

ORIGINAL ARTICLES

Scriptural Symbolic Dreams: Relevant or Redundant in the 21st Century?

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Objective: This paper asks if the ancient relationship between dreams and religion can contribute to contemporary dream research, focussing particularly on one type of dream that is detailed in the Judeo-Christian and Islamic scriptures: the visual symbolic message dream, through which God/Allah conveys a message to the dreamer encoded in symbols that need interpreting.

Method: The paper begins by examining the scriptural dream narratives to identify recurring themes in their content and interpretations. It then compares these with information obtained in interviews with 9-12 year old children from Christian, Muslim and Secular backgrounds (n=94) about their divine dreams. When children identified a message in their dream, both the dream and the message were coded according to their type. The focus of this paper is on those dreams that were coded as visually symbolic (n=25) and it examines the types of messages that the children believed they contained, comparing them with those in the holy texts.

Results: The majority of the themes in the messages that the children identified resembled those in the scriptures, including instruction, warnings and future predictions. These spanned the sample groups.

Conclusions: The paper concludes that the scriptural dreams have relevance for contemporary dream research as children's experience of divine dreams has parallels with them. Future research can explore the divine dreams of children belonging to other faiths and children's interpretations of dreams that they do not assign a divine connection to. (**Sleep and Hypnosis 2004;6(3):111-118**)

Key words: *divine dreams, children's dreams, dream interpretation, religious dreams, symbolic dreams, dreams about God, dreams from Allah*

INTRODUCTION

In ancient civilisations the world over, there existed a widespread belief that the gods sent dreams to people and also appeared in them.

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Accepted April 19, 2004

This was embedded in the religious belief systems of the time, and perhaps the most evocative image was that of the temple or shrine devoted to the ritual of dream incubation. This involved the dreamer performing rituals prior to sleep, with the aim of invoking a god into their dream, perhaps with the intention of receiving healing or prophetic knowledge. The temple's officials would subsequently reveal the meaning of the dream (1). Interpretation was thus central to this practice, for the sacred rite had little worth unless the meaning of the dream was revealed.

Yet, as the dream incubation temples of the ancient Greeks, Romans and Egyptians (amongst others) crumbled in the decline of these once great civilisations, the notion that dreams could have a divine origin did not disappear with them. Over time, the belief that some dreams came from God/Allah was preserved in writing and carried into today's world in the scriptures of thriving world religions, including those of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This paper focuses upon the concept in the Abrahamic faiths, but other religious systems also share it as Bulkeley (1) details in his overview. The journey that this belief has taken has varied within religions, depending on a complex range of cultural factors that cannot be detailed here. Briefly, Kelsey (2) has provided a thorough documentation of the history of God's relationship with dreams in western Christianity where the notion has generally been devalued. In contrast, the Islamic belief that Allah can send dreams has been sustained in Muslim communities, whilst Harris (3) and Covitz (4) propose that Judaism takes an ambivalent attitude towards dreams. Despite the shared roots of these religions, different attitudes towards dreams have emerged. One influence upon this is culture, as illustrated by Charsley (5,6) and Curley (7) who describe how dreams remain central to the practices of churchgoers in some independent churches in Uganda and Nigeria respectively. This of course is in complete contrast to western churches.

'Divine dreams' may be defined in a Judeo-Christian and Islamic context as a dream occurring in sleep that the dreamer believes has been sent by God/Allah or in which they perceived God to have appeared. As this type of dream has played a role in religions throughout the world—religions both 'living' and 'dead'—this paper asks if this ancient relationship between dreams and religion can contribute to contemporary dream research. The intention is not to suggest that a supreme being either exists or if one does, that it can send dreams; rather,

it is my intention to explore the degree of relevance of one type of dream common to the Abrahamic scriptures to children's experience of divine dreams. Continuing the interpretive theme of the ancient incubation temples, I will focus on visual symbolic message dreams. What are these and how do the Abrahamic faiths portray them?

