Genesis Dreams: Using a Private, Psychological Event as a Cultural, Political Declaration

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The article examines the role of the 13 dreams in the book of Genesis. The dreams are first shortly described (following Gnuse, 1984, and Oppenheim, 1956) in their historical context: the Near-East of over 3000 years ago. The structure of some of the dreams is then discussed and compared to dreams from another historical period, that of modern Jewish Moroccan pilgrims (Bila & Abramovitch, 1985), whose faith is based largely on the Bible. Following this discussion of the structure, the message of the dreams, regarding both the near future, and the remote, national future, is described. The article discusses the argument that all these dreams serve the purpose of establishing a common national identity, which has been historically the basis of Jewish faith. Possible reasons for using dreams in conveying the message are then discussed. The article ends with a discussion on the declining importance of the dream in the post-Genesis Bible.

KEY WORDS: Bible; culture and dreams; history; Judaism; visitational dreams.

"The dreams in Genesis are very significant: Either they depict the future, or they cause future events. Everybody dreams in Genesis: The Patriarchs . . . Joseph . . . but also Abimelech, King of Gerar, sees God in his dream, and so does Laban the Aramean. And even two Egyptian officials . . . But the issue of significant dreams ends with the end of the book of Genesis . . . Why is the world before the Tora full of significant dreams, and from the giving of the Tora on the dream loses its significance?" (Leibowitz, 1988, p. 33)

Until Abraham’s appearance on the scene, the book of Genesis, the first of the five parts of the Tora (the Book of Moses), describes the rare communication of humans with God as direct. From Abraham to Joseph, dreams become another main channel of divine communication. This article tries to assess the significance of the dreams in Genesis. Our analysis has two main points: to use the understanding of the dreams in the historical context in which they were written in order to explore the dreams in the cultural context that links Biblical stories to modern Jews, and to describe the way in which the Biblical text uses the dreams to realize its religious, historiographic and political aims, all of which center around the foundation of the Jewish religion and national identity.

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There are thirteen dreams in Genesis. Five are message dreams, in which God speaks to the Patriarchs. Two are message dreams in which God speaks to the enemies of the Patriarchs, and six pertain to Joseph's story (see list in the Appendix).

After this discussion on the classification and the structure of Biblical message dreams, the next step will be to undertake a comparison between their elements and those of visitational dreams of modern Moroccan Jews. The possible links throughout 3000 years of tradition will be discussed.

The message in message dreams will be analyzed, and the common idea relevant to all seven message dreams will be related also to the six symbolic dreams in the book. This idea, we claim, is a main message within Genesis, and the possible reasons for using the dreams as vehicles of the message will be discussed, along with the possible reasons for the decline in dreams' importance further on in the Bible.

Methodologically speaking, we identified dreams whenever the specific verb of dreaming was used explicitly in the text, or when there was psychological activity in sleep or at night (for example, of seven divine revelations Abraham has, only one is in sleep). For the sake of consistency, we only used the traditional Hebrew version of the Bible.

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THE STRUCTURE

At least regarding their style, Genesis dreams should be seen as reflecting the cultural context in which they were written: the region between Egypt and Mesopotamia over 3000 years ago. Dreams were then seen as stemming from an external, generally divine source, directly or symbolically (Gnuse, 1984), although sometimes the divinity of dreams had to be confirmed after awakening (Oppenheim, 1956).3

Oppenheim (1956) divides the ancient Near-East dreams into three kinds: psychological, symbolic and message dreams. Since no Genesis dream belongs to the first category, we will not discuss it. Symbolic dreams need interpretation, and are perceived as important. In message dreams God appears and speaks directly to the dreamer. These dreams are described, or dreamed, according to well-defined cultural conventions. A significant aspect of this category is that ancient Near-East literature includes only the dreams of important figures like kings: their dreams are public (Gnuse, 1984). When Pharaoh has a bad dream, he summons all the priests of Egypt (Genesis 41:8). We now turn to a discussion of the structure of message dreams.

All the Patriarchs have message dreams. Abraham and Isaac dream once (Genesis 15:1–18; 26:24–25), and Jacob three times (28:11–18; 31:5–13; 46:1–4). In addition, there are two dreams of the Patriarchs' enemies: Abimelech (20:2–7) and Laban (31:24). Descriptions of message dreams in the Bible have a specific pattern, similar to that in ancient Near-East literature (Gnuse, 1984; Oppenheim, 1956):

I. Theophany: “And God came.”
II. Recipient: “to Abimelech”

We used the Koren edition, Jerusalem, 1981. The English translation is ours, based on The Newberry Bible (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1967). We also translated the passages from Leibowitz and Rashi.

Lewin (1983) argues that Israelites, unlike their neighbors, had an internal notion of dreams. This contrasts with using dreams for message-conveying throughout Genesis. We believe the negative attitude towards dreams (Lewin, 1983), was irrelevant for the dreams in Genesis, as discussed below.