

One of my students, who was raised in a relatively strict Christian household, shared the following story with me. As a child Lucille (not her real name) experienced several dreams which seemed to foretell future events in her waking life. Once she dreamed that her mother had a car accident the night of Lucille's eighth-grade prom. In the dream Lucille was not in the car, but her prom dress was, and so was her mother's collection of record albums. It turned out that the night of the prom her mother did indeed have a car accident; without telling Lucille, she had taken her prom dress to be hand-sewn, and was on her way home when the accident happened. The stereo and record albums her mother brought in the car to loan to a friend were also damaged in the accident. Lucille had not told her mother about the dream beforehand, although she had described it to her best friend. When her mother heard about the dream and the friend's corroboration of it, and when she heard of other similar dreams Lucille had experienced, her mother became frightened and angry: "I'm not going to be the mother of a *witch*," she declared to Lucille, and she refused to listen to any dreams Lucille tried to share with her. Now that she had been told her dreams were wicked and sinful, Lucille stopped having them. "To this day," she told me, "I believe I somehow chose to shun those (dreaming) abilities, but I don't know how I might turn them 'on' again if I wanted."

Many ASD members have encountered people who, like Lucille's mother, are skeptical or even hostile towards the subject of dreams because they believe it violates the teachings of Judaism and Christianity that dream interpretation is a sinful practice. In this essay I would like to offer my best efforts at understanding the concerns of these people, trying to respond to them in a respectful and empathetic way, rather than scolding people like Lucille's mother as ignorant religious zealots. My hope is that by taking seriously the skepticism held by some members of the Judeo-Christian tradition towards dreams and dream interpretation, those of us who study dreams will be in a better position to formulate effective responses. It's far too easy in debates about religious beliefs to demonize one's opponents, to deny their views any legitimacy whatsoever, and to cast oneself as the upholder of all truth and justice. That kind of approach, whether it's "pro" or "anti" religion, simply leads to more bitterness and misunderstanding, not less.

To start, then, I want to examine the scriptural basis for this skepticism.<sup>2</sup> The hostility of the Judeo-Christian tradition towards dreams and dream interpretation is primarily rooted in three groups of biblical passages.

First are passages emphasizing the ephemerality of dreams, their fleeting, insubstantial quality: Ecclesiastes 5:3 says, "for a dream comes with much business, and a fool's voice with many words."

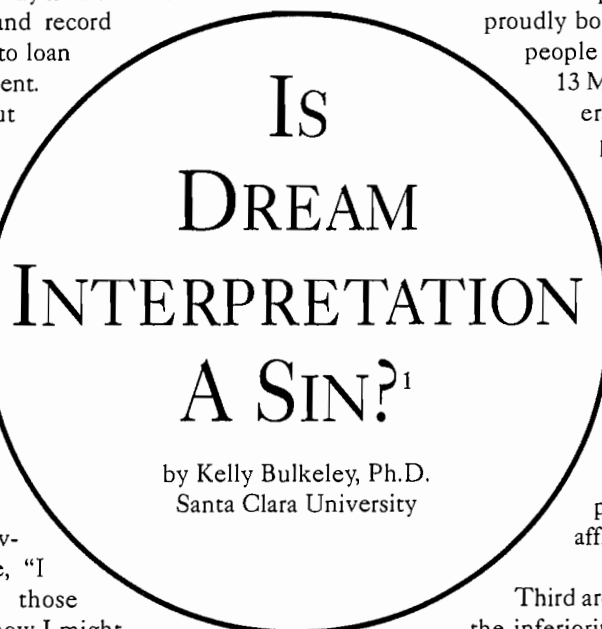
Psalm 73:19-20 says the wicked will be swept away; "they are like a dream when one awakes, on awaking you despise their phantoms." Similarly, Isaiah 29:7-8 says the fate of God's enemies "shall be like a dream, a vision of the night. As when a hungry man dreams he is eating and awakes with his hunger not satisfied, or as when a thirsty man dreams he is drinking and awakes faint, with his thirst not quenched, so shall the multitude of all the nations be that fight against Mount Zion."

Second are the passages attacking false prophets who proudly boast of their dream revelations, leading people away from true faith: In Deuteronomy 13 Moses says don't listen to those "dreamers of dreams," those false prophets who persuade the people to worship other gods. Jeremiah 29:8-9 has the Lord warning, "Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams which they dream, for it is a lie which they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them." And Zechariah 10:2 declares, "The diviners see lies; the dreamers tell false dreams, and give empty consolation. Therefore the people wander like sheep; they are afflicted for want of a shepherd."

Third are those passages asserting or suggesting the inferiority of dreams as a means of communicating with God: here, Moses in Numbers 12:6 has the Lord admitting that "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; ... With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in dark speech; and he beholds the form of the Lord." And the fact that Jesus is never reported to have a dream is often taken as further scriptural evidence that dreams are an inferior form of revelation.

The most common way to respond to concerns like these is to say, but what about all those genuinely God-sent dream revelations that are recorded in the Bible? What about Jacob's dream at Bethel, and Solomon's dream at Gibeon, and Paul's night vision of the man from Macedonia? What about the lyrical passage of Joel 2:28, in which God promises, "and it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions?"