Divine Dreams in the Scriptures

Although the empirical study did not include Jewish children, this brief overview of the scriptural symbolic dreams includes the Old Testament because it forms part of Christianity's heritage. Writers on dreams in the Christian tradition such as Tertullian (8) and Gregory the Great (9) referred to Old Testament dream texts as evidence for their claims that God sends dreams.

The Old Testament, New Testament, Qur'an and Hadith (the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions) (10-12) all contain narrative accounts of dreams. Theologians have examined these Biblical texts and identified two different forms of divine dreams, which can be broadly classified as auditory message dreams and visual symbolic message dreams (see Oppenheim (13) who classifies them as message dreams and symbolic dreams respectively). In the former, the dreamer hears a spoken message that is unambiguous. In the latter, the dream conveys its meaning by substituting characters, objects and events with others that represent them, and an interpreter was usually required to decode the symbolism. This categorisation of symbolic dreams can also be applied to dreams in the Qur'an and Hadith. Amongst these scriptural dreams were a variety of themes, some of which recurred in different dreams.

According to the interpretations, one of God/Allah's purposes in sending dreams was to inform the dreamer of future events. One of Joseph's (Yusuf) dreams and those of Pharaoh and his two prisoners are of particular interest

to this topic, given that they are common to both the Old Testament/Pentateuch (Genesis 37-46) and the Qur'an (Sura 12: 4-49). Future prophecies dominate these dreams; for example, Joseph dreamt of the sun, moon and stars bowing down to him (Genesis 37: 9, Sura 12:4), which symbolised his future rise to power. Similarly, two prisoners— identified in the Bible as Pharaoh's chief baker and chief butler— narrated their dreams to Joseph who provided accurate predictions, one of death for the baker and one of freedom for the butler (Genesis 40: 8-23, Sura 12: 36-42). See also Daniel's two dreams in the Old Testament, which also contained prophecies of the future (Daniel 7: 1ff and 8: 1ff).

Within the story, Pharaoh also reported two dreams to Joseph. These are noteworthy because the interpretation contained a second theme in addition to the predictive element. Pharaoh dreamt of seven lean cows eating seven fat cows, and seven withered ears of corn swallowing seven healthy ears of corn, which Joseph interpreted as indicating that seven years of famine would follow seven years of plenty (Genesis 41: 1-36, Sura 12: 43-49). Unlike the aforementioned interpretations, which were purely predictive, this interpretation also contained a warning to Pharaoh that he could avoid this disaster by asking people to store grain during the years of abundance. Pharaoh heeded the advice, and in so doing, eased the severity of the famine, thereby changing the course of history. Further examples of dream's messages containing both a future prediction combined with a warning were those of King Nebuchadnezzar, as detailed in the Old Testament (Daniel 2: 31-45). Daniel's and Joseph's interpretations also contained instruction for their kings as to how they might change the forthcoming events. Unlike Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar failed to take his advice and was stripped of his kingdom as the dream had foretold.

The Qur'an details a dream in which Allah provides courage for Muhammad's army who

were about to enter the battle of Badr. Allah showed Muhammad's army their opponents in the dream, presenting them as small in number, which gave them the necessary courage to face them. Had He shown the enemy as a large battalion, they would have been discouraged about the impending conflict (Sura 8: 43-45).

According to the Hadith, Muhammad regularly practised interpretation of other people's visual symbolic dreams. The interpretations of dreams that are recorded in the Hadith often differ in style from those in the Qur'an in that they do not all provide a message for the dreamer. However, a recurring theme in the interpretations that were given was that certain dream images reflected upon the individual's behaviour, which was related to their faith. One example was Ibn Umar's dream in which he waved a piece of silk in different directions, and the cloth carried him in that direction. Muhammad interpreted this as symbolic of Ibn Umar being a righteous man (Sahih Bukhari 9/87: 143).

Thus we can identify themes in the symbolic messages of divine dreams according to holy texts of Islam and the Judaeo-Christian traditions, some of which are recurring and others not, including predictions of the future, warnings, instruction, courage and religious themes. Do these themes have any connection with those of contemporary children's divine dreams?

