

Dreams

Introduction

I have been asked to explain the nature of dreams and what the Biblical position is.

A paper on this is useful today, as there is a great deal of confusion about the place of dreams. We have one extreme where Charismatics put great store in their own interpretation of a personal dream and equate this with divine revelation, and an intellectual, academic outright denial of any value in dreams at all. What is the truth?

What are dreams?

Everybody knows what a dream is, but few understand much about them.

Definition

Analytically, a dream is a series of thoughts, images, and sensations occurring in a person's mind during sleep; or a state of mind in which someone is, or seems to be, unaware of their immediate surroundings (as in a waking dream).

The word can also be used for a cherished desire ('the girl of my dreams') or a personal fantasy ('his desire to be a rock star was just a dream'). Sometimes it is used to speak of a perfect ideal ('her new boyfriend was an absolute dreamboat').

Occasionally it is used to replace the words 'think' or 'thought' when using a negative ('I wouldn't dream of foisting myself on you'; 'I never dreamed anyone would take offence').

Identification

Scientists discovered some time ago that dreams occur during the deepest part of sleep and are physically identified by rapid eye movement (REM). There are numerous studies that can be read about the physical analysis of dreams, but this is not my remit here.

Symbolism

Throughout the centuries that have been many people that have been employed as interpreters of dreams; some of them identified in the Bible.

Today there is a Scotsman, a psychologist whose name I forget, who is extremely wise regarding the interpretation of dreams and has a catalogue in his mind as to what specific symbols mean. He gained this from analysing numerous candidates, who described their dreams to him, and then he catalogued these symbols in order of frequency. There is nothing mystical in his analyses; he explains how dreams relate to personal stress and aspirations.

What dreams are today

It appears that dreams have an important place in allowing the mind to deal with the stresses and issues of a given day, or of continuing worries. Mental systems do not stop when one is asleep.

For all his days are sorrowful, and his work burdensome; even in the night his heart takes no rest.

Eccles 2:23

For a dream comes through much activity. Eccles 5:3

The mind needs time to process the stress we go through in order to keep our mental faculties working properly. This is done through dreams. They are a neuropathic or emotional repair system.

Thus the symbols used in dreams represent the fears and worries that are being processed by our minds. These have recurring symbolic themes; for example, a sensation of falling, a feeling of being chased and so on. Often the dreams are identifying a fear involved in making a decision and help our brain process the stress.

For example; an employee is being put under intense pressure by his boss to achieve certain performance targets and raise outcomes in his department. The employee works very hard to achieve these targets. At night he dreams that someone is chasing him and that he must run away and escape.

Interim conclusion

Dreams were created as part of the natural processes of the human body and mind and are used to process fears and worries. They usually include common themes and symbols. This is one reason why people who do not get enough sleep are prone to mental illness.

General Biblical analysis of dreams

In the NKJV of the Bible the following statistics are revealed:

- The word 'dream' appears 72 times.
- The word 'dreams' appears 26 times.
- The word 'dreamed' appears 11 times.
- The word 'dreamer' appears 4 times.
- The word 'dreamers' appears 2 times.

The Hebrew word for 'dream' used is the noun *chalowm*; appearing 65 times. It is used of ordinary dreams and also of prophetic dreams.

The verb form is *chalam*, which appears 27 times. It has cognates in Ugarit, Aramaic, Syriac, Coptic, Arabic and Ethiopic. It can also mean 'to be healthy', when used of animals who cannot dream.

There is also an Aramaic word used, *chelem*; which appears in Daniel (as to be expected as Daniel was in Babylonia).

The Greek words used are:

- *Onar*, meaning a vision in sleep as opposed to a waking vision. It appears six times in Matthew.
- *Enupnion*, literally, what appears in sleep, i.e. an ordinary dream. It appears once in Acts.
- The verb used is *enupniazo*, appearing twice in Jude and Acts.

The word 'dream' only appears seven times in the NKJV. The concept of dreams is not used after Acts. It does not exist in the apostolic writings (the one mention in Jude is regarding evil people who dream dreams). This lack of appearance is important.

OT analysis of dreams

There are many occasions of a prophetic dream where God communicated with his people to urge some behaviour or action. An exposition of all these occasions would require more space than we have here and would be a long task. However, we can list some occasions and make certain points.

Under the Old Covenant, God spoke to prophets face to face, or at least into their mind. Sometimes God used visions and more rarely dreams (Num 12:6). Prophets then communicated God's will to the people; usually some form of denunciation and exhortation requiring correction. Since prophets had a close relationship to God, even hearing his voice, dreams were not really necessary.

Dreams were used, however, quite frequently when God wanted to communicate something with men outside the covenant or Israelites that were not prophets; sometimes it was with saints who were not yet sufficient spiritually developed in their relationship with God (such as Jacob before Peniel).

The first occurrence of God speaking to a man in a dream is to Abimelech. Note that God had spoken to Abram directly long before this. God communicated directly to Abraham but indirectly to Abimelech.

