

The God Who Reveals Mysteries: Dreams and World Evangelization

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Introduction

The casual observer might suppose that dreams are the stuff of which Disney movies are made. Mention the concept of dreams, and many will return in their memories to those childhood night-dreams that either delighted or terrified. Yet others, who have traveled along the higher education highway, will hear the word “dreams” and immediately think of Sigmund Freud and his particular slant on such phenomena. Whatever one’s thoughts concerning dreams, it is clear that they are a frequent part of the human experience, and “enlightened” Western minds should not ignore the reality of dreams when dealing with various cultures and religions. Throughout human history, literature, religion, and the enterprise of daily living, one will discover the existence of dreams.

The second chapter of Daniel, in which the prophet explains to Nebuchadnezzar that there is a “God who reveals mysteries” and who speaks through dreams (2:28), is only one of many instances in the Old Testament where God communicated by means of dreams or visions. Continuing throughout the New Testament, dreams and visions constitute an important means by which God communicated with human beings.

Because of the recurrent reports of dreams, particularly in missions contexts around the world, today’s missiologists and missionaries are debating the role and significance of dreams for missions and world evangelization. Though the number

of written materials devoted solely to the place of dreams in missions is not great, a quick search of the missiological journals produces some interesting results—an increasing number of dream reports, particularly about seeing a white robed figure understood to be Jesus, and a corresponding call to pray for and employ dreams as an important, even the most important, means of world evangelization.

Today, reports of dreams and visions in which Jesus is seen declaring, “I am the way,” are flooding out of Muslim lands. According to Erich Bridges, there is “an increasing openness and turning to Christ—often preceded by dreams or visions of him among potential converts.”¹

This article examines the phenomenon of dreams, especially as it relates to the work of missions and evangelization among the world’s Muslims. From different, yet related, perspectives—a biblical and historical overview and a look at contemporary cultures and missiological emphases—the author will consider the place and value of dreams in contemporary missiological practices.

A Biblical and Historical Overview

From biblical times, what have people thought about dreams? David Rountree, in a weekly pastoral note to his congregation, asked about finding answers to life’s myriad questions.² He noted that professing believers base their answers to important questions on many different things: feelings, cultural mores and traditions of men, personal experience, etc. Then, quot-

ing from 2 Corinthians 10:5—that we are to bring “every thought captive to the obedience of Christ”—he wrote, “True Christianity is found only where there is an unceasing, sole reliance upon the all-sufficient Scripture for all matters of faith and practice.” The point is not that God never speaks through a small, inner voice, through counsel from mature Christians, through personal experiences, or through any number of other ways. The important matter is that all these means, by which God might provide instruction, ultimately must be brought to Scripture and tested in its perfect and authoritative light.

Certainly, in considering something as important as missiological method and strategy, it is essential that one starts with God’s Word and allows that Word to inform, direct, and evaluate the entirety of thought and practice. Thus, the biblical teaching about dreams and visions will provide a foundation from which the phenomenon of dreams can be properly understood.

Again, the second chapter of Daniel reports that, in the second year of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign, the Babylonian king dreamed troubling dreams, which neither he nor his servants could interpret. When the decree went out to find someone who could interpret Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, Daniel stepped forward and declared, “there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries” (2:28).³ Daniel explained the meaning of the dream, and Nebuchadnezzar replied to him, “Surely your God is a God of gods, and a Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries” (2:47).

Dreams and visions were accepted as a normal part of everyday existence in Babylon and other ancient cultures. Neither the king, his servants, Daniel, nor his companions were in the slightest manner

surprised that God would speak through dreams. Nor will one find any shortage of dream and vision reports in other biblical materials. Dreams constitute one way among many that God speaks.⁴

Dreams and Visions in the Old Testament

Over 120 times, a variation of “dream” is found in the Old Testament.⁵ Representative texts include the announcement of judgment against Abimelech (Genesis 20), and, in contrast, promises given to Jacob that he would receive the flocks of Laban (Genesis 31). In dreams, God spoke through the prophets (Num 12:6). Dreams were employed to give instruction (Job 33) and to speak of the future (Genesis 37). Dreams, however, were not confined to the Old Testament era; the prophecy of Joel 2:28, which speaks of dreams being given, is fulfilled in Acts 2:17. Thus, through dreams, God announces judgment, bestows promises, gives revelation, provides direction and instruction, and makes available information about the future.

