

The Spiritual Significance of Dreams Gen 28: 10-19a

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Introduction

Every night we have strange visitors. We sleep, we dream, but often we do not know what to make of them. Like angels, could they sometimes bring a message from God?

People in Biblical times took dreams very seriously. This is obvious in the Genesis passage of Jacob's dream, "There was a ladder set up on earth, the top of it reaching to heaven and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it." (28:12) I admit my first thought, hearing this is of Bath Abbey and the portrayal of this dream in stone on the west face. But Jacob was given a more spiritual interpretation with the land as a promise to him and his descendants. God said, "I will not leave you until I done what I have promised to you" (28: 15). However, I am sure I am not the only person to be puzzled at the link between the dream and that promise. But Jacob at least understood "this is the gate of heaven" which might have something to do with the dream.

So like Jacob we have mysterious dreams, find it hard to make any sense of the experience, and somehow find any relation to 'everyday reality'.

Bible and Dreams

Dreams are mentioned over 50 times in the Bible. This is a way that God talks to humanity; five dreams were associated with the birth of Jesus. Dreams were important to kings, for example Pharaoh was troubled by a series of dreams which only Joseph could interpret (Gen 41). The same happened with Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel who said, "There is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries." (Dan 2: 27). God appeared to Solomon in a dream and said, "Ask what I should give you." (I Kings 3:5). In the NT Paul was guided to Macedonia through a dream (Acts 16: 9-10).

Dreams are associated with the 'end of time' as we know it. The prophet Joel foretold, "I will pour out my spirit on all flesh, your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams and your young men shall see visions." (2: 28) Well, at times I feel old and I certainly dream – have we arrived?

Relevance?

Now you might respond, "So what?" You might forget your dreams as you wake in the morning. You might think that dreams are currently 'out of fashion' by about 2000 years! And almost everyone would agree with you, except for a handful of Freudian and Jungian analysts. But I have found that dreams provide meaningful guidance at significant transitions in life. Two examples when I found either reassurance or a disturbing realization:

- (a) 1982 I had been accepted as a graduate student at Boston University. I was worried about the financial risk of taking a wife and four children to live in Boston. I knew Boston was expensive, clergy jobs almost impossible to get and a leading minister told me "Don't come!" At this time of transition I had a strange dream in which the diocesan Bishop Cecil Warren was playing a child's game jumping over the backs of other people. I worked on the dream and came to the realization that I had an overly masculine view of the church and its hierarchy. I was challenged to believe in a more

feminine and nurturing role – one that would care for me and my young family. I felt reassured and it worked out well with me having not only a university scholarship but successive clergy jobs that supported the family well.

- (b) In 1994 I had returned to parish ministry but after five years in a busy parish, Holy Covenant in Jamieson, I was completely burnt out. I was planning to teach part-time at St Marks and to work as a psychologist. But I was conflicted about leaving parish ministry. In a dream I was drinking wine from a crystal chalice and it broke in my mouth. I was wounded in my vocation as a priest and concluded with a healthy measure of self-care that I needed a break from parish ministry (which has lasted 20+ years!).

I am not saying that all dreams have such significance. Some dreams seem to ‘clear the clutter’ of daily life. But some are important. So I notice my dreams and I have can sense when one has an important message for me. So how do we begin to understand our dreams?

Interpretation

There is a long history of dream interpretation. Over the centuries there have developed dream manuals to aid the dreamer in understanding dreams. Freud’s famous *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) was the analytic equivalent and there are countless new age manuals and internet sites.

How does the Bible approach dream interpretation? Pharaoh dreamed 7 fat cows, followed by 7 lean cows, which swallowed the 7 fat cows (Gen 41). He had a similar dream of 7 ears of grain. Joseph interpreted the dream as foretelling 7 bountiful years followed by 7 years of famine. The pharaoh followed the message of the dream and used the good years to build a reserve of grain which fed the nation.

In other interpretations of dreams there is a clear symbolic dimension to the dream. Nebuchadnezzar dreamt of a state with a head of gold, chest and arms of silver, legs of iron mixed with clay which a stone strikes. Daniel (Dan 2) interpreted this as the rise and fall of kingdoms.

This implies, and I think rightly, that interpretation involves decoding symbols in a dream. This leads to three approaches:

- (a) Using a **dream dictionary** and look up the suggested meanings. I did some research about five years ago and I was surprised to find that this is reasonably effective.
- (b) **Freudian** approach which means you take your dreams to a classical analyst who is an expert in dream interpretation. This is costly, if you can still find an analyst, and I am not convinced that the expert approach works well. If you do choose this approach see a Jungian analyst (there are still a few around).
- (c) **Jungian approach** puts the responsibility to interpret the dream back on the dreamer. In my experience this works best.

I will advise some practical steps which follow the self-interpretation of dreams along Jungian lines. The approach is well explained in Robert Johnson’s *Inner Work* book (now about 20 years old).

Practical Steps

You might be thinking I can’t remember my dreams, so I challenge you to put a pad and pen beside your bed. This action will signal that you are receptive to your dreams. It is also essential for the following steps which will help you to interpret the dream:

1. The most important dreams are vivid, surprising and possibly repetitive. When you wake up and remember something of a dream, record it on the note pad or journal. Begin with fragments and add details as you recall them. Make sure every detail that you can recall is recorded on the pad. Then I would advise you to go back to sleep, you can think further about the dream in the morning!
2. Set a time, maybe 30 minutes to work on the dream. Underline the key symbols. This includes people, actions and places. These will be central to 'de-coding' the dream. It is like when you learned a language at school. I did three years of Latin, you look at a passage, gradually you can get some of the sense of meaning, but a few words puzzle you until you get the dictionary. Then hopefully all becomes clear. It is the same process with dreams.
3. Then put the symbol-words on a page and associate meaning until one clicks. For example "rocking chair" then you associate: grandmother, retirement, mortality and say that 'clicks' for you then you have a meaning for that word, but not yet for the dream as a whole.
4. Do this with all the symbols, insert the meanings into the flow of the dream and then you will start to have a sense of the meaning. Make it about you personally. The dream is not just about say mortality but your vulnerability to death.
5. When you have a sense of the dream as a whole, try to hear a message to yourself.

I am not saying this will work every time. About 10 years ago I had a very significant dream but probably tried to over-interpret it. And nothing really worked. But more often, I have had many significant dreams which have influenced the course of my life. I have come to think of the interpreter in me as a 'wise self'. Not based on rationality but somehow caring and knowing what is best for me. I have found the messages very reassuring, especially in times of transition or making a major decision. It adds to my confidence in making a life decision to have this 'wise self' and my rational brain 'in sync'.

Conclusion

Have you ever played the game of throwing a flat pebble and watching it skip across the surface of a lake? I suppose we all have. A harmless activity but it is a metaphor for how we live much of our lives. Just skimming the surface of life. Of course there will be life crises when we are plunged beneath the surface: a health crisis, losing our employment, a separation or the death of a loved one. But we can choose to go deeper in the water. I see the spiritual life as an invitation to depth. Of course this is helped by our common worship, the beauty of music and art, meaningful friendships and intimacy with family.

Attending to our dreams is another pathway to psychological and spiritual depth. Dreams remind us of another realm: mysterious, potentially deep in meaning, and at times insistent. A little like God.

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