That's all true, the Bible does contain passages giving positive religious value to dreams. But pointing to those passages does not directly answer the three clear concerns raised by the Biblical passages I quoted a moment ago – the concerns that dreams are too ephemeral to be taken seriously, that dreams are potentially deceptive in their meanings, and that dreams are an inferior form of revelation. Again, I think the most respectful, and ultimately most effective, way of responding to a Jewish or Christian person who is skeptical about dreams is to address these concerns head-on.



IS  
DREAM  
INTERPRETATION  
A SIN?<sup>1</sup>

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So these would be my answers. Yes, many if not most of our dreams are fleeting and ephemeral, dealing with relatively trivial matters from our ordinary daily lives. It would indeed be foolish to treat every dream as a grand revelation from on high. But that doesn't mean that at certain points in our lives we don't have dreams that are different, dreams that come with a special clarity and vividness and intensity. Although rare, these dreams seem to hint at the fulfillment of God's promise in Joel 2:28, to "pour out my spirit on all flesh" through visions, dreams, and prophecies. The Bible may express skepticism towards many of our dreams, but certainly not towards *all* our dreams.

And yes, dreams are potentially deceptive; it is often very hard to discern their meanings with any kind of certainty, and we should be careful about listening to smooth-talking, self-proclaimed prophets who want us to follow their dreams or who want to tell us what our dreams mean. But the Bible suggests that if you have a deep and true faith in God, you needn't fear such deceptions: your faith, your sensitivity to and trust in the living presence of the divine, will be a reliable guide in discerning the meanings of your dreams and the dreams of others. The stories of the two greatest Biblical dream interpreters, Joseph and Daniel, illustrate the power of faith as the touchstone for accurate dream interpretation.

And yes, the Bible does portray dreams as a kind of "dark speech," as a relatively indirect and inferior form of communication between humans and the divine. But God uses many different means of communicating with humans in the Bible, and dreams are unquestionably one of those means. Surely the lesson to be drawn is not that we wait only for the extraordinary kind of face-to-face encounter with God that Moses and Jesus were granted, but that we open ourselves to all possible means of receiving God's spirit, however "dark" or indirect some of them may be.

A careful and respectful reading of the Bible, then, does not support the belief that God's faithful should ignore dreams or that dream interpretation is a sin. If there is any general message about dreams to be drawn from the Bible, it is this: dreams are one of the ways that God's spirit enters people's lives, and although a dream may initially appear strange or frightening, a person who has faith and a discerning judgement can eventually grasp its meaning.

A close reading of the Bible's portrayal of dreams is valuable not only for understanding what the Bible *says*, but also for learning what the Bible *doesn't* say. The Bible says nothing about dreams being caused by demons or the Devil; the Bible says nothing about dreams and the "polluting effects" of sexual desire; the Bible says nothing about dream interpretation violating the first commandment, to worship no God but the Lord; and the Bible says nothing about divine dream revelations being restricted to

Biblical times, and thus being unavailable to later generations. These are all claims that are made by certain members of the Judeo-Christian tradition against dreams and dream interpretation, and yet none of them has any legitimate basis in the Bible itself: they are all later additions to the tradition.

I don't have the time to examine in any real detail the extra-Biblical origins of these claims, for doing so would require delving into the many historical and doctrinal differences between Jews, Catholics, and Protestants, and the many differences between the various groups within these broad traditions. But I would like to offer a response that I think applies in a general way to each of these claims.

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The response is this. One of the most powerful themes running throughout the Bible is the corrupting effects of worldly political power on true religious faith. From the struggles of Moses against the Egyptian Pharaoh to the cries of Jeremiah and Isaiah for social justice to the radically compassionate ministry of Jesus, the Bible shows the need for God's faithful to be extremely vigilant in preventing the evils of politics, i.e., the oppressive wielding of power over other humans, from interfering with their relationship with God.

Now looking at what some Judeo-Christian leaders, departing from the Bible, have said against dreams – that they are caused by demons, are sexually polluting, violate the first commandment, and are no longer a sanctioned form of revelation – we find that the *effects* of their claims are precisely to interfere with one of the means by which the Bible clearly says humans relate to God. On this basis I would argue that much of the Judeo-Christian hostility towards dreams, which to repeat has no real basis in the Bible, is due in fact to the political desires of certain Judeo-Christian leaders to strengthen their institutional power by cutting off people's access to a source of potentially "unorthodox" religious insights and experiences.

This leads me to a final question: rather than asking, "Is dream interpretation a sin?," members of the Judeo-Christian tradition have good reasons to ask instead, "Is it a sin to discourage people from interpreting their dreams?"

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#### NOTES

1. This essay is based on a presentation made during the panel convened by Mena Potts at the 1996 ASD conference in Berkeley, California, titled "The Sin of Dream Interpretation". My thanks go to Mena for taking the initiative in organizing the panel.

2. As a scholarly note, I disagree with Morton Kelsey's claim in God, Dreams, and Revelations (Augsburg, 1991) that all the Judeo-Christian enmity towards dreams originates with Jerome's mistranslation in the fourth century A.D. of several key words in his Latin Vulgate Bible. I believe the following Biblical citations prove that there was plenty of skepticism towards dreams in scripture itself, well before Jerome and his translating misadventures.