In contemporary English usage, “dream” and “vision” are often used synonymously. In fact, in literature the two terms are juxtaposed—“dream vision”—creating “a poetic framework esp[ecially] popular in medieval literature in which the poet pictures himself as falling asleep and envisioning in his dream a series of allegorical people and events.”⁶ So it is in the Old Testament.⁷ In Genesis 15:1, “the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision.”⁸ In 1 Samuel 3:15, Samuel is pictured as afraid to relate his vision to Eli, a vision⁹ that could be described as a dream. Nathan’s vision, reported in 2 Samuel 7 and 1 Chronicles 17, functions in the same manner as many dreams, that is, as a medium through which God speaks. On many

occasions, the prophets had dreams and visions. Dreams were capable of conveying, not only truth, but also lies (Jer 14:14).¹⁰ Whatever they conveyed, dreams and visions were understood to be communicators of information.

On several occasions, the biblical authors position the two terms together as if to use the one to define or clarify the other: "Hear now My words: If there is a prophet among you, I, the LORD, shall make Myself known to him in a vision. I shall speak with him in a dream" (Num 12:6); "In a dream, a vision of the night, When sound sleep falls on men, While they slumber in their beds, then He opens the ears of men . . ." (Job 33:15); "And the multitude of all the nations who wage war against Ariel, Even all who wage war against her and her stronghold, and who distress her, will be like a dream, a vision of the night" (Isa 29:7). In a case of poetic synonymous parallelism, Zophar explained to Job the ultimate end of the wicked: "He flies away like a dream, and they cannot find him; Even like a vision of the night he is chased away" (Job 20:8).¹¹

When the Old Testament occurrences of "vision" and "dream," or their derivatives, are counted, the number easily exceeds one hundred and sixty. Without a doubt, the idea that God communicates to human beings through dreams and visions is widespread in the Old Testament.

The New Testament Record

The New Testament commences with Matthew's record of the Messiah's genealogy and proceeds to report a number of dreams and visions that direct the participants in the narrative. In a dream, an angel explained to Joseph the situation concerning Mary and gave instructions to him (Matt 1:20-25). Soon thereafter, an angel

appeared to Joseph in a dream and directed him and his family to safety in Egypt (Matt 2:13). The dreams continued as the Lord directed Joseph to return to the land of Israel (Matt 2:20). Matthew gives no defense or explanation for the occurrence of these dreams; they are accepted as a normal means by which God communicates.¹²

Although the New Testament begins with these dream accounts, few dream reports are found in the materials that follow. Albrecht Oepke explained:

There is an inner reason for this paucity. . . . To be sure, Christians dreamed no less than other men of their age. . . . The point is, however, that they regarded much fewer dreams as significant. The line found in the OT is now fully developed. Dreams are not wholly ruled out as a means of divine revelation. . . . Primitive Christianity is not hostile to dreams, but it is strongly critical. Even when significance is accorded to a dream, it remains peripheral, limited to individual instances of divine leading. Paul in his letters mentions none of the notable dreams which he had in Ac[ts]. . . . No NT witness ever thought of basing the central message, the Gospel, or an essential part of it, on dreams.¹³

The paucity of dream reports notwithstanding, the New Testament writers accepted the idea that God communicates to his people through dreams. Though Luke employed different terms than Matthew, little doubt exists that Acts 10 reports dream/vision activity in the lives of Cornelius and Peter. Because of its missiological value, a brief examination of this text will be fruitful.

The book of Acts reports the fulfillment of the words of the resurrected Jesus: "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all

Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The gospel was preached, and converts were made, in Jerusalem (Acts 1-7), then progressively in Samaria (Acts 8-12) and the rest of the world (Acts 13-28).

In chapter eight of Acts, and those that follow immediately, the stories are told of the first Gentiles incorporated into the church. In fact, one commentator has observed that chapter ten "is entirely occupied with one great subject, the first reception of converted Gentiles to the Church, without passing through the intermediate state of Judaism."¹⁴ In this context, Luke related the story about Cornelius, Peter, and their dreams/visions.

Luke described Cornelius, a centurion, as "a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, and gave many alms to the Jewish people and prayed to God continually" (10:2). Cornelius was not a full proselyte as understood by the Jews. F. F. Bruce described Cornelius as one who was

attracted by the simple monotheism of Jewish synagogue worship and by the ethical standards of the Jewish way of life. . . . Cornelius's attachment to the Jewish religion appeared particularly in his regular prayer to the God of Israel and acts of charity to the people of Israel. One may say, indeed, that he had every qualification, short of circumcision, which could satisfy Jewish requirements.¹⁵

The important matter, as Bruce explained, is that "it was such God-fearers who formed the nucleus of the Christian community in one city after another in the course of Paul's missionary activity."¹⁶

