

How to Learn God's Dream Language

Dreams have had a profound role in the Christian church since its beginning. Last month I explained how understanding dreams is rooted in Hebraic history, and today I'm going to expand on that to show the rich heritage of dream language and revelation bequeathed to the Christian church throughout its history.

In brief review, to set the stage—what God did long ago, and throughout history, He does today and will continue always to do. Dream language is the language of the ages. This is one of the mysterious ways that God intersects our lives. He invades our comfort zones. He visits us in the night and simply speaks to us.

Dreams, visions and interpretations are a part of virtually every culture and religion on earth and have been throughout the ages. This is even truer for Judaism and Christianity than any other religion, as Jews and Christians worship the one true God, who is the author of revelation. To accept dreaming as a legitimate medium for spiritual revelation and communication, then, is to follow the flow of history, including church history. So, what is that history?

Dream Legacy of the Early Church

Just as they had for the Jews in the Old Testament, divined dreams continued to play a significant role in the New Testament and in the life of the early church. Matthew, for example, records four dreams that Joseph received relating to the birth and early life of Jesus, as well as the dream to the wise men warning them not to return to Herod. Luke in Acts relates Saul's (Paul's) vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus and the subsequent dream of Ananias, whom the Lord

sent to lay his hands on Saul and restore his sight. He also mentions Saul's dream in which he is told to expect Ananias. Years later, Paul has a dream that results in carrying the gospel into the continent of Europe for the first time. Simon Peter and Cornelius, a Roman centurion, both receive visions that lead to Peter's visit to Cornelius's home, where he preaches the gospel to Cornelius and his friends and family.

After the deaths of the apostles and the passing of the New Testament period, church leaders during the first few centuries of the church remained quite open to dreams and visions as a valid avenue of God's communication with man. Many of them wrote of dreams and visions in a positive manner and some even recorded their personal dream experiences. Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna and a man who was a contemporary of the apostles and was ordained by them, was martyred for his faith in A.D. 155. While praying shortly before his death, Polycarp received a vision in which the pillow under his head caught fire. He understood that this image was a premonition from God of his own impending death.

Examples in Church History

Justin Martyr, the first Christian philosopher, believed that dreams are sent by spirits. He used this idea to support his belief that the human soul lives on after the death of the body. Dreams give us "direct spiritual communication with nonphysical realities."

Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons in the last half of the second century, believed, like Justin Martyr, that dreams reveal the spiritual world. In *Against Heresies*, his major extant work, Irenaeus provides critical and positive analysis of the dreams of Joseph, Peter and Paul in the New Testament. He also used his understanding of dreams to refute the idea of reincarnation. Since dreams connect our soul to the spiritual world, we should remember dreams from a former life if such existed.

Clement of Alexandria, one of the most brilliant minds in the early church, believed that true dreams arise from the “depth of the soul” and that they “reveal spiritual reality, the intercourse of the soul with God.” For Clement, sleep was a time when a person becomes especially open to divine revelation. Dreams can provide insight to a person’s divine destiny:

“Thus also such dreams as are true, in the view of him who reflects rightly, are the thoughts of a sober soul, undistracted for the time by the affections of the body, and counseling with itself in the best manner. ... Wherefore always contemplating God, and by perpetual converse with him inoculating the body with wakefulness, it raises man to equality with angelic grace, and from the practice of wakefulness it grasps the eternity of life.”

Tertullian, powerful writer and defender of the faith in the third century, regarded dreams as one of the *charismata*, or spiritual gifts from God. He also believed they were just as relevant for people of his own day as they were in New Testament days. In his view, dreams came from any one of four sources: demons, God, the soul or “the ecstatic state and its peculiar conditions.”

Augustine, one of most brilliant minds and greatest theologians in the history the church, was a firm believer in the validity and value of spiritual dreams. He wrote that humans perceive reality in four different ways. First, there is the outer realm of physical objects to which we react with our physical bodies. Second are the mental impressions that we have of those physical experiences. Third is the inner perception of those experiences and finally, the mental image in its remembered form. Augustine believed that, in addition to physical realities perceived through outer and inner perception, humans could also perceive “autonomous spiritual realities,” such as angels and demons, that presented themselves to the inner eye. Augustine’s writings contain

numerous examples and discussions of dreams, both his own and those of others. One of particular interest is a dream that his mother Monica had received years earlier in which the Lord gave her comfort in the assurance that he (Augustine) would one day turn to Christ.

