

THE DREAM THEME IN *GENESIS*

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Is the dream theme in *Genesis* a plain echo of ancient Near East popular tradition, or is it merely a standard literary device that introduces a significant historical religious event? These questions may be asked by one who wants to unravel the dream puzzle in *Genesis*. Readings on ancient Near Eastern tradition found in ANET¹ with which the Bible serves common thought-patterns could lead to further questioning: Of what significance is the dream theme to a religious tradition?

Methodology

The dream as a theme of a thought-concept allows a multiplicity of approaches with no one approach exhausting its meaning. The approach used in this study is derived from Othmar Keel's² comparative study of ancient Near East iconography and the Book of Psalms. He presented a methodology of understanding and appreciating the iconography of the ancient Near East with its unique concepts. Since the Bible shares the same patterns with the ancient Near East images, O. Keel's study on iconography does shed light on the study of the psalms. Likewise, O. Keel's approach to psalms could well be applied to dreams in *Genesis*. The following steps are patterned after O. Keel's approach.

1. Dreams are studied individually or independently of each other.
2. The incidents before the dream are related with those after the dream read as a whole composition to get the significance of the dream.
3. Explore the possible significance or relationship of the dream narrative to the life story of the person and to a particular religious tradition.

It is only when the dream theme is finally related to a people's religious tradition can it assume full significance.

Keel's approach can at least explore, since it cannot fully fathom, the dream as a reservoir of meaning. So much original meaning is lost in the translation of the Bible into English and so much still lies hidden in the original Hebrew. Yet, with the universality of the theme, the underlying message has the same stirrings

¹ J.B. Pritchard (Ed), Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament (2nd Edition: Princeton, NJ; Princeton University Press, 1955).

² Othmar Keel, The Symbolism of the Biblical World, (New York: Seabury Press, Inc. 1978).

in the English or any other foreign language — it speaks of both hope and revelation.

It is interesting to note that the dream accounts in *Genesis* are linked to four important figures of religious tradition: Adam, Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph. This study is an attempt to explore the meaning of their dream narratives.

Dream Narratives

A. Adam

Gen. 2:21

"So the Lord God cast a deep sleep on the man, and while he slept, he took out one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh."

Although the dream is not mentioned, the verse signifies the same. A logical relationship between sleep and dream can also be established. The situation for this event of a deep sleep, *tardemah*, is provided by the preceding statement, v. 20b. "But for the man there was not found a helper fit for him."

Verses 22-23 speak of the effect of this *tardemah* in the overwhelming surprise of experiencing another person in the woman. Verse 21 is understood to preclude v. 21, thus the primacy of this *tardemah* which 'suggests the mysterious and highly significant nature of the divine activity:' (JBC)³.

- This account established two things believed by the ancients.
- Nothing highly significant is fully comprehended by man that is not conceived or is not seen first in dreams or in sleep.
 - It is the Lord who creates inspirations and dreams, who makes situations and dreams, who makes situations happen and who prepares the birth of future events.

As a Yahwist account (J), this narrative reveals a very old popular tradition that reflects very much the wisdom of the ancients as evidenced by the Epic of Gilgamesh (ANET). The Yahwist sees this prototype in Adam's 'deep sleep' as the highlight of creation and thus it acquires prominence. God in the mysterious act of creation cannot be observed, hence, the necessity of the 'deep sleep.'

B. Abraham

Gen. 15:1

"Some time after these events the word of the Lord came to Abraham in a vision: "Fear not, Abraham! I am your shield; I will make your reward very great."

³E.H. Maly, "Genesis" in R.E. Brown SS, J.A. Fitzmeyer, SJ; R.E. Murphy, O'carm (Eds.), *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 12.

Gen 15:12

'As the sun was about to set, a trance fell upon Abraham, and a deep terrifying darkness enveloped him . . . !

According to Ottosson in TDOT the text belongs to local tradition associated with cultic sites.⁴ From this we say that cultic sites arose from a particular experience that is given meaning. What could have been the actual experience of Abraham?

Abraham expresses his anxiety and insecurity in the first dream which God countered with assurance. The first dream is a simple dream. Verse 12, however, is a *tardemah* which announces a highly significant event to follow: the establishing of the covenant with Yahweh! This, according to the Elohist (E), is 'the great climax' of history. Thus the theme of the land and the descendants stands out presaged by the dream. In this *tardemah* according to Gerard Von Rad⁵ the E writes that "Abraham had to sink in fear and insensibility before God's coming!" Von Rad writes, "Man cannot perceive God in the act, cannot observe his miracles in their genesis."

Another dream sequence is found in chapter 20 of Genesis which speaks of the "peril of the Ancestress." (Gen. 20:3) But God came to Abraham in a dream one night and said to him, "You are about to die because of the woman you have taken. . . .

God answered him in a dream: "Yes, I know you did it in good faith. In fact, it was I who kept you from sinning against me; that is why I did not let you touch her. Therefore, return the man's wife — as a spokesman he will intercede for you — that your life will be saved. If you do not return her, you can be sure that you and all who are yours will certainly die."

