

# The greek and hebrew bible's representation of dreams: an analysis

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## **Bible Presentation of Dreams**

In the ancient times, dreams fell into different categories depending on their significance. A distinction was drawn between ordinary dreams without any importance, and others that were signs of destiny. The dream omens required the interpretative skills of a specialist in order to be understood. Other dreams contained clear and direct message and never required interpreters. Dreams were composed of symbolic images and those who received them were considered to be prophets or messengers of the gods. The distinctions in the dreams are also present in the Hebrew Bible though there is no clear evidence of divination for everyday dreams. Prophetic books rarely speak of dreams and sometimes contradictory on the subject. This essay is a comparison of the Hebrew Bible's presentation of dreams to the Egyptian cultural tradition of dreams. The important distinctions on the presentations of the dreams are outlined.

In the Hebrew Bible presentation of dreams, the dreams are categorized into distinct prophetic dreams. The Hebrew Bible clearly classifies dreams into those of encouragement and those that give warnings. For instance, Jacob and Solomon receive an encouragement in their vision as leaders of the chosen people of God. In their prophetic dreams, God presents himself to the receiver even though his actual likeness is never described. In Jacob's life, God appears to him three times and each appearance occurs at different crossroads in Jacob's life. (Sandys-Wunsch, 1974) The different dreams and visions in Jacob's life are grouped since they have different meanings. Often,

the promise and encouragement is not meant for an individual but for the whole population that is experiencing trouble.

Solomon also received a prophetic dream where he was offering a thousand burnt offerings on the altar. The dream was a calling to be a King; hence the story of a dream in the Hebrew bible is a provision of legitimacy to Solomon's assumption of power. Those who received warning dreams include Abimelech and Laban. Abimelech received a warning dream when he wanted to marry Sarah who apparently was Abraham's wife. God also intervenes through a dream where Abimelech is given a concise and ambiguous warning.

There is a similarity in the Greek dreams when compared to the dreams in the Hebrew Bible. Among the Greeks, there were also varied approaches to dreams. According to the Greece cultural tradition of dreams, the dreams were conceived as rhetorical messages arriving fully formed from an outside source. It was believed that the dreams predicted the future and the king did not completely rely on his ability to interpret dreams. (Newton, 1960) The king had to get help from interpreters since the dreams could have varied meaning at different times. The varied symbolism in the interpretation of dreams among the Greece would mean that there were different approaches to categorizing dreams.

In the Hebrew Bible, dreams are viewed as a way of divine revelation. The mode of revelation in the Hebrew Bible ranges from external phenomenon to an internal phenomenon. The external revelation includes voices and forces

of nature while the internal revelation includes visions and dreams. In Genesis for instance, God uses dreams to reveal his will and to foreshadow future events. (Dupre, 1964) An example is where God reveals his will to Abimelech, Jacob, and Laban through dreams. God also revealed to Pharaoh through dreams what he is regarding doing. The biblical story gives a description of Pharaoh's vision as a revelation from God. It is in the dream that Pharaoh is warned of the upcoming abundance and famine in Egypt. The Israelites had a belief that the reality encountered them in their dreams. Their experience in the dreams was to be respected whether it was from God or from somewhere else. The book of origin can therefore be implicit as a way in which God reveals the divine will and foreshadows future events.

In the ancient Greek, the system of dream interpretation was not concerned with only interpreting the future as in the Hebrew Bible. The system of dream interpretation was also concerned with individual's prosperity in life. In the ancient Greece, dreams impacted on individual's and society's development in the ancient world. Even though some decision was made considering the dreams which was part of the oracle prophecies in Greece. At the time of Greece, was the most powerful civilization on earth. The Greeks had their source of wisdom as the Oracle at the Delphi. The source of wisdom had a great impact on the most decisions of the country. It is the prophecies that came from dreams that made Greece a powerful civilization on Earth.

In the Hebrew Bible, the dream world is a sacred space that is qualitatively different from others. When theophany takes place in some space, the space

becomes sacred, not only in the physical dimension, but also on the religious and mysterious dimensions. Many dream narratives in the book of Genesis describes the view of dreams as the sacred space in which theophany occurs. For example, God appeared to both Abimelech and Laban in a dream by night. The Hebrew Bible brings out the attitude of the people towards dreams as religious and sacred, rather than profane. (Gardiner, 2000)

When the Greece traditional presentation of dreams is compared to the Hebrew Bible presentation of dreams, it is evident that not all dreams in the Greece culture were regarded sacred as in the Hebrew Bible. Among the Greeks, evidence shows that only fulfilled prophetic dreams are recorded. Only the dreams that were connected to important people and events in the society were recorded. (Newton, 1960) The case is entirely different in the Hebrew Bible presentation of dreams, where every dream was regarded sacred. Both the dreams from noble members of the society and the average society members were recorded for interpretation. The cultural presentation of dreams amongst the Greeks can be thus understood as an acceptable medium of cultural imagination.