Thomas Aquinas, medieval theologian who rivaled Augustine, agreed with Aristotle's view that the only sources of human knowledge are sense experience and rational thought. His approach to theology was to combine Christian thought with Aristotelian thought and thereby to thoroughly modernize Christianity.

Yet, even while writing this massive work, *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas himself experienced both a dream and a revelatory vision. The dream was an instructive dream in which Peter and Paul instructed him on how to handle a particular theological issue he had been having great difficulty with. Near the end of his life, when his great work was almost finished, Aquinas received a vision, a direct divine experience that apparently exceeded anything his rational thought could have produced. The result was that he stopped working on his *Summa Theologica*, saying, "I can do no more. Such things have been revealed to me that all I have written seemed like straw, and I now await the end of my life. And this from a man whose utterly rational approach to theology helped turn the church as a whole away from sensitivity to dream language for centuries!

Dream Language in the Modern Church

By "modern," I mean in this sense the church since the time of the Reformation. Beginning sometime in the fourth century and continuing for over a thousand years, the church officially turned its back on dream language in favor of a more "rational" approach to theology and doctrine. During the same time, however, many individual believers continued to experience dreams and visions of a divine nature, and a large

number of the records of those encounters survive to the present day. In other words, despite the church's "official" anti-dream stance, God has continued to speak to His people through dreams and visions just as He did in ancient days. Let me share one Christian History example in some detail.

The Revelation Behind Amazing Grace

John Newton was one of the most respected and loved churchmen in England in the 18th-century. But his life did not start off in that direction. Newton grew up to be a seaman and later became a slave trader. Years later, as he was about to enter the ministry, he wrote about a dream he had had early in his slave trading days that both warned him of the danger of his way of life and gave him a sense of God's providence. In his dream, Newton was aboard ship in the harbor of Venice, taking the night watch. A person approached him with a ring, gave it to him and warned him to guard it carefully because as long as he kept the ring he would be happy and secure.

As he thought about these things, a second person came up to him and convinced him of the folly of depending on the ring for his security. Newton dropped the ring in the water and immediately saw fire burst from a range of mountains behind Venice. Too late he recognized the second person as the tempter, who had tricked him into throwing away God's mercy on his life. All that awaited him now were the hellish flames of those burning mountains. In Newton's own words:

"And when I thought myself upon the point of a constrained departure, and stood, self-condemned, without plea or hope, suddenly, either a third person, or the same who brought the reigning at first, came to me... and demanded the calls of my grief. I told him the plain case, confessing that I had ruling to myself willfully, and deserved no pity. He blamed my rashness, and asked if I should be wiser supposing I had my ring again?

"I could hardly answer to this; for I thought it was gone beyond recall. I believe, indeed, I had it not time to answer, before I saw this unexpected friend go down under the water, just in the spot where had dropped it; and he soon returned, bringing the ring with him. The moment he came on board the flames in the mountains were extinguished, and my seducer left me. Then was 'the prey taken from the hand of the mighty, and the lawful captive delivered.' My fears were at an end, and with joy and gratitude I approached my kind deliverer to receive the ring again; but he refused to return it, and spoke to this effect:

"'If you should be entrusted with this ring again, you would very soon bring yourself into the same distress: you are not able to keep it; but I will preserve it for you, and, whenever it is needful, will produce it in your behalf.'"

After a short time, Newton forgot this dream. A few years later, however, he found himself in circumstances remarkably similar to those in his dream when he "stood helpless and hopeless upon the brink of an awful eternity." There John Newton found mercy from the Lord. He discovered that the One who restored the ring would also keep it for him. This experience led him to exclaim, "O what an unspeakable comfort is this, that I am not in my own keeping!"

As a minister of the gospel, John Newton penned the words to many hymns, including one of the most famous and most-sung hymns of the church, "Amazing Grace." It was a grace John Newton knew from experience.

Let's Receive Our Inheritance!

Dreams are powerful things. They can reach us, touch us and change our lives in a way that no other form of communication can. Don't despise dreams. Don't turn your back on them as so many in the church did for so many centuries. Open yourself to the world of dream language and, in the tradition of the Jews,

expect God to speak to you through dreams, expect to remember what He says, and expect your life to be changed as you respond to what God says to you.

Like our Jewish forerunners and the early church fathers, let's create a culture where the spirit of revelation not only exists but also flourishes. It's time to take back our spiritual birthright and be sons and daughters who walk an illumined path by the One who is the author of dreams.

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