Here are the key instances of God using dreams to his covenant people:

- Jacob (Gen 28:12 31:10-11).
- Joseph (Gen 37:5-11).
- Solomon (1 Kg 3:5)

Here are examples of God communicating with non-covenant people; in fact enemies of God's people:

- Abimelech (a Philistine king; Gen 20:3-7)
- Laban (Gen 31:24)
- Pharaoh's chief butler and baker (Gen 40:5)
- Pharaoh (Gen 41:1-8)
- A Midianite (Jdg 7:13)
- Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 2:1 4:10,18)

So dreams are not an example of the prime form of communicating with God; they are not the height of spiritual experience. In fact, they are a low form of communication and the form that God often used with non-covenant people or immature saints.

Another factor of dreams is that often they required a man of God to interpret the dream. The dream was useless as a method of information if there were no man of God to act as interpreter; thus the importance of Joseph to Pharaoh or Daniel to Nebuchadnezzar.

When dreams were warnings or condemnation, these were usually plainly understood, such as the dreams of Abimelech or the Midianite (albeit interpreted by his friend).

NT analysis of dreams

The mention of dreams is mostly early in the Gospel of Matthew. The other reference to a dream is a quotation from Joel in Acts 2:17; thus it is referring to an OT experience.

Five mentions in Matthew are regarding a divine communication in connection with the early life of the Messiah and the Lord's father. The only other occasion regards an ordinary dream of Pilate's wife, which was caused by the stress of seeing an innocent and wonderful teacher being victimised and tortured. Thus:

But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit'. Matt 1:20

Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they [the wise men from the east] should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way. Matt 2:12

Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, 'Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him'. Matt 2:13

But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, 'Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the young Child's life are dead'. Matt 2:19-20

But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judaea instead of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And being warned by God in a dream, he turned aside into the region of Galilee. Matt 2:22

These are all under the Old Covenant, before the cross of Christ. We see divine communication to both men in the covenant and outside the covenant. Dreams continued to be a mediatrix between God and man.

Thus there is no talk about any spiritual value of dreams in the New Covenant period, with the exception of a quote from Joel, which I will examine later.

We should also mention the case of Paul. In a vision of the night a 'man of Macedonia' stood before Paul and said, 'Come over into Macedonia and help us', (Acts 16:9) see also (Acts 18:9). These cases are not said to be dreams but of a divine use of visions in order to emphasise a certain task They are also early on in the Gospel period.

Warnings to ignore false dreams of false teachers

Even during the Old Testament, in the period of valid dreams, there were many occasions where false prophets claimed to have a dream in order to elevate the authority of their false word. God warns against this just as he warns against false prophets.

If there arises among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams, and he gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes to pass, of which he spoke to you, saying, 'Let us go after other gods' -- which you have not known -- 'and let us serve them,' you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams, for the LORD your God is testing you to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear Him, and keep His commandments and obey His voice, and you shall serve Him and hold fast to Him. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has spoken in order to turn *you* away from the LORD your God. Deut 13:1-5

How long will *this* be in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies? Indeed *they are* prophets of the deceit of their own heart, who try to make My people forget My name by their dreams which everyone tells his neighbour, as their fathers forgot My name for Baal. Jer 23:26-27

‘Behold, I *am* against those who prophesy false dreams’, says the LORD, ‘and tell them, and cause My people to err by their lies and by their recklessness. Yet I did not send them or command them; therefore they shall not profit this people at all’, says the LORD. Jer 23:32

Therefore do not listen to your prophets, your diviners, your dreamers, your soothsayers, or your sorcerers, who speak to you, saying, ‘You shall not serve the king of Babylon’. Jer 27:9

For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: ‘Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are in your midst deceive you, nor listen to your dreams which you cause to be dreamed’. Jer 29:8

For the idols speak delusion; the diviners envision lies, and tell false dreams; they comfort in vain. Therefore *the people* wend their way like sheep; they are in trouble because *there is* no shepherd. Zech 10:2

Anyone claiming divine inspiration just because they have a dream is a fool. The test of divine inspiration is the word of God and nothing else. If someone’s dream, vision, prophecy, teaching, doctrine, exhortation or anything else is at odds with God’s word, that person is false. Just as prophecies can be lies, so dreams and visions can be lies.

The theological point

All examinations of Biblical subjects must take into account the concept of progressive revelation; that is the progress of development of a certain subject over time. The importance of a doctrine in one historic time period may be reduced to zero in a later period.

For example; the command to slaughter animals in typical acceptance of God’s provision of salvation and forgiveness was important in Israel’s ancient history (even though salvation was still by faith in the provision of God), but after the cross such sacrifices were terminated forever.

The believer must always take into consideration the changes made by the institution of the New Covenant. Without such consideration we would still require, priests, temples, feast days, fast days, pilgrimages, sacrifices, choirs, musical instruments and so on.

The explanation of apostolic teaching shows that dreams ceased to be a normal form of God communicating with men; that is why there are no late references to them. This makes complete sense.

If God is present in the heart of believers, and if the Holy Spirit dwelling within makes known to us the will of God and leads us into truth, why any need of dreams and visions?