Thus, in light of the coming of Messiah Jesus in redemptive history and the fulfillment of God's plan centered in him, Peter

must overcome his Jewish prejudices and must understand that the grace of God makes no distinctions on the basis of ethnicity or national origin. The Jewish laws that regulated, for instance, what a person should or should not eat, provided no basis for determining whether a person walked with God. Bruce observed, "Perhaps, as he thought about the vision, he remembered hearing similar words on an earlier occasion . . . that it is not what goes into someone's stomach that conveys defilement, but what comes out of one's heart."¹⁷

Peter came to understand that God does not deal with individuals on the basis of racial or national identity, "but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to him" (Acts 10:35). In other words, the gospel of Jesus is good news both for the Jews and those who are not Jews.

These verses present certain difficulties for interpreters. In particular, the question is asked whether Cornelius, before his encounter with Peter, was yet a believer. John Gill offered that "these sacrifices of prayer and beneficence came up with acceptance from off that altar which sanctifies the gift, or were acceptable to God, through Jesus Christ; these were taken notice of, approved by God, and remembered by him, and the fruits and effects he was shortly to enjoy; for that Cornelius was a believer, need not be questioned; since he was not only a devout and religious person, but one that feared God, which includes the whole of religion, internal and external. . . . so that his faith was of the same kind with that of the saints before the coming of Christ."¹⁸ Thus, Gill agrees with John Calvin, who placed Cornelius "in the catalogue of the old fathers, who hoped for salvation of the Redeemer before he was

revealed.”¹⁹

John Polhill has maintained that Cornelius’s “devotion to God put him well on the way, preparing him for receiving the gospel and for the full inclusion in God’s people that he could not have found in the synagogue.”²⁰ The emphasis is on the preparation of Cornelius for receiving the gospel from Peter. James P. Boyce described such preparation in his comments on the work of regeneration: “God operates immediately upon the heart to produce the required change, by which it is fitted to receive the truth. . . This influence is spoken of as a preparation of the heart for the truth . . . This preparation of the heart comes from God.”²¹

Such preparation of the heart comes “mediately through the word”²² and through the Spirit.²³ The “heart is prepared to turn to God and does actually so turn.”²⁴ Cornelius, having been prepared to receive the gospel, heard it from Peter, believed, and was saved.

In Romans 10, the apostle Paul explained the manner in which the Lord works to save. The necessary progression is clear. One must call upon the Lord, but in order to do so, a witness must declare the news, which is heard by the individual. The individual who hears must then believe and call upon the Lord Jesus for salvation (vv. 13-15).

Paul was not hesitant to write that belief and salvation are dependent upon a witness or preacher declaring the truth. That truth must then be received and believed. Thus, the interpretation of Cornelius’s dream: He was a seeker after God, but he did not yet have the gospel. God sent dreams both to Cornelius and to Peter so that Cornelius might hear the gospel from Peter, believe, and be saved.

All the above is consistent with the

missiological emphasis in the New Testament. The gospel must be preached to all people, and so, God raises up his preachers and missionaries to take the gospel to those who have not heard. The story of Cornelius is not an instance in which an individual is saved through a dream; rather, Cornelius was directed through the dream to Peter, who gave to him the life-saving gospel. Put another way, Cornelius’s dream is not an example of a stand-alone, salvific dream. Rather, through the dream, God directed Cornelius to Peter, who declared the gospel to him. In another instance, this typical New Testament formula is illustrated in the life of Lydia: “A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening, and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul” (Acts 16:14). Lydia was a worshiper of God, yet she must hear the gospel from Paul and respond.

*Beyond the New Testament*²⁵

Beyond the New Testament, several of the church fathers were involved with dreams.²⁶ Tertullian devoted a considerable amount of writing to dealing with dreams. In some instances, he commented on Scripture passages, in other sections he considered the actual event of human dreams as vehicles of God’s movement.

Gregory of Nyssa provided a section on dreams in his works, and indeed it seems that he was actually converted by a dream of God. William Moore, in the Prolegomena to Gregory’s works, wrote that “Gregory’s first inclination or impulse to make a public profession of Christianity is said to have been due to a remarkable dream or vision.”²⁷

In his First Apology, under the heading “The Demons Misrepresent Christian Doc-

trine,” Justin Martyr concerned himself with the danger that demons might come to believers in dreams, deceive them, and lead them astray.²⁸ Augustine had some dealings with dreams, and in one section, where he is replying to Evodius, he provides a remarkable response:

For my part, although I am wholly unable to explain in words how those semblances of material bodies, without any real body, are produced, I may say that I wish that, with the same certainty with which I know that these things are not produced by the body, I could know by what means those things are perceived which are occasionally seen by the spirit, and are supposed to be seen by the bodily senses; or by what distinctive marks we may know the visions of men who have been misguided by delusion, or, most commonly, by impiety, since the examples of such visions closely resembling the visions of pious and holy men are so numerous, that if I wished to quote them, time, rather than abundance of examples, would fail me.²⁹

Clement had a few things to say about the veracity of dreams and God.³⁰ Theodotus presented a section on dreams where he equated dream-visions with the *gnosis* and praised the individual who arouses himself from his sleep and thus escapes these visions: “For as those that are most asleep think they are most awake, being under the power of dream-visions very vivid and fixed; so those that are most ignorant think that they know most. But blessed are they who rouse themselves from this sleep and derangement, and raise their eyes to the light and the truth.”³¹ Lactantius has an entire chapter on God’s revelation via dreams in his works and generally included a discussion of ancient dreamers in much of his work.³²

Glancing back to the New Testament

momentarily, the writer of Hebrews begins his epistle, “God . . . spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways” (Heb 1:1). Through angels, dreams, visions, covenants, theophanies, historical events, still small voices, and in many other ways, God has spoken. Emil Brunner gave full expression of this thought:

God reveals himself through angels, through dreams, through oracles (such as Urim and Thummim), through visions and locutions, through natural phenomena and through historical events, through wonderful guidance given to human beings, and through the words and deeds of the Prophets. Above all the New Testament stands the person, the life, the sufferings, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as the final self-manifestation of God, but again, not only Himself in His historical form, but also the witness given to Him by the Holy Spirit in the hearts of believers, the proclamation of Christ by His chosen Apostles, and through the believing community, and finally the fixing of this witness in written form in the Bible of the Old and New Testaments. Holy Scripture therefore does not only speak of the revelation; it is itself the revelation.³³

Understanding that dreams can have good or evil origins, and that they can deliver truth or error, a word of caution is in order. Alfred Eidersheim, in his *Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ*, included a section in which he examined a number of texts in the Babylonian Talmud concerning prophets and dreams.³⁴ Upon concluding that the Talmud gives examples of “the indifferent, the good and the absurd,” Eidersheim provided an important observation: “[These dream reports and their interpretations] show the necessity of discrimination.”³⁵

While Eidersheim's caution is well received, it is clear that, from the early years of the church, God has employed dreams to communicate with human beings. He has used dreams to warn, encourage, give direction, speak forth scripture, and to provide information about the future. Some of these communications have been recorded and canonized as parts of the Bible. The idea that God can communicate through dreams, though, does not end with the New Testament or the church fathers.

From the religious traditions growing out of the Reformation, various writers dealt with dreams from the standpoint that people are tormented by dreams while under conviction. John Bunyan wrote *Pilgrim's Progress* as if in a dream state. John Wesley and others mentioned dreams in their works. At points in his *Types of the Messiah*, Jonathan Edwards examined dreams/visions as a method by which God communicates.³⁶ In fact, an abundance of references to dreams exists throughout the writings of church history.

Among those who have presented a fairly negative view of dreams was A. H. Strong, who provided sections on dreams in his theology where he equated their use as *gnosis*.³⁷ In dealing with the biblical passages on dreaming in his "Notes on the Bible," Wesley cautioned that dreams can be deceptive.³⁸ Schaff regarded dreams, in a negative sense, as being the source of anti-resurrection myths.³⁹

Throughout their history, humans have viewed the phenomenon of dreams from different perspectives. Various opinions have been given in regard to their value and worth. Whatever one's understanding of dreams, however, no one can convincingly argue that dreams have not been a regular component of human history. That which holds true for history past holds true

for the present.

Dreams, Cultures, and Missionaries

How are dreams regarded in contemporary cultures and how should they be employed in missions?

Hiebert's "Flaw"

Many have argued that the views about dreams and other supernatural phenomena found in non-Western cultures are actually more consistent with the biblical worldview than those found in Western-secular-naturalistic worldviews. Paul Hiebert's landmark article on the excluded middle⁴⁰ alerted readers to a "flaw" in the worldviews of many who would seek religious converts.⁴¹ Hiebert argued that the major world religions provide answers to ultimate questions about matters future and unseen, for example: Does God exist? How can God be described? What happens to a person after death? Is there such a thing as eternal life?

On the other hand, science and technology provide answers for everyday life in the here and now: What will make the crops flourish? (add fertilizer); How can an illness be cured? (ingest medicine); What can be done to make the car run more smoothly? (replace the spark plugs); etc. These strategies operate in the realm of the present and the seen.