METHODS

The sample consisted of 478 children aged 9-12 years who were given a questionnaire in their schools in Scotland and England. In addition to gathering biographical data, the questionnaire also asked the children if they had ever had a dream that they believed God/Allah had sent, and/or, in the case of Christian and Secular children only, if they had had a dream in which God was present (see Adams (14) for further data on Christian and Secular children's dreams about God). The

questionnaire was based on the format of the 'Most Recent Dream' questionnaire, as used with children (15). However, wording was amended in order to focus upon the main research question, i.e. instead of asking the children to write a description of their most recent dream, they were asked to write a description of their last dream about/from God.

I subsequently invited those who reported a divine dream to be interviewed about it. After eliminating reports that contained evidence purporting to fabrication, a total of 107 valid dreams were included in the study (resulting in a total of 22.4% of all children asked). Of these 107, I interviewed 94 children. This sample was broken down as follows: Christian (n=35); Secular (n=24); Marginal Christian (n=9) where children did not make a clear distinction between having had a Christian or non-religious upbringing; and Muslim (n=26). They had an average age of 10 years 7 months and median 10 years and 11 months. The purposes of the interviews included expanding upon the written details about the dream and seeking information about the children's understanding of it, particularly why they believed that the dream had a divine connection. Overall, the interviews elicited similar patterns in both dream content and in ways of responding to their dreams across the different sample groups.

Whether or not the children's dreams were coded as 'message' dreams was dependent upon the children's understanding of it. Although none of the interview questions were directly related to any possible meaning or interpretation of the dream for fear of resulting in false positives, the majority of the children interviewed (n=63, 67%) explained how they had uncovered meaning in their divine dream. This information was mostly related to questions that explored the divine element, for example, 'why do you think God/Allah sent you this dream?' I devised a coding scheme that was based upon elements of common features and themes in the scriptural dreams and in other dreams reported in the respective religious

traditions, types of dreams identified in psychology and other elements identified in the children's dream reports. One of the classifications within the coding system related to a message in the dream, as identified by the children, and the form that those message dreams took. In total, 63 of the 94 children interviewed perceived their dream to have contained a message (67%) and of these, visual symbolic dreams were the most commonly reported form. They numbered 25 and accounted for just over one third of all message dreams (39.7%). These 25 children had responded as the prophets Joseph, Daniel and Muhammad had done, interpreting symbols in the dream that revealed a message they believed God/Allah had sent. What then, did the children dream about, and how did the messages compare to the scriptural accounts?

RESULTS

Eighteen of the messages were given one coding for their theme (n=18) and seven messages were given two codings for theirs (n=14), resulting in a total of 32 codes. Generally, where a theme was recurring, this spanned the sample groups. Instruction was the most frequently recorded code for the children's interpretations, accounting for almost one third of the symbolic messages' codes (n=10, 31.2%). Rasha, a Muslim girl, dreamt that she and a cousin were going on Hajj. She travelled by car and watched her cousin travelling by boat and they saw Mecca and the Kaaba before the boat turned around. Although the dream did not contain any images of the girls performing Hajj, Rasha felt that the dream was a message from Allah instructing her that she should go on Hajj in the future. John, a Christian boy, described how he had been fighting with other children at school, and a few days prior to the dream he had hurt another boy in a fight. In the dream groups of children were exchanging blows and the child with whom John had previously fought with in waking life stood on him, "like

triumph... revenge.” Like Rasha’s dream, there was no auditory instruction, but John focused on the final image of the dream and interpreted it as a message from God telling him to stop fighting because one day the opponent might be the victor. An interesting waking life consequence of this was that John was reconciled with the boy whom he had fought.

