

Dreams from Allah

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Dreams in the Qur'an and Hadith

FROM THE BEGINNINGS OF ISLAM DREAMS were to be accorded a high status, being closely linked to prophecy as one of its forty-six parts. The Qur'an testifies to the importance of dreams and visions in communicating messages from Allah through the prophets from Abraham to the Prophet Muhammad. In Sura 12 Prophet Joseph is noted as a recipient of true dreams: 'When Joseph said to his father: My father! I saw in a dream eleven planets, the sun and moon, I saw them prostrating before me' (12:4). His father then responds by assuring him: 'So will your Lord choose you and teach you to interpret dreams . . .' (12:6). He is also the skilled interpreter of the dreams of others, of his prison companions (12:36) and of Pharaoh's dream of the seven fat and seven lean cattle, seven green and seven dry ears of corn, the years of plenty followed by famine (12:43). Joseph's ability to understand as well as to receive the divine truths contained in dreams is viewed as nothing short of a miraculous gift from Allah that gives evidence of his prophethood. According to Islamic tradition, the revelation of this sura to Prophet Muhammad at a time of persecution by his enemies in Mecca brought reassurance that Allah supported His prophets and their followers despite their tribulations. The dreams in the sura had a central function in conveying knowledge of the divine will that is seen to be fulfilled, so that the righteous are ultimately successful.

In the body of hadith literature – which recounts many sayings and acts of the Prophet Muhammad – sections are assigned specifically to dreams. These normally endorse the view that there is benefit to be derived from good dreams and that the Prophet himself approved of them and wished the Islamic community to take them seriously as a source of guidance. According to one widely cited tradition, the Prophet declared that prophecy had ended with him and that there would be no later messenger from God. The people were then in despair, until he told them that they would still receive good tidings through the Muslim's dream.¹ This led to the popular belief that the pious believer would be the one expected to have access to true dreams from Allah, although the dreams of all Muslims were worthy of careful sifting and analysis.

The Islamic science of dream interpretation

After the time of the Prophet, the figure who is popularly held to be the father of the Islamic science of dream interpretation is Ibn Sirin (d. 728).² Noted as one of the most pious among the second generation of Muslims, he was highly respected in his lifetime as a transmitter of hadiths and known also as a friend of the famous ascetic Hasan of Basra, who died in the same year. It was not until the middle of the ninth century that he came to be especially regarded as a skilled interpreter of dreams. A few instances of his interpretation are recorded in *The book of animals* by al-Jahiz (d. 869), as in the following example: 'The dog seen in a dream is an obscene man; if it is black, the man is an Arab; if it is black and white, the man is a non-Arab'.³ This is a relatively straightforward disclosure of the symbolic significance of the dog, associated with impurity and pollution, the black dog becoming representative for the mystics of the baseness of the human self to be overcome by constant spiritual struggle. On another occasion Ibn Sirin is said to have predicted Hasan of Basra's death by his analysis of a dream in which a bird in flight fell down suddenly like a stone. The equation of a bird with the human soul was also to be an enduring symbol in medieval Islamic society; some of the best-known symbolism occurs in the long allegorical poem *The conference of the birds* by the twelfth-century Persian poet 'Attar, who writes of the journey of the birds to find their king, a paradigm of the soul's journey towards God.

By the tenth century Arabic treatises on dreams were being falsely attributed to Ibn Sirin with the goal of claiming an esteemed authority to give these works credence. The process continued into the fifteenth century, works in Persian, Turkish and even Latin and Greek also being ascribed to him.

While Islamic dream books drew on an ancient Near Eastern heritage, they were also strongly indebted to the Greek theorists. In particular, they owed much to an Arabic translation of the *Oneirocritica* of Artemidorus of Ephesus. This translation was undertaken in Baghdad on the orders of Caliph al-Ma'mun (r. 813–33), known for encouraging the pursuit of Greek learning through an active translation movement. The oldest original extant treatise that drew directly on the *Oneirocritica* and was to establish the pattern for the genre, was composed in 1006 for Caliph al-Qadir bi'llah (r. 991–1031).⁴ Numerous later dream books followed this example, one of the most popular being the encyclopaedic key to dreams of al-Nabulusi

(d. 1731), in which lists of dream symbols are organized in alphabetical order for easy reference.⁵ This book has been widely circulated, undergone a number of printings and remains a very popular work for consultation.

The dreamer and the dream interpreter

All these dream interpreters concentrated on the uncovering of hidden meanings in symbolic dreams, which were thought to require special expertise in understanding their inner significance. They would discuss the symbolism contained in sleeping visions of all kinds of natural phenomena and creatures; rain and snow, wind and fire, human beings, animals, birds and insects. However, in addition to such symbolic dreams, Islamic literature is filled with records of literal dreams where the meaning is abundantly clear and indeed is spelled out to the dreamer. Typical of such dreams are those in which the dreamer's relatives or teachers appear to give some instruction for action that must be taken or in which dead saints or even Prophet Muhammad himself tell the dreamer some information supposedly unknown to their contemporaries. In the case of a vision of the Prophet, this may provide fresh guidance not available from the written Hadith.