The point of the New Covenant is the pre-eminence of Christ in all things. As we abide in Christ we progress in grace and wisdom. As we walk in the Spirit of Christ we are led into truth and freedom. There is no need for obscure dreams, indirect communication and the need of interpreters for dreams. Dreams were for the period of shadows, not the reality of Christ.

Therefore, pay no attention to those preachers (usually Charismatics) who make much of dreams and claim to be a special prophet who can interpret dreams. Anyone who emphasises dreams in the church is suspect.

For in the multitude of dreams and many words *there is also vanity*. But fear God. Eccles 5:7

God has given the church his word in order to know his mind and purpose. You have no need of dreams.

What about Joel's prophecy?

But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 'And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, That I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams. And on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days; and they shall prophesy.' Acts 2:16-18

Joel was a man of the Old Covenant. His prophecy speaks of a time when all God's people would be prophets. All would have an experience of the Spirit and all would communicate directly with God. It would be an age of the Spirit on all God's people.

As a man under the Old Covenant, Joel could only express this event within the terms of his own experience. Seeing visions, having dreams were expressions of receiving communication from God. The point is the communication not the method of it.

Thus the point of the prophecy is that all would know God, all would have the Spirit and all would communicate with God. The point is not to expect communication in dreams.

Thus the rest of the NT after Acts does not speak about dreams as a means of communication with God.

Regarding, 'I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh' we must note this; it has to be interpreted in a New Covenant manner. 'All flesh' can only mean 'all types of people'. Bible theology tells us plainly that God does not pour out his Spirit upon the reprobate; sinners can have no fellowship with God. The promise of the outpouring of the Spirit is only to those who are in Christ.

This was plainly understood by the apostles who were taken by surprise when Gentiles received the Spirit. It took shocking new revelation to realise that a Roman soldier could be part of the covenant and receive the Spirit (Acts 10). After this God raised up Paul and Barnabas to take the Gospel to the Gentiles.

Thus you must ignore all the modern supposedly Christian commentators who make foolish assertions about this passage, such as:

- This prophecy only applies to the time of the Tribulation.
- God will pour out his Spirit upon every living being.
- Women can be prophetesses under the New Covenant.
- Waking visions are a normal part of receiving divine communication in the Gospel Age.
- Dreams are a normal part of receiving divine communication in the Gospel Age.

What about sin during dreams?

This has been a longstanding difficult question: am I guilty for impure thoughts that occur in my dreams?

The Puritans said no; we cannot be guilty for impure dreams because our rational mind was not awake. If our rational mind was inactive, if our volition was at rest, then there could be no active sin. But is this correct?

We cannot be guilty of impure thoughts in dreams that are forgotten immediately on waking. We cannot be guilty for things we know nothing about. However, many impure thoughts from dreams are known when one wakes up; indeed one often feels unclean as a result, or at least uncomfortable.

Impure thoughts come from an impure heart; all thoughts arise in the heart and impure thoughts come from the old nature. Anything that is expressed by the old nature is corrupt and is sin by definition. Thus unclean images that are remembered from dreams are the activity of the old man and must be sin. What else can they be?

Unclean thoughts, whether waking or during sleep, cannot come from God and cannot be part of the new nature. If they are from the old nature then they are sinful and require cleansing. They may have arisen involuntarily, but they still arose.

This is why we feel unclean when we remember images that arose during dreams. They may have been images planted in our old nature by the enemy and may not be from our own desires, but they still need cleansing.

For instance, it is possible during a dream to have an image of something sinful that you actually despise and would never choose in your waking life. You did not choose this image, but nevertheless it still arose in your mind. Thus it needs to be cleansed.

The safest way to deal with this is that if you feel unclean as a result of a dream, confess it to God and ask for forgiveness. This is not a burden and it is safe. The alternative is to leave those images to fester in your mind. Is that wise?

Admittedly we cannot be certain about this matter, as there is no direct Scriptural teaching on it that I know of. However, by deduction from other doctrines, it seems best to me to advise seeking forgiveness for something that leaves you feeling unclean. Keep the vessel pure.

Therefore if anyone cleanses himself ... he will be a vessel for honour, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work. 2 Tim 2:21

Conclusion

The apostolic teaching gives us no reason to elevate the place of dreams to a means of heavenly communication. This is entirely logical since all believers have the Holy Spirit dwelling within them to lead them into all truth. If you have God in your life, why would you need an obscure dream to wrestle with?

Prophetic dreams are entirely Old Covenant. They were used in a time where ordinary saints did not have direct, internal, spiritual communication with God, as they did not have

the indwelling Holy Spirit. That was why they needed, priests, prophets, signs, visions and dreams.

There is no evidence that God uses dreams to communicate with his people today; indeed the apostolic letters do not mention them at all. That time has gone with the unveiling of the New Covenant.

Dreams are just a normal and necessary part of life; they process the stresses and worries of the day and reset our mental and emotional processes. They can be invaded by the enemy and impure images planted in a dream; these need to be confessed as unclean when waking up so that there is no internal corruption.

Scripture quotations are from The New King James Version
© Thomas Nelson 1982

Paul Fahy Copyright © 2015
Understanding Ministries
<http://www.understanding-ministries.com>