However, Hiebert points out that a sphere of reality exists—a large, middle area—which is unseen and present. This large, middle area is the world of spirits and supernatural forces of all kinds. Dreams, especially those dreams originating from a supernatural being, are components of this large "excluded middle." Though Western worldviews typically exclude it, this middle is important for understanding both the biblical⁴² and many

contemporary cultures and worldviews.

The Cultures of the World

Dreams as religious expression are common among the world's cultures. Eugene Nida has noted that they "rate particularly high as means by which the supernatural forces manifest themselves to people. . . . Africans, both Christian and non-Christian, place considerable emphasis on dreams, and there are numerous instances where Indians in Latin America have spoken of dream experiences which profoundly changed their lives by warning them of dangers, physical or spiritual."⁴³

John Mbiti has confirmed Nida's observation: "In African life dreams play a central role, as is evident both in African Religion and in African Christianity. It is clear that the coming of Christianity has not erased this African dream culture."⁴⁴ Furthermore, "African Christians have also discovered a dream culture in the Bible and this gives them authority to retain their own dream culture, modify it, expand it, and hold onto it in the changing religious and cultural situation."⁴⁵ One correspondent has written, "after being in Africa for 20 years, among the persecuted and collecting over 450 interviews, I cannot [agree with] the premise that dreams, visions signs and wonders are the 'paranormal.'"⁴⁶ In a similar way, in reference to Muslims, the correspondent writes: "I would suggest that, for Muslims, not to have dreams and visions would be the abnormal or the paranormal."⁴⁷

Erich Bridges has described the spread of the gospel across rural Algeria. He notes that this advance has taken place largely by God speaking to the peoples through dreams. He reports the Holy Spirit moving from house to house in an Algerian village one night, revealing himself

through dreams, visions and angelic visitations, and thousands of North African Muslims writing to a Christian radio service and reporting dreams about Jesus. Additional reports include that of a young Muslim, who tore up a Bible tract, and was confronted by Jesus in a dream. Jesus explained, "You have torn up the truth," and the dreamer became a believer. Also, in Nigeria, two Muslim mullahs, who participated in a deadly attack on a new believer, saw visions of Christ, repented and took eighty of their followers to a Christian church to hear the gospel.⁴⁸

Workers with The Voice of the Martyrs organization have reported varied and numerous dreams related to them by persecuted believers in the Muslim world. The lead story in the October 2003 issue of *The Voice of the Martyrs* is entitled "Night Visions in Iran & Iraq."⁴⁹ In personal correspondence with workers living in Muslim contexts, I have received the following reports, and others similar to them.⁵⁰

I was able to spend some time with the new believers in our people group who have had so many dreams and visions and was truly blessed by seeing the purity, the freshness, and the strength of their faith.

Our people group is having dreams and visions. A few new believers have emerged out of these dreams and visions, but I'm positive there are many more people having them that we know nothing about. . . . Two people groups are open, they are having dreams and visions, and as one of the nationals told me recently, there simply is not enough time in his day to visit everyone who has expressed interest in finding out about the truth.

Almost every year I hear of someone hearing a voice by/about Jesus as they circle the Ka'ba on their Hajj.

In the reported dreams, Jesus typically appears clothed in white garments and surrounded by light (similarly, the angel who appeared to Peter in Acts 12:7 was surrounded by light).

Reports of dreams among Muslims are common. Kelly Bulkeley has explained,

One theme the Prophet Muhammed drew from the scriptures of [Judaism and Christianity] was a reverence for dreaming. In the Qur'an, as in the Jewish Torah and the Christian New Testament, dreams serve as a vital medium by which God communicates with humans. Dreams offer divine guidance and comfort, warn people of impending danger, and offer prophetic glimpses of the future. Although the three religions drastically differ on many other topics, they find substantial agreement on this particular point: dreaming is a valuable source of wisdom, understanding, and inspiration.⁵¹

Bulkeley goes on to conclude, "Islam has historically shown greater interest in dreams than either of the other two traditions, and has done more to weave dreaming into the daily lives of its members."⁵²

Conclusions and Applications

How should one proceed? Anyone examining the issue of dreams in Islam, or other religions, must grant certain realities. The Bible not only acknowledges the existence of dreams, but also legitimizes them as vehicles through which God communicates with humans. In cultures around the world, both present and ancient, dreams have played important roles in the lives of people. The question then arises, "How should one deal with dreams, particularly in a Muslim context where dreams are accepted as normal components of the everyday world?"