As in the Old Testament, Qur’an and Hadith, the themes of predictions (n=6, 18.7%) and warnings (n=5, 15.6%) also appeared in the children’s interpretations of their symbolic dreams. One message contained both a prediction and a warning, as Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar’s did, which was dreamt by a Christian girl named Rebecca. She recalled how she had gone back in time and was walking past a house with her friend and family. She accidentally tripped and fell into the doorway of the house, after which the door closed and she found herself separated from her friend. Rebecca understood this to be a symbolic message that her best friend was going to leave the neighbourhood. She believed that God had sent it,

...to warn me that she’ll go away for a long time and that I wouldn’t see her for a long, long time... She was close to me and it would have been quite hurtful if she went and I didn’t know about it before. And [God] sent it to me because He was sending me a message that she was going to go...

She felt that by sending her this message, God was trying to help her. However, it did not have the desired effect. On the contrary,

It actually made it worse cos I knew she was going to go and I kept thinking ‘are you going to go?’ and I started thinking about it a lot.

In waking life, her friend later moved out of the area, thereby fulfilling the prophecy of the dream. This fulfilment is a key feature of the scriptures, which usually describe or refer to the ways in which the precognitive dream’s

prophecies manifested. In contrast Simon, a 10 and a half year-old Secular boy, believed that his was an indication of events that were yet to happen. He recalled a dream in which he was in the desert with his mother. A young girl appeared and suddenly disappeared, and some monsters captured his mother. He suddenly found a light sabre, similar to those in the film Star Wars, and was able to frighten the monsters away and save her. Simon felt that this dream was an indication that one day in the future he would need to help his mother out from a financial situation, which God had foreseen and was using the dream to tell him in advance. Although slightly scared by the dream on waking, Simon was relieved by knowing that his mother had not been captured by monsters and remained curious as to who the young girl, was. Amy, a 10 year old Secular girl interpreted her dream of her deceased Grandmother journeying on a bus as symbolic that she was travelling to heaven, and that the two would one day be reunited there. This offered reassurance, a theme accounting for 6.2% of the codes (n=2). Although this is not evident in the scriptural symbolic dreams it does occur in some of the scripture’s auditory dreams, an exploration of which I am currently undertaking.

The majority of the dreams reported contained settings and a plot but one that was of particular interest for both its content and interpretation was that of Marginal Christian girl, Anne. She had not been initiated into any religious faith but had recently, at the age of ten and a half, begun to attend a Sunday School. This was a recurring dream that had no setting but began with Anne hearing her friend’s voices telling her to look in a particular direction. As she did so, the voices disappeared and she saw a light that was white in the centre, changing to orange and red as it filled the space of the dream. She interpreted the light as a symbol of Christianity and related it to her time at Sunday School. Her teacher had suggested that the children advertise the institution to their

friends, but she had been uncertain about doing so until she had the dream. She believed that God had sent it to give her more courage to tell other children about the religion, and as a consequence decided to help her teacher promote the school. In this way, the dream displays similarities to the Qur'anic dream of Muhammad's army, which offered them courage. Although Anne was not Muslim, and this symbolic dream with a message of courage was an isolated case in the children's sample (n=1, 3.1%), it is nevertheless of interest given the impact it had upon her.

There were four codes for religious themes (12.5%). In one example, a Muslim girl explained how she had had a pleasant dream, which she felt that Allah had sent to her because she had been well behaved. However, not all of the children's symbolic dreams were similar to those in the scriptures or religious traditions. Indeed, there were four (n=12.5%) codes of 'other,' three of which were the only code for the dreams, because the children's interpretations did not correspond with each other or with the aforementioned subjects. For example, one girl dreamt that she was walking with her deceased Aunt and believed that God had sent her the dream to remind her of her Aunt whom she had not known well. A Muslim boy dreamt that he was watching a sunset on a quiet beach and felt that Allah had sent this to him to enable him to calm down following an argument with his father.

