophet and dreamer of dreams in Chapter 12, a legal problem was tackled which had to be slated conditionally. Legally a prophet or dreamer of dreams is false if he says "Let us go after other gods and let us serve them." Even if he shows wonders or correctly foretells the future, he must not be listened to. It is simply accepted as fact that the prophet or dreamer of dreams has the power to see beyond the present. However, if he uses this power to turn Israel away from its God, then his words shall be shunned, and he shall be put to death (13:1-5). Yet it never occurred to the author of Deuteronomy to do away with dreams by simply ignoring them or maintaining that they never have value, instead this passage implies that the prophetic function of dreaming and interpreting was so important that to pervert it was a heinous offense and had to be punished by death. In a backhanded way, dreamers were thus treated with real reverence.

This whole matter, of course, was complicated by the fact that the Hebrews lived among non-Hebraic people who had their own priests who had dreams and visions and interpreted them; and these priests used other interesting practices for divining the future. There was clearly a will in Israel that their own people stay away from pagan diviners. This is accepted unconditionally in Deuteronomy 18:9-22, which simply directs that there shall not be found among the people anyone who makes his son or daughter pass through the fire or who practices divination, or any soothsayer, augur, sorcerer, charmer, medium, wizard, or necromancer. While this passage, like the same tradition found in Leviticus 19:26-31, is often taken as a prohibition against dream interpretation, dreams are specifically not mentioned in either place, even though the writer practically exhausts the Hebrew words to include all the religious magic of other peoples.

This is a remarkable passage. Among even the Greeks and the Romans, with their highly developed religious forms and ethical practice, there was no attempt to curb the superstitious practices of the common people. But here it is put in unmistakable terms. The Israelites shall have nothing to do with pagan priests who do liver-reading or call forth the spirits of the dead. Practices like these were rife in the Near East at the time Israel's life and culture was developing, and it was undoubtedly meant that the children of Israel should not take dreams to such priests for interpretation. But the remarkable part is the next section, which tells the people what they should do.

The passage goes on to establish in the law the foundation for prophecy and the visionary experience of the prophet. So that the Lord may speak in a direct way to his people, he will raise up a prophet among them who is strong enough to hear the voice of the Lord their God, and see the fire like that on Sinai. He will put his words in the prophet's mouth. Then it is up to the prophet to speak what is given. The people shall listen and the Lord will deal with those who will not, but for the prophet the penalty again is death if he speaks anything but what is given, or if he speaks in the name of other gods. Thus these passages, which are the only part of the law touching on prophecy or dreams, contain no injunction against listening to visions and dreams, but only against failure to distinguish the word of the Lord. This therefore places a real responsibility on contemporary Christians who believed that God could actually approach and speak directly to them. They not only had to speak the word of God which would "come to pass or come true"; in effect, the final test for the true prophet of the Lord was to see if his prophecies led the people into closer communion with their God.

10. Conclusion and Recommendations

The two Hebrew transliterated words that are translated as "seer" show clearly how highly the Hebrews valued those who could see visions. They are *chozeh* and *roeh,* which are derived from Hebrew words for perceiving, seeing, the same roots from which the Hebrew words for visions are derived. "The see-er" is an excellent translation for either of these Hebrew words. The see-er is another name for a prophet. He is the one who perceives more than just the space-time world. Samuel was called a seer (I Chronicles 29:29), and it is stated that the prophet was aforetime called a seer. (I Samuel 9:9). One of the earliest specific references is in II Samuel, in which "the word of the Lord came to the prophet Gad, David's seer". (24:11).

In several places in the books of prophecy, as well as in the books of history, the prophet is clearly identified as a seer. Amos is called a seer (7:12), while Isaiah equates the prophet and the seer (29:10), as does Micah in 3:6-7. The latest of these references may well be the passage in Isaiah 30:10 which speak of a rebellious people "who say to the seers, 'See not'; and to the prophets, "Prophesy not to us what is right…' Many scholars believe that these words were written very close to the time of Jesus' birth. Here and in other places it is clear that the main task of the seer was to see and understand the visionary realities - to know angels and hear God's voice and see visions.

All of these experiences, then - talking with God, angel, dream, vision, prophecy - express the same basic encounter with some reality that is not physical, and the most common of them is the dream experience.

The majority of the Old Testament authors took care to express their belief - as Plato did in later times - that man was in contact with two realities, a physical world and a non-physical one which they called spiritual. The contact they described with this second reality was made directly through these experiences. This paper therefore recommend that contemporary Christians should be more intentional about cultivating their natural giftedness in the areas of dreams and visions, as well as the understanding of the import and impact of dreams as oracular medium that is not demonic, but an important revelatory and didactic process that is both divine and biblical.

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