What does one do when confronted

with cultures that possess none of the skepticisms about dreams that people in the Western, evangelical world do? How does one, as one writer has put it, look "for God's revelation and self-manifestation within the values, relational patterns, and concerns of a culture"?⁵³ Several options are available when considering dreams.

The first option is to ignore the dream reports that are so common. However, one will do so at the risk of excluding a great number of experiences reported by people around the world. A second option would be to promote dreams as a primary strategy for reaching the unreached with the gospel. This author has received several emails and prayer-grams in which writers have asked that the recipient pray that, through dreams, God would present the gospel to unbelievers in the Muslim world. In fact, one such request described dreams as *the one key* to reaching the Muslim world with the gospel. However, nothing in the Bible encourages or allows Christians, in missions and evangelism, as a strategy, to rely solely (or even primarily) on dreams. The biblical mandate, clearly, is to preach, give witness to, and to testify. On the other hand, where dreams are reported, nothing should prohibit the careful and wise use of them in a gospel witness. In a similar manner, one would use myths, stories, and other components of culture as contact points and bridges in order to say, "OK, here is what you report. Let me tell you the truth about that."

There is no single instance in the Bible in which God declared the gospel solely through a dream. That is not to say that he cannot do so, rather it is to say that he has not done so. We can go further. Not only is there no record of God using dreams in the Bible to declare the gospel, but no warrant exists for expecting him to do so. He has

explained his chosen method of making the gospel known. The Author of Scripture uses words like “preach,” “witness,” “testify,” and “teach” to describe the means by which people will be confronted with the gospel and won to faith in Jesus Christ. As in the case of Cornelius, the Lord prepared him for receiving the gospel and then, through a dream, directed him to Peter who could declare the gospel to him.

Some might argue that the conclusions reached in this article are those of an author who cannot escape his own Western, naturalistic worldview, i.e., someone who, *a priori*, is skeptical about the place of dreams and the supernatural in the world. The appropriate response is that the biblical writers had their roots anywhere but in a Western, naturalistic worldview. Though they clearly accepted dreams and visions and the supernatural as part of the landscape of their lives, they did not excessively rely on them in accomplishing their work. They did not promote dreams as *the key* to hearing from God. They knew that he spoke in many and various ways. They understood the essential work of the Holy Spirit and the necessity of hard, sometimes dreary and plodding ministry. When God spoke supernaturally through dreams, they accepted that communication. But they did not strategically issue instructions to pray for dreams and to seek the miraculous in taking the gospel to the world.

A third option is to carefully use what is present. Jack Deere provided a number of insightful and useful questions that might be posed in regard to contemporary dreams, whether in a Muslim context or another: “How do you even know if the dream came from God? What if an upset stomach the night before was the source of the dream? Even if you decided the dream *was* from God, how would you go about

interpreting it? Do the Scriptures offer rules of interpretation for dreams? Even if you were fairly certain the dream was from God and that you knew what it meant, how do you know how much weight to give to it? Would it have the same authority as the Bible, as a vision, an impression, an audible voice, and so on?”⁵⁴

Clearly, one must proceed with caution rather than at a dangerous, full-throttle speed. Those who are concerned to present a genuine gospel witness must always be concerned about distinguishing between the genuine voice of God and that which is counterfeit. For no small reason did the apostle John instruct his readers, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1).

However, to reject all dream reports as irrelevant is, perhaps, to miss something very valuable. One correspondent wrote, “What we are finding with Muslim background believers, MBBs, is that most of them come to the Father through a spiritual journey that covers 3-5 years. This pilgrimage often begins with dreams and visions, then the Father miraculously lays the Word in their hands and then brings a near culture or in-culture-believer to explain to them their dreams/vision and what they have read. According to my almost 200 MBB interviews, the Bible figures centrally in over 90% of those conversions. In research terms this is awesome. It also has deep implications for the almost 80% of Muslims that do not read or write.”⁵⁵

Dreams must never be understood as having parity with the Scriptures. Only the Bible provides an absolutely trustworthy and authoritative word from God. Always, a distinction must be made between dreams of canonical revelation (which,

because the Scriptures are complete, are no longer available) and dreams of guidance that lead the dreamer to the canon. Time and again, the ambassador of Christ must direct hearers to the Scriptures. Jesus himself explained, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me” (John 5:39).

