






# Abstract




Divine revelation through dreams was a principal belief of early Judaism, early Christianity and early Islam. Thus it is not surprising that the sacred texts of all three included instructions on how to discern true dreams from false ones. At the same time, they generally condemned telling the future (divination) by dreams. This paper compares the teachings on divinely-inspired dreams and their interpretation in the Qur'an and its commentaries in the form of hadith (sayings of the Prophet) with those found in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. In closing I consider the broader relevance of dream interpretation in a cross-cultural context today.





# Sacred Texts and Writings on the Meaning of Dreams: the Qur'an and Hadith compared with Biblical Teachings

Prof Bronwen Neil  
ARC Future Fellow  
Dept of Ancient History  
Macquarie University



# Structure of this presentation

Introduction to a common tradition of dream interpretation -  
Methodological questions

I. Types of dream in Jewish sources

- Disparate functions of literary dreams

II. Types of dream in Christian scriptures

III. Early Islamic dream narratives:

- Dreams in the Qur'an
- Dreams in Hadith (sayings of the Prophet)

IV. Broader relevance of dream interpretation in a cross-cultural context today

Conclusions



# Introduction - methodological questions

- How can we compare dreams across different religious traditions?
- All three are monotheisms with a tradition of revealed scripture
- They shared a common cultural tradition of dream interpretation
- An ecumenic approach (Lamoreaux 2008)

[C]lassification of the dream within a religious perspective typically focused not on the discovery of some latent psychological or existential meaning, but rather on reaching a correct perception of the authority and purpose of the dream as meant by the spiritual authority believed to have evoked or brought the dream. (Edgar 2006: 265)



## Introduction 2: Functions of literary dreams

- moral edification,
- providing support for a specific doctrinal or legal point of view,
- affirmation of a dynasty's claims to political legitimacy,
- the establishment of an individual's credentials in a given situation or arena,
- predicting, cautioning against or foreshadowing future events,
- addressing a disputed or even unmentionable topic, social or political commentary, or satire.

Marlow 2008: 11.



# Dreams in Hebrew Scriptures

After Kenny 1996.

1. Prophetic, which present aspects of future events; e.g. Joseph in Gen ; Daniel

2. Archetypal-spiritual, in which the dreamer explores existential questions, and which results in some transformation of behaviour; e.g. Jacob and the angel

3. Nightmares, with upsetting or frightening images; e.g. Job 4:13, 33: 15

Not included:

[Personal-mnemonic, which concern everyday matters in the dreamer's life;

Medical-somatic, which includes those episodes related to workings of the body;

Lucid dreams, in which the dreamer is aware of experiencing a dream and then consciously alters events.]

# Types of dream in New Testament

In the Gospels - didactic, directive, conversion

- Visions of the risen Jesus e.g. Mary in the tomb garden; road to Emmaus

Acts of the Apostles

- Didactic e.g. Peter on the rooftop
- Conversion e.g. Saul/Paul on the road to Damascus
- Directive e.g. Ananias
- Soul travel e.g. a man Paul knew



# Dreams in the Qur'an

[17:60] We informed you that your Lord fully controls the people, and we rendered *the vision that we showed you a test for the people*, and the tree that is accursed in the Quran. We showed them solid proofs to instil reverence in them, but this only augmented their defiance.



The cursed tree of hell fire



# Dreams in the Islamic Tradition

1. In the Qur'an, a revelation delivered through inspiration of the Prophet in a series of dreams
2. In Hadiths, i.e. sayings of the Prophet handed down orally at first, then written down in the eighth and ninth centuries, e.g. Al-Tabari (c. 870). Revered as second only to the holy word of the Qur'an.



# Dreams in the Qur'an (cont.)

Cf. Gen 22:1-15 Abraham and Isaac

In Qur'an it is Abraham and his son (unnamed):

[37:102] When he grew enough to work with him, he said, 'My son, I see in a dream that I am sacrificing you. What do you think?' He said, 'O my father, do what you are commanded to do. You will find me, GOD willing, patient.' [103] They both submitted, and he put his forehead down (*to sacrifice him*). [104] We called him: 'O Abraham.' [105] 'You have believed the dream.' We thus reward the righteous. [106] That was an exacting test indeed. [107] We ransomed (*Ismail*) by substituting an animal sacrifice.



## Dreams in the Qur'an (cont.)

[48:27] GOD has fulfilled His messenger's truthful vision: 'You will enter the Sacred Masjid, GOD willing, perfectly secure, and you will cut your hair or shorten it (*as you fulfill the pilgrimage rituals*) there. You will not have any fear. Since He knew what you did not know, He has coupled this with an immediate victory.'

[48:28] He is the One who sent His messenger with the guidance and the religion of truth, to make it prevail over all other religions. GOD suffices as a witness.



# Dreams in the Qur'an (cont)

Joseph the dream interpreter is a nabi (Prophet)  
in Qur'an - Sura of Yūsuf

e.g.

Sura 12:36-41 Two servants of the  
King (malik) in prison (cf Gen 40)

Sura 12:43-49 Dream of the  
Malik about the 7 fat cows  
and 7 thin ones (cf Gen 41)



Yusuf and Zulaikha (Joseph chased by  
Potiphar's wife), Persian miniature by Behzād, 1488.



# Dreams in hadiths

- In Arabic the noun for dream interpretation (*ta‘bīr*) is related to the verb *i‘tibār*, meaning ‘to draw moral lessons from mundane events’.
- 7th-c. hadith-narrator Ibn Abbas (d. 667-8): ‘the [dream] interpreter must master several other branches of knowledge’, including arithmetic, times, natures, wisdom, words, and the divine book and hadith (sayings of the Prophet).
- E.g. Hadith recorded by al-Bukhārī (d. 870): ‘Aisha said: The commencement of the Divine Inspiration to Allah’s Apostle was in the form of good righteous (true) dreams in his sleep. He never had a dream but that it came true like bright daylight.’

# Dreams are a small part of prophecy

Anas bin Malik related that Allah's Apostle (Muhammad) said:  
'A good dream (that comes true) of a righteous man is one of forty-six parts of prophecy'. (*Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*).

Cf. Babylonian Talmud (c. 6<sup>th</sup> c.)

Berakhot 55a-57b:

'Dreams are one-sixtieth part of prophecy'.



## IV. Relevance for today?

All dreams associated with appearances of holy figures, including the Prophet and angels (e.g. Gabriel) were considered veridical/true, since the Prophet said:

'Whoever sees me [the Prophet] in dreams will see me in wakefulness [the Hereafter] for Satan cannot take my shape.'

Use by Jihadists and their supporters, including women.



# Conclusions

- In the scriptural traditions of Jews, Christians and Muslim, dreams had personal *and* social significance, dreams had personal *and* social significance.
- Their retelling could thus serve any number of changing spiritual and political ends, since in the Judaeo-Christian and Islamic worlds, the spiritual *was* the political.
- Literary dreams could be cautionary, edificatory, didactic; they could spur conversion legitimise authority, or offer polemical instruction for holy men and their followers.
- Belief in dreams is quite common today in some Islamic and other societies, even secular ones.





# Select Bibliography

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