Since the acceptance of dreams as sources of such information and guidance could have serious consequences not only for the individual but also for the community, it mattered very much who was the dreamer and who the interpreter. If the dreamer were a prophet, then there would be no problem because the prophets were held to receive their messages, including dream communications, directly from Allah. In the case of the great mystics of the Sufi tradition, belief in the genuineness of dream guidance of this type was always more problematic. While many Muslims would endorse the validity of the mystic's opening to divine truths through the medium of dreams, others would be more sceptical and cautious. They might at times be ready to concede the possibility of such an experience being authentic for certain individuals, but dangerous if followed as guidance superseding the inherited written tradition.

For the dreamer at a less advanced spiritual level, there would be frequent recognition of the risks to which one could be exposed if he or she were to misunderstand the dream. Whereas the pure in faith would be opened in sleep to true visions from Allah, the average believer who was still veiled by sin might receive dream visions produced by their own human anxieties or even originating from the devil. Hence there is

a constant preoccupation among Sufis with the need to be advised by the spiritual master, the shaykh, who can discern the real source and significance of each dream. The master will then also be able to gauge the extent of the disciple's mystical progress. Illustrative of such a case is an anecdote related about the great early Sufi Junayd (d. 910). One of his disciples had come to believe himself more spiritually advanced than he actually was and had taken to solitary retreats, in which he dreamt of being transported to Paradise. Junayd, learning of his situation, advised him that on the next occasion he should call upon Allah, seeking refuge with Him. The disciple did so and the beautiful vision vanished, leaving him on a dunghill with a pile of bones.⁶

Even if the dream interpreter were not a Sufi shaykh, it would still be seen as highly desirable for such a person to be learned and pious, discreet and perceptive. Although the oneiromancer claiming to foretell the future would be a common enough sight in the market place, he would not earn real regard among the educated. The serious analyst of dreams would be expected to be a scholar of Qur'an and Hadith, but able also to explain the dream in a way appropriate to the dreamer's social status and degree of understanding. The same dream image could have quite different meanings depending on the dreamer's position in society, gender, age or health, apart from considerations of character and personality. If the dreamer were sinful, a dream of Mecca would not necessarily be a positive sign of pilgrimage to be performed, but might rather reveal guilt because of the dreamer's neglect of worship. Consequently, the successful interpreter was presumed to have a sharp insight into his client's moral state, even when there was no assumption of a guiding role.

The dreamer and Allah

In the view of most Muslim theologians, it was only the prophets who would be granted a vision of Allah in this life due to their special position as intermediaries between Him and humankind. If others were to be granted the same experience it could give rise to heresies and undermine the proper functioning of divine revelation in the world.

Nevertheless, records of dream visions of Allah abound in Sufi literature, including accounts of the mystics' intimate conversations with God. The Great Shaykh Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240) was probably the most celebrated of those who laid claim to such encounters. As a young man in Spain, perhaps in 1190 in Cordoba, he relates an extraordinary vision of the Resurrection: 'The God came, "in the darkness of thick

clouds, accompanied by angels” (Qur’an 2:210), seated on His Throne which was being carried by angels. They placed the throne to my right. While all this was happening I experienced no fear or anxiety or fright.⁷ He continued to explain how Allah placed His palm upon him to confirm his status in the world and informed him that he would enter Paradise. Ibn ‘Arabi then sought to intercede for his sisters and wife and was assured that they would join him there together with all his relatives and companions. He reports Allah’s final dream response to his questions: ‘Even if you were to ask me if you could take all the people of the Stations (*ahl al-mawaqif*), I would let you’.⁸ The ‘people of the Stations’ are the whole of humankind who, according to a hadith cited by Ibn ‘Arabi but not included in the canonical collections, will travel the distance of fifty stations or stopping-places at the time of the Resurrection and Last Judgement.

The function of the dream vision of Allah is to serve as an assurance to Ibn ‘Arabi that he enjoys a high status with his Lord and that he and his loved ones will be among the saved at the Last Day. It demonstrates that, with God’s permission, he will also be able to act in the role of intercessor with Allah on behalf of the human creation. The dream message is primarily a personal one for the mystic, but can also have a wider relevance for his family, relatives and the Muslim community. This type of experience is shared in common with other spiritually advanced Sufis, for whom the vision normally operates in very similar ways.