Though the missionary and evangelist must never allow dreams or any other phenomenon to substitute for the work of declaring the gospel (see, again, Rom 10:11-15), God grants wonderful opportunities that must not be ignored. If people approach the missionary with dream reports, the approach provided by Guy Frederick seems valid: “I will point them towards Jesus Christ at any rate—for he is either the solution to their bad dream or the one whom they may be seeking if it is a ‘God-directed dream.’”⁵⁶

ENDNOTES

¹Erich Bridges, “To Muslims with Love, Prayer, Tears and Blood,” *The Christian Index*, 30 Jan 1997, 16.

²David Rountree, “The Right Way,” *New Covenant News*, 3-9 Sep 1995, 1.

³Unless otherwise noted, Scripture citations are taken from the *New American Standard Bible*, 1995.

⁴Carl F. H. Henry has written about the ways of knowing and validating religious concerns. In his chapter “The Ways of Knowing” (*God, Revelation and Authority* [Waco, TX: Word, 1976] I:70-95), he described three ways of knowing—intuition, experience, and reason—which have been claimed as legitimate ways of knowing. The way of knowing, which throughout the six volumes of his work he asserts as the foundation of Christianity, is revelation.

⁵The common Hebrew word is *khalom*. In related words, the concept of dreams as a vehicle of divine revelation is found throughout other ancient Near Eastern cultures and languages. For similar uses of the term in related languages, see J. Bergman, “*khalom*” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. J. Botterweck and H. Riggren (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980).

⁶*Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam, 1976), s.v. “dream vision.”

⁷Though they are different terms, the words often function in the same manner. An example of different terms used to refer to the same function is the use of the Old Testament words for “prophet” (*nabi*) and “seer” (*roeh*, *hozeh*). Though Old Testament scholars debate the source meanings of these terms, often they are set side-by-side by the biblical writers and used synonymously. That is, they function in the same manner to explain the work of the prophet. See Isa 29:10; 30:9, 10.

⁸Wenham has noted that the term used in this text, *makhazeh*, is rare in Hebrew and used only of Balaam (Num 24:4, 16) and contemporaries of Ezekiel (13:7). “[Nevertheless,] visions were a recognized and very ancient mode of revelation” (Gordan J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* [Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas, TX: Word, 1987] 327).

⁹*mar’ah*

¹⁰A not so veiled warning was delivered by a Muslim woman in Turkey when she wrote (quoted as written in the email): “Sometimes when I read about those dreams of people about Jesus and God, believe me they made me afraid and make me remember those Hollywood movies who becomes serial killers say-

ing that they saw Jesus and he ordered them to do it." Correspondent 1, email to the author, 08 October 2003. Several personal correspondences are cited in this article, and because of security concerns, the authors are identified by numerals only.

¹¹Cline noted that the "night vision ["vision of the night," NASB] is certainly a dream." David J. A. Clines, *Job 1-20* (Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas, TX: Word, 1989) 486. Likewise, William D. Reayburn, *A Handbook on the Book of Job* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1992) 372, has commented, "As in 7.14 there is no attempt here to distinguish between *dream* and *vision*" (emphasis added).

¹²A valuable resource that examines the background and possible connection of the Matthew dream narratives with ancient Near Eastern predecessors and the book of Genesis is Robert Gnuse, "Dream Genre in the Matthean Infancy Narratives," *Novum Testamentum* 32 (April 1990) 97-120.

¹³Albrecht Oepke, "onar" in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967).

¹⁴J. A. Alexander, *A Commentary on The Acts of the Apostles* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1991) 387.

¹⁵F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, rev. ed., (The New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988) 203.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 204.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 206.

¹⁸John Gill, *Gill's Commentary: Matthew to Acts* (1852-54; reprint, Grand

Rapids, MI: Baker, 1980) 5:876.

¹⁹John Calvin, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996) 414.

²⁰John Polhill, *Acts* (New American Commentary, vol. 26; Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1992) 252. The author repeated the concept of Cornelius's preparation for the gospel on several occasions: e.g. "Cornelius already had some preparation for the gospel he was soon to hear" (252); and "Cornelius and his family already were worshipers of God and thus had some prior preparation for the gospel" (260).

²¹James Petigru Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (1887; reprint, Hanford, CA: den Dulk Christian Foundation, n.d.) 375-376.

²²*Ibid.*, 375.

²³*Ibid.*, 376.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 379.

²⁵The historical survey that follows, because of space limitations, is necessarily limited in its scope. Though brief, the survey demonstrates the fact that people have held quite diverse opinions regarding the purpose, function, and validity of dreams.

²⁶I wish to thank Guy Fredrick for his help in researching historical materials and contemporary cultures. Much of what I have written in these sections is based on conversations with him and research that he has done on my behalf.