This dream is non-symbolic since the dreamer receives instructions that are immediately comprehensible.⁶ The previous incident that occasioned the dream was Abraham's journey to the Negeb and his encounter with Abimelech, King of Gerar, who took a liking to Sara and took her. The incident after was the confrontation or resolution of conflict between Abimelech and Abraham.

This account speaks of the warning message of death or curse to any strong people who would take advantage over the weaker band of wandering Hebrews. Belonging to the first fully developed Elohist narrative, this dream account has a significant message. The fear of the Lord and His judgement can save a people. Indeed it led to a resolution of conflict through confrontation and dialogue which ended with full restoration of relationships between the two groups: the sharing of wealth and resources that results in peace and prosperity.

⁴M. Ottosson, "Chalam; Cholom" in G.J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren (Eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament (TDOT)*, p. 428.

⁵Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), p. 84.

⁶M. Ottosson, "Chalam, Cholom", in *TDOT*, p.427.

God is the sender of the dream; Abimelech, the dreamer; and Abraham, the prophet that mediates between Abimelech and God who intercedes for Abimelech that he be blessed, not cursed. The account ends with Abraham sharing his blessing with Abimelech.

The two dream accounts (Gen. 15 & 20) are closely related. In Gen. 15 Yahweh answers Abraham's insecurity and fear of tribal extinction with the promise of descendants and their blessing as they dwell in the land. Their *tardemah* awaits further resolution and points to a later event, the dream of Abimelech in Gen. 20, when Yahweh's promise is now in operation and both Abraham and Abimelech are saved from a possible curse. Abraham is saved from childlessness by having Sara back while Abimelech from another curse by establishing good relations with Abraham. In this way Abraham's tribe enjoys the benefits of peaceful co-existence in the land as was promised earlier.

C. Jacob

The first of a series of dreams assigned to Jacob belongs to two literary traditions, the Elohist and Yahwist, and is found in the following verses of Gen. 20: Gen. 28:11-12 (F) the stairway to heaven
vv. 13-16 (J) the promise of the land and descendants
vv. 17-18 (E) the stairway to heaven continued
v. 19 (J) an actiology

This is occasioned by Jacob's departure from Beersheba to Haran in fleeing from his brother Esau. This account is an example of an actiology or a cult-narrative which tells us that the history of the cult is traced back to the dream.

In Gen. 31:10-13 (E), Jacob recounts a simple dream. The preceding verses tell of Laban's sons' knowledge of Jacob taking everything that belonged to Laban, his father-in-law and of his accumulation of wealth. In the later verses Rachel and Leah answer and justify the wealth accumulated by Jacob as their portion — being heirs of their father's riches. This dream sequence gives the justification and motivation for the flight of Jacob from Laban which according to the Elohist is rooted in obedience to Yahweh.

In Gen. 31:24 there is a warning to Laban in a dream. The verse previous to this speaks of Laban's pursuit of Jacob, while the verses after the dream show Laban encountering Jacob more rationally. A peaceful confrontation ensued which ended with a pact made between Jacob and Laban.

The dream narrative in Jacob's story cannot just be taken individually but has to be related to the entire Jacob story to add a clearer portrait of him — the simple homely ancestor who survived danger and trials and became numerous by keeping to his familiar ways of self-preservation in taking flights which were not devoid of trickery. These narratives present him as Jacob (Yaacov-el, meaning 'may God protect') whom God indeed protected. The Yahwist (J) gives him the name of Israel through the word of an angel (Gen. 32:29 — "You shall

no longer be spoken of as Jacob, but as Israel, because you have prevailed.") The Yahwist sees his own people as sinners and therefore reminds them of their past deliverance from many dangers and oppressions — 'of seeing the face of God and being spread.'

d. Joseph

The dream in Gen. 37:5-8 and Gen. 37:9-11 introduces us to Joseph. In the verses previous to the dream, Jacob's love for Joseph is established and in the verses after the dream, his brothers execute their plan of putting Joseph out of their way. The dream then is the immediate cause of the brother's quarrel.

Joseph's image as an extraordinary personality is announced by these dreams. As pointed out by Von Rad there is an 'unmistakable prophetic substance' in the dreams; thus Joseph is chided on their account.⁷ Gen. 37:3-11, which Von Rad sees as 'a small exposition of the whole Joseph story, brings forward the inner tensions among the brothers toward prophecy. Von Rad notes that hate which dominates the text is the key-word that points to the dark future of anyone who prophesies.⁸

Gen. 40:9-19 is the dream narrative in prison. In vv. 9-15 the cupbearer recounts his dreams, and Joseph interprets it. In vv. 16-19 the baker recounts his dreams, and Joseph likewise interprets it. The background to this narrative is provided for in the introductory verses 1-4. The prison is the place assigned to those who prophesy, but even in prison the prophet functions effectively. Thus, the verses that follow (vv. 20-23) are the fulfillment of the dream, which proves the prophet right.