In the Hebrew Bible, there are common purposes that dreams are given for. From a brief survey of dreams and visions in the Hebrew Bible, it is obvious that there are persistent topics that give general purposes for the fact of ideas and visions. Common uses of dreams in the Hebrew Bible include; pregnancy, protection, pronouncing judgment, promise, promotion and plan. In the Bible, God uses dreams for common purposes of warning, encouragement and guidance. In the Bible, God also uses dreams to speak

to unbelievers. Visionary experience is common in the calling of God's leaders which includes a process of sanctification as seen in the lives of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Obadiah and Samuel. In most cases, the dreams are also closely linked in with trying times and prosecution of God's people. (Sandys-Wunsch, 1974)

In the cultural Greek presentation, dreams were viewed as a form of proto-rhetoric that happens to occur largely outside our control. The dreams are not presented for a common purpose as in the Hebrew Bible. In the ancient Greece, the dreams are viewed as a form of a meditative thinking. The purpose of the dreams in the ancient Greece culture is important in explaining the unbridled creativity of dream imagery and the rhetorical appeal leading to personal growth. The rhetorical appeal in the Greece dreams may be viewed as inherent responsiveness to the call to personal and ethical responsibility. Dreams in the ancient Greece culture, therefore remains as a persuasive force in people's lives as ever. People are just as willing to take action in the waking world based upon the idea in a dream. (Pearson, 2007)

In the Hebrew Bible, dreams were believed that they were messages from the gods. The Hebrews however believed that in only one God. Since they were monotheistic, they believed that it was God who spoke to them in the dreams. In contrast with the ancient Greeks, the Greece would make themselves pure two days prior to having a sleep in the temples so as to receive information from the gods. The Greeks would carry out some cultural practices like abstaining from sex and avoiding eating meat or fowl. The

potential dreamer would then have a sleep in the temple to invoke the gods. The Greeks had to invoke the gods in order to get the dreams even as they slept in the temple. In the Hebrew Bible, dreams are viewed as a divine language transmitting on divine messages. The messages were transmitted to the people without necessarily provoking the gods. Besides, it was only one god that was worshipped. The divine messages carried were significant to the dreamers themselves and the nation.

For instance, it is through a dream that God manifested himself to Jacob where he made a promise to Jacob regarding his offspring. Additionally, God instructed Jacob through a dream on how to procure improved yields from his flocks. God commanded Jacob in the same dream to go back to his birth land at the time when Jacob was frustrated with Laban's attitude towards him, a scenario that was quite different from the past. Moreover, it is through a dream that Abimelech learned the truth about the hidden relationship between Abraham and Sarah from God. (Sandys-Wunsch, 1974) Abimelech is given the message to return Abraham's wife through a dream where God apparently warns him. The Hebrew Bible perception of dreams and the Greeks cultural presentation of dreams are, therefore different on the basis that the Gods are not invoked in the Hebrew Bible. In both cases, messages were sent to the dreamers who had a task to complete.

Common in the ancient Greece dreams is the use of symbols. The dreams with symbols must be interpreted to derive their real meaning. For example, in Penelope's dream in Homer's Odyssey, Penelope is waiting for her husband Odysseus to come back home from war. She has to endure fifty

suitors in the meantime who apparently are feasting on her husband's wealth. Still in the dream, fifty geese are killed by an eagle that makes a revelation that it is her husband Odysseus. As interpreted, the geese symbolize the suitors. The dream was not only prophetic but also a symbolic wish-fulfillment dream. In the dream, Penelope has the ability to distinguish between significant and insignificant dreams. According to the Greeks, dreams that had no significant meaning came to the dreamer by passing through a gate composed of ivory while very important dreams pass through a gate of horn. (Woolf, 2005)

While there is an existence of symbols in the ancient dreams of Greece, there are voices and visions held by prophets in the Hebrew Bible. In many Hebrew Bible narrations, the dreams are directed to the people through sacred voices and visions. The dreamers had varying experience where they could hear a voice that was believed to be from God. The voice gave a direction regarding what the individuals and the whole nation had to do. The sacred voice would be obeyed and things would turn to be as anticipated in the dreams. On the other side, the prophets of God and kings had visions that also directed God's message to his people. The vision encountered showed what the future holds for the people who were obedient and disobedient to the sacred laws of the times.

Evident from the ancient literature on the Greece dreams, the visitor in the dream could be a ghost with ill intentions. Such dreams in the ancient Greeks culture were associated with myths about gods and ghosts.

(Campbell, 1970) Some divinity that the Greeks believed in were associated



with healing powers, as it is in the beliefs. Some gods would visit their worshipers in dreams and give them medical advice, diagnosis, and even cure over diseases. Those devoted to their religion would practice incubation in order to experience the dreams from their gods. Some sanctuaries had even rooms just meant for the purpose of sleeping overnight. The cults were based on some rituals such as ritual bathing, animal sacrifice, and having to sleep in an animal skin.

When the ancient Greece presentation of dreams is compared to the Hebrew Bible perception of dreams, a difference is clear in the manner in which the practices regarding religion are carried out. In the Hebrew Bible, only one god was worshipped. Besides, the people were not to carry out cults in order to get dreams from God. It was believed that God would heal his faithful people without necessarily appearing in dreams. It was believed that faith was the solution to every problem. In the dreams, God would appear when there was the need to intervene, giving and encouragement or a warning to his beloved people.

Additionally, the dreams in the Hebrew Bible are entirely sacred which not the case in the ancient Greece culture. In the Greece culture ghosts would occasionally appear to dreamers once in a while to cause havoc. (Campbell, 1970) In the Hebrew Bible, dreams and visions were entirely the communication between the people of the land and God. According to scholars, when the worship of one God takes place in some space, that space turns to be sacred. The sacred nature of the Hebrew Bible presentation of dreams is not only on the geographical dimension, but also on the religious

and mysterious dimensions. As for the ancient Greeks, cults had to be practiced in order to achieve some ambitions. In the Hebrew Bible, the whole issue of cults is regarded as evil since God is holy.

In conclusion, the Hebrew biblical narratives and the ancient Greeks presentation of dreams are fascinating given that they can be compared and significant differences pointed out. After significantly exploring the dreams literature, we may discover that theological meanings of dreams includes; dreams as a way of transmitting messages, dreams as a revelation and dreams as divine intervention in human affairs and the gods.