The dream of Allah is also discussed at the beginning in the early books of dream interpretation, out of deference. The interpreters see a wide variety of meanings in the dream appearance of God or hearing His voice. For the pure and sincere believer, it is usually a favourable sign. However, this is not always the case; if there is a veil between the believer and Allah, this may signify that the dreamer is or will become a grave sinner. Even if he or she receives a gift from God, it does not necessarily indicate approval, but may show that the dreamer is too attached to worldly goods which are little esteemed by Allah. These dreams may effectively serve as a warning of the need to reform. The time and place in which the dream occurs may also be of importance, whether for the individual or a community. If Allah is seen in a dream in a particular town where the people are sinners, then they may expect punishment. If they are the ones wronged, that people may hope for justice. But there are also a range of possible allegorical interpretations of the dream, since the symbol of Allah might indicate a great king or even a tyrant ruling over the land. Nevertheless, these theophanies are

generally of more importance for the spiritual life of the dreamer than for the society.

Guidance from beyond the grave

Dreams of the dead are perhaps the most notable for providing instruction both to individuals and to Muslim communities. Such dreams are often literal, although they may at times contain symbolism that requires skilled interpretation. Sometimes the dead visit the dreamer in sleep without any apparent preparation, but commonly the vision of them follows a pilgrimage to a tomb or other sanctuary, even a nocturnal vigil or sleeping by the grave in a deliberate effort to seek guidance through a dream. This conscious process of sleeping at the holy site in order to consult spirits of the dead is known as *istikhara*.⁹ It has strong affinities with ancient practices of incubation and has been treated with caution by religious lawyers who have laid down rules in an effort to control a suspect practice. Set prayers are thus prescribed before the devotee falls asleep in the hope of consulting the deceased, usually about a particular problem. Away from scholarly regulation, magical elements have been introduced, as in the case described from Morocco where the aim is to discover the identity of a thief: 'A magic formula is written on one's hand and one then goes to sleep, with this hand placed under the right cheek; the thief is then revealed in a dream'.¹⁰ Sleeping on the right side is presumed to ensure a dream from a good source and not from the devil.

If such ghostly contacts perform a practical role in information-gathering, others have a more distinctively instructional aspect. For Sufis, the most sought-after dream spirits are generally their spiritual predecessors, hence the popular saying that it is possible to learn more from a shaykh after his death than during his life.¹¹ Sometimes former masters or great 'saints' may appear to confirm a Sufi's spiritual ranking, to approve or censure a course of action. The Egyptian mystic al-Sha'rani (d. 1565) records more than a hundred dreams in his autobiography, these types of meetings with the dead being of special importance to him.¹² Thus he relates how the thirteenth-century poet Ibn al-Farid showed his respect for him by apologizing for having been sent from his tomb when al-Sha'rani had come earlier to visit him. However, he also recalls being rebuked by the great jurist al-Shafi'i (d. 819) on account of his failure to perform the pilgrimage to his grave in Cairo.

For certain Sufis, significantly those of the major Naqshbandi brotherhood, dead shaykhs could play an important role in their spiritual initiation. They would thus be 'not (only) initiated by a living, physically present Shaykh, but (also) by the "spirituality" or "spiritual presence" (*ruhaniyyat*) of a deceased Shaykh'.¹³ The presence, which might appear through the medium of the dream, could be evoked by the disciple's practice of concentration on the master. Similarly, the dream could transmit the presence of a living shaykh to his disciple, as is described in the case of Baha' al-din Naqshband (d. 1389), whose disciple is said to have seen him in his dreams while Baha' al-din was on the pilgrimage to Mecca.¹⁴

The Prophet as guide

Among all the dream spirits of the dead, the Prophet Muhammad is the most highly esteemed and the most likely to be followed in offering instruction for the society as a whole. Conviction of the authenticity of the Prophetic vision was grounded in various traditions such as the oft-cited 'Whoever sees me in his sleep has truly seen me and it is not possible for the devil to take my shape'.

In many cases this involved a dream vision in which the Prophet delivered a literal message to his community. When the recipient of the dream was in a dominant position, this could mean that commands were issued in the Prophet's name. For example, in the Islamic state established in the North Caucasus by Imam Shamil between 1834 and 1859, Shamil, himself a Naqshbandi shaykh and fierce opponent of Russian intervention, believed that he was acting on the direct orders of the Prophet in implementing fresh laws. This sometimes led to a particularly severe line being taken, as when smokers were punished by being forced to ride backwards on donkeys with pipes thrust through their nostrils.¹⁵ Understandably, the question of whether there was any validity for posthumous dream teachings from the Prophet was to be a contentious issue among Muslim scholars. Since the scholars were expected to act as the custodians of the written tradition, their authority could readily be undercut by any visionary who claimed access to new guidance that was also impossible to verify.