DISCUSSION

What then, are the implications of this research? Firstly, to the similarities between the scriptural narratives and children's dreams. As shown above, none of the children's appeared to be directly related in content: for example, there were no dreams of sun, moons and planets bowing down, or lean cows eating fat cows. However, where the children's interpretations were concerned, similar themes to the scriptural interpretations were evident. Not only had the

children perceived the dream to contain a message from God/Allah, but they also solicited similar themes in those messages. Again, there were no direct comparisons in terms of content of the messages— none of national disasters such as famines, or of rises and falls to power. Yet the broader, more general themes of the messages including warnings, instruction and future predictions were evident. One explanation for this is that the scriptural dreams embodied characteristics that have since been identified by psychological studies, such as the notion that dreams give us messages and can predict the future. This is of course complicated by the proposal by some theologians that the Biblical dream narratives are literary constructions, an idea that is not applicable to the Qur'an, which Muslims believe is the literal word of Allah delivered to Muhammad by the Angel Gibrael. As Gnuse (16) illustrates, the charge against the Biblical dream narratives is supported by the fact that analysis of the language and structure indicates that most fall into standard formats. Certainly, the Biblical narratives do bear strong similarities to each other in their structure, reflecting the author's cultural context, and of course we will never know if Nebuchadnezzar or Daniel ever had those dreams that are recorded. However the similarities with the children's dreams may suggest that the Biblical accounts, even if not historical dream reports, were borne out of human experience of dreaming.

Of further importance is the finding that the message's themes were spread across the samples; it was not the case that only Christian children interpreted future predictions in their dreams for example, but also Muslim and Secular children too, further suggesting that the similarities with the scriptures' dreams are by no means confined to religious children, nor children of only one faith— that they are perhaps 'universal.'

The second implication of this research lies with the relevance of people's beliefs that God/Allah can send dreams. From an objective

viewpoint, it is important to acknowledge that this is an ancient and universal concept, even though we cannot know definitively if a supreme being exists. As the concept has particularly declined in western Christianity, it is easy for dream researchers from Christian or Secular backgrounds to overlook this type of dream and way of understanding dreams if they allow themselves to remain within the confines of their own cultural boundaries.

Thirdly, this research gives us an insight into children's understanding of their own dreams, albeit limited to those that they believe have a divine origin. This has important implications for those theorists who suppose that children have limited thought processes about the origin of their dreams, and demonstrates the importance of asking children who state that dreams come from God for further explanation. It is possible that they will be able to offer sophisticated reasons for making such a claim.

Finally, I have, elsewhere, (17) explored how some of the children perceived their divine dreams as significant, and I proposed that some could be categorised as 'big dreams' according to a Jungian framework. This aspect—of the significance of divine dreams—offers a further parallel with those of the scriptures. For the dreamer, heeding the divine message impacted on their lives; indeed, for Pharaoh it was not only his life that was affected, but also that of his people, who survived the famine because of his actions.

There are several avenues for future research into the relevance of religious dreams to contemporary dream research. Firstly, this has been limited to 9-12 year old Christian, Secular and Muslim children. Hence there are opportunities to explore the divine dreams of

children of different ages and also of additional faiths to see how they compare. Secondly, further exploration can be made into the ways in which children understand their non-divine dreams—do they also interpret these and find meaning in them or is this something they only do when encountering an atypical dream?

CONCLUSION

This paper can only offer an insight into one aspect of my research project into children's divine dreams but it serves to highlight the relevance of scriptural symbolic dreams to contemporary children. For many western Christian and Secular adults alike, the notion that God can send dreams may be a fanciful tale; the literary creation of the authors of the books of Genesis and Daniel who used dreams in their stories to convey ideas about God. But for many Christians, Jews and particularly Muslims, the belief that God/Allah sends dreams is still held and needs to be respected. The children in this study, some of whom had no formal instruction into any religious faith, have dreamt dreams that were often unusual compared to their others, which led them to assign a divine origin to them. As some of these dreams bore similarities to those in the scriptures, the findings encourage us to once again engage with this historical concept as a means by which some people continue to explore and understand a small proportion of their dreams in the midst of the frantic, scientific west. Irrespective of our own viewpoint on the question of the divine as a possible source of some dreams, this ancient notion certainly seems far from redundant for many of our 21st century children.

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