This dream-narrative is only a part of the sequence that leads to a climactic setting in Joseph's audience with the Pharaoh. The narrator, according to Von Rad, intends in the dream to prepare for Joseph's exaltation in Egypt by way of contrast.

In Gen. 41 we have the third set of dreams: vv. 1-4 records the first dream of Pharaoh, while vv. 5-7, the second dream. The next verses (vv. 15-16) relate the recall of Joseph from prison and his audience with the Pharaoh. Gen. 41:15-16) relate the recall of Joseph from prison and his audience with Pharaoh. Gen. 41:15-16

Pharaoh then said to him: "I had certain dreams that no one can interpret. But I hear it said of you that the amount you are told of a dream you can interpret it." "It is not I," Joseph replied to Pharaoh, "but God who will give Pharaoh the right answer."

⁷ Gernard Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 352

⁸ *Ibid.*

The answer of Joseph has great significance to the values attached to dreams. Here is the clue, the key to the understanding of the attitude the Israelites had of dreams. Since interpretation of dreams belonged to Yahweh, the one who is empowered to interpret it has divine inspiration.⁹

Verses 17-27 is another recounting of Pharaoh of his dreams which speak of the gravity of its implications. In vv. 25-32 Joseph gave advice.

The dreamer in the Joseph story always appears in pairs but this is more of a style of writing than being symbolic. The love of repetition is typically Semitic. Gerhard von Rad is of the opinion that the details of the dream would not be taken symbolically but that 'they must be considered quite as they are.'¹⁰

The narrator used the dream narratives as background to point a clearer picture of Joseph — the boy weaned at an early age, who has survived many trials and conflicts in adolescence, who grew up to be the man seasoned in experience to become the man of wisdom.

The tribes who treasured this tradition saw the wisdom of Joseph as a special charism from God. He is not 'just' the dreamer or another diviner like the Pharaoh's *chartuminus* 'diviners' but one empowered to prophetic dreams (in Hebrew, *ba'al hah alamot*). Reflecting on the history shared by the tribes with Egypt with whose life and customs the Bible reveals an intimate acquaintance, there is a task assigned to Joseph — the task of interpreting the future of Egypt through dreams. The event of the 7-year famine is recorded in the ANET to occur in the Ptolemaic Period. Its historical background is assured by many

Joseph adapted himself to oneiromancy (dream interpretation) which was then the mark of wisdom in his day, but only to present theological polemic against the superstitious practices of the Egyptians. The image of Joseph as the wise man is now complete. He has achieved a very high seat of honor that is unequalled by any man except Pharaoh himself. His knowledge and wisdom has finally won him his status.

Conclusion

This practical approach pursued in the study of dreams can yield very rich results. Even as the study of individual dreams uncovered many new findings, we have to check ourselves from the understanding that dreams can be studied intensively as individual units. In no way can the dreams be properly understood when separated from their matrix of tradition which is their proper context. Thus, this inseparability has led to the conclusion that a comprehensive study of the dream theme requires that it should be related to the whole cano-

⁹ Ottosson, *TDOT*, p. 431.

¹⁰ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 351.

nical religious tradition such as *Genesis*. Since a narrow focus on the historical strand of *Genesis* risks the throwing away of essential elements necessary for understanding it, the key therefore to the understanding of the dreams lies in acknowledging the tension between the mythical and historical elements in religious tradition.

The dream theme indeed belongs to ancient Near East popular tradition but its primary use is defined in *Genesis* to be the vehicle of God's revelation — thus, giving it a highly religious significance which is absent in the ancient Near East tradition.

It is a standard literacy device as evidenced by stereotyped phrases contained in the accounts. Nevertheless, the dream is not robbed of its true value — rather, it propels the significant events which revolve around important figures in Israel's biblical pre-history. As a literacy formula belonging to very early history, it surrounds the world of Abraham, Jacob and Joseph and reveals to us an appropriate understanding of early tradition and personages as both mythical and historical figures.

It is interesting to note that nowhere in *Genesis* is the dream or its counterpart, *tardemah*, treated lightly. The ancients assign to them a religious actiological significance — the formation of woman and man's discovery of her (Gen. 2:21), Yahweh's covenant with Abraham in Gen. 15, the origins of cultic shrines that serve as haven for Jacob in his flights for survival, and the prosperity of Joseph in a foreign land.

The study of dreams has confirmed the ancients' deep understanding of human psychology. When the Elohist sees the dream as a vehicle for divine revelation, he regards the dream experience as the prelude to the birth of events. Man needs to discern, reflect over this dream experience so as to be ready to receive God's revelation in time. For how can he be able to take in the full force of Yahweh's revelation without the dream process? Psychologically, man needs the poetry of the dream to see life vividly. To show life vividly, he too uses the dream — like what the Yahwist did to portray the highlight of creation: man's discovery of woman. The *tardemah* or the 'deep sleep' and the dream would waken him as a renewed creation to the surprise of a new experience.