

Oneiromancy in the Bible

So what did the medieval or early Renaissance reader make of oneiromancy--the process of divination through dreams? Even though the King James Bible would not appear in English until the 1600s, most educated readers would be familiar with various biblical accounts of divinely inspired dreams. These pages list biblical passages that Christians in the medieval period considered important.

In some cases, there is some confusion in the Latin text as to whether or not the events described took place as a dream (*somnium*) during sleep (*somnus*), or as a waking vision (*visio*). To differentiate, I include the Latin below. Note that the phrases "*in somno*" and "*in somnis*" can mean "in dreams" or "while asleep."

Genesis 20:3-7 (*somnium*): In the story of Abraham and Sarah, a male dreamer (Abimelech) is warned against taking Sarah from Abraham.

28:12-15 (*in somnis*) Jacob's dream of a ladder, with angels moving up and down it.

31:10-13 (*in somnis*) Angel appears to Jacob in a dream, shows him Laban's sheep producing speckled and striped ewes, which will be his according to agreement.

31:24 (*in somnis*) Laban warned by God in dream not to speak harshly to Jacob.

37:5-9 (*ut visum somnium*) Joseph hated by his brothers, he tells them a dream he already dreamed; the frame is a narrator telling a past dream in which Jacob's brothers' sheaves stand in a field with sheaves bowing down to his. Then the sun and moon and stars worship it as well.

37:19 (*Ecce somniatur venit!*) Behold the dreamer, let us cast him into a pit! The wicked refusal of Joseph's brother to believe in the prophetic dream.

40:5-23 (*somnium*) The Baker and Butler with Joseph. Here, the narrator narrates his dream to another, who interprets it, though the chief butler ungratefully forgets his interpreter.

41:1-24, 41:25-32 (*somnium*) Pharaoh's dream of seven sleek and gaunt cows, and seven good ears of grain and seven thin ears of grain, and Joseph's interpretation.

42:9 (*somnium*) Joseph remembers the dream about his brothers.

Exodus: Note that Moses in Exodus is a special category. He doesn't need interpretation or the intermediary of dreaming to talk with God.

Numbers 12:6 Mary and Aaron, God explains to them the difference between dreams and visions and what occurs with Moses: "*Si quis fuerit inter vos propheta Domini, in visione apparebo ei vel per somnium loquar ad illum. At non talis servus meus Moyses, qui in omni domo mea fidelissimus est; ore enim ad os loquor ei, et palam, et non per aenigmata et figuras Dominum videt.*" [If there is a prophet among you, I the Lord, shall make Myself known to him in a vision. I shall speak to him in a dream. Not so, with My servant Moses. He is faithful in all My household; With him I speak mouth to mouth, even openly, and not in dark sayings.]

Deuteronomy 13:1-5 (*somnium*) Lists the criteria for telling if a dream is true or false, and commands the slaying of false dreamers: "If a prophet or a dreamer of *dreams* [*qui somnium vidisse*] arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you saying, 'Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them.' You shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you to find out if you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. . . . But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has counseled rebellion against the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt. . .

. So you shall purge the evil from among you.” The verse had strong connections to the church's policy for dealing with heresy in medieval times.

Judges 7:13-15 (*somnium*) In an unusual framing narrative, Gideon sneaks into the enemy camp, and overhears one sentry telling another of a dream he had, in which a roll of barley rolls into the camp and flattens it. The other sentry interprets it as the coming of Gideon to destroy them. Gideon hears this interpretation, takes heart, and goes back to collect his soldiers to do just that.

1 King 3:2-15 (*somnium*) Here, King Solomon speaks to God in a dream to ask for wisdom at Gibeon. Apparently, a similar interlude occurs in 1 Kings 9:1-9.

1 Samuel 3: 5-16. Interesting liminality. Samuel misinterprets God’s voice calling in the night as his master, the priest Heli, calling for him. Heli convinces him to call to God the next time Samuel hears the voice. Then the voice tells Samuel an unpleasant prediction about Heli. Samuel becomes afraid to tell the vision to Heli. The context is not clear whether he hears the voice in a dream or as an auditory phenomenon while awake.

1 Samuel 28:6-15 When Saul cannot find an answer from dreams [*per somne*] or prophets, he goes to the witch of Endor for necromantic divination, a dramatic no-