The authors of the traditional dream books interpreted all visions of the Prophet as true in some sense and usually a positive indication for the Muslim community. However, the significance of the dream could vary considerably depending on the form taken by the Prophet: old or young, smiling or frowning, alone or with a number of his Companions.

It does not always show a good moral state in the dreamer, but may be taken as a sign of one who is not meeting the standards expected of a pious Muslim. The vision could be interpreted as predicting that he will be led to repentance and receive the guidance of Prophet Muhammad.

Christians and the Muslim's dream

There are central elements in Muslim experiences of dreaming that have little apparent relevance for Christians. The Prophet does not guide through his own dreams or through others' visions of him. Christians have different views of those whom Muslims would regard as earlier prophets, whose pure state makes them the perfect vehicles of Allah's dream messages to humans; the Joseph of Genesis is not the Joseph of the Qur'an and Jesus Christ is not the Jesus of whom Muslims dream: the sinless prophet and, for Sufis, the seal of the saints. Christians may indeed find it hard to relate to the Muslim dream interpreter's reflection that workmen and physicians who dream of Jesus may benefit especially by having his abilities as a carpenter or healer transferred to them.

Given such differing perceptions, are there aspects of Muslim dream life that offer some spiritual wisdom more meaningful to Christians? Perhaps, if special attention is directed to the Sufi tradition of spirituality and the desire to access the individual's experience of dreaming in order to disclose a possible source of divine inspiration. Accounts of Muslim mystics' opening to God are filled with records of wonderful visions such as those of the Great Shaykh of Moorish Spain, Ibn 'Arabi. Such mystics have little sense of a division between the waking life of the believer and the life experienced in the sleeping vision. God is seen in both, is heard in both. Both are treated as equally real and at times it becomes impossible to tell where dream ends and waking vision begins.

However, there is also the awareness within the Islamic tradition of the need for caution in assessing the nature of the dream. Christians are also likely to identify with Muslim anxieties about the following of spiritual guidance provided by a dream. It is a problem that has caused many divisions which have deepened in the last hundred years with increasing exposure to western scepticism. Cautious appraisal of the dream has in the case of many Muslims changed into outright rejection of the validity of dreams as central to spirituality. Nevertheless, the old dream books are still being reprinted and in demand, even if the market place or scholarly interpreters are close to extinction.

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NOTES

- 1 See A. J. Wensinck and J. P. Mensing (eds), *Concordance et indices de la tradition musulmane* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1936–64), vol 2, p 205 (r.'y.) for references containing this tradition.
- 2 See T. Fahd, 'Ibn Sirin' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam (EI)* 2, vol 3, pp 947–948 and, by the same author, *La divination Arabe: études religieuses, sociologiques et folkloriques sur le milieu natif de l'Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1966), pp 312–315.
- 3 Cited in Fahd, *La divination Arabe*, p 313.
- 4 The treatise is named after this caliph, *al-Qadiri fi'l-ta'bir*, the work of Abu Sa'id al-Dinawari. The earliest Arabic treatise on dreams is known to have been composed by Kirmani in the late eighth century, but has not survived. A ninth-century work by Ibn Qutayba has been preserved in fragments quoted in a later dream book by Abu 'Ali Husayn al-Dari, one of those treatises wrongly attributed to Ibn Sirin. See Fahd, *La divination Arabe*, pp 316–328.
- 5 'Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi, *Ta'tir al-anam fi ta'bir al-manam* (Beirut, reprint 1996).
- 6 The anecdote is related in a twelfth-century collection of Sufi biographies by 'Attar, trans A. J. Arberry, *Muslim saints and mystics* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), pp 208–209.
- 7 Ibn 'Arabi's *Book of visions* quoted in Claude Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur: the life of Ibn 'Arabi* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1993), p 84.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p 85.
- 9 See T. Fahd, 'Istikhara' in *EI* 2, vol 4, pp 259–260.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p 260.
- 11 The saying is attributed to Abu'l-'Abbas al-Mursi (d. 1287), one of the seminal figures in the Shadhili Sufi brotherhood.
- 12 See Jonathan G. Katz, 'An Egyptian Sufi interprets his dreams: 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Sha'rani 1493–1565' in *Religion* vol 27 (1997), pp 7–24.
- 13 Johan G. J. Ter Haar, 'The importance of the spiritual guide in the Naqshabandi Order' in L. Lewisohn (ed), *The heritage of Sufism* vol 2 (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999), p 312.
- 14 See *ibid.*, pp 320–321.
- 15 See Elizabeth Sirriyeh, *Sufis and anti-Sufis: the defence, rethinking and rejection of Sufism in the modern world* (Richmond: Curzon, 1999), pp 38–42, on Shamil's state, Sufis and their resistance to the Russians in Chechnya and Daghestan.