²⁷William Moore, "Prolegomena," in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1954) 5:3. The full report of this dream and its circumstances can be

found together at this location.

²⁸Justin Martyr, "First Apology of Justin," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956) 1:167.

²⁹Augustine, "Letters of St. Augustine," [CD-ROM] (Albany, OR: Ages Software) 1027-1028.

³⁰In chapter 14 of his "First Epistle to the Corinthians," Clement dealt with the demons that misrepresent Christian doctrine, at one point pointedly warning, "For they strive to hold you their slaves and servants; and sometimes by appearances in dreams, and sometimes by magical impositions, they subdue all who make no strong opposing effort for their own salvation. And thus do we also, since our persuasion by the Word, stand aloof from them (i.e., the demons), and follow the only unbegotten God through His Son." [CD-ROM] (Albany, OR: Ages Software) 301.

³¹Theodotus, "Selections from the Prophetic Scriptures," [CD-ROM] (Albany OR: Ages Software) 75-76.

³²Lactantius, "Of the Use of Reason in Religion; and of Dreams, Auguries, Oracles, and Similar Portents," in *The Divine Institutes* [CD-ROM] (Albany, OR: Ages Software) 103-106. Also, one should consider Constantine's conversion, which, purportedly, was by a dream.

³³Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1947) 21.

³⁴Alfred Eidersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1950) 318-325.

- ³⁵Ibid., 325.
- ³⁶Jonathan Edwards, *Types of the Messiah*, ed. Edward Hickman, vol. 2 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* [Works] (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1979) 642-675.
- ³⁷A. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, [CD-ROM] (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 2000) 16-17.
- ³⁸John Wesley, "Notes on the Bible," [CD-ROM] (Albany, OR: Ages Software) 167, provided a timely caution: "ingenious men have strange dreams; and these they sometimes mistake for realities." He gives similar warnings, throughout his comments, that dreams can be deceptive (e.g. 381, 389, 396)
- ³⁹Phillip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church: The Middle Ages Apostolic Christianity A.D. 1-100*, vol. 1 [CD-ROM] (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1997) 156-157.
- ⁴⁰Paul Hiebert, "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle," *Missiology* 10 (Jan 1982) 35-47.
- ⁴¹Frederick Turner has made a similar observation concerning the Western attempt to understand the heritage of North American Indians: "Almost all the difficulties to be encountered here are the results of the assumptions, values, and modes of perception which are our heritage from Western civilization" (*The Portable North American Indian Reader* [New York: Penguin Books, 1977] 21). I would distinguish between "understanding" this heritage and "affirming" it. One might understand the North American Indian heritage quite well while at the same time pointing out issues that are inconsistent with the biblical revelation. The same can be said in regard to other cultures and their heritages.
- ⁴²Although I find much in his book with which I cannot agree, Clarence Larkin's opening statement is right on target: "The Scriptures are full of the 'Supernatural'" (Clarence Larkin, *The Spirit World* [Philadelphia, PA: Clarence Larkin Estate, 1921] 1).
- ⁴³Eugene A. Nida, *Customs & Cultures* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954) 159.
- ⁴⁴John Mbiti, "Dreams as a Point of Theological Dialogue between Christianity and African Religion," *Missionalia* 25 (December 1997) 511.
- ⁴⁵Ibid., 513.
- ⁴⁶Correspondent 2, email to the author, 10 September 2003.
- ⁴⁷Ibid. It must also be added, though this is beyond the confines of this article, that the prevalence of dreams as vehicles for communicating with the spirit world are not lacking in the North American context. The employment of dreams and visions to converse with the spirits or to understand the world is as ancient as the Native American cultures. The myths, stories, and legends of Native American peoples are filled with dream and vision reports. A helpful and quick perusal might be made of a book such as that edited by Frederick Turner (see note 41).
- ⁴⁸Bridges, 16.
- ⁴⁹Todd Nettleton and Gary Lane, "Night Visions in Iran & Iraq," *The Voice of the Martyrs*, October 2003, 3-8.
- ⁵⁰These reports have been edited in order to clarify terms and abbreviations found in the original correspondence.
- ⁵¹Kelly Bulkeley, "Reflections on the Dream Traditions of Islam," n.p. [cited 2 February 2004]. Online: http://www.kellybulkeley.com/articles/islam_and_dreams.pdf.
- ⁵²Ibid.
- ⁵³Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992) 49.
- ⁵⁴Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit: Discovering How God Speaks and Heals Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993) 213.
- ⁵⁵Correspondent 4, email to the author, 22 September 2003.
- ⁵⁶Guy Fredrick, email to the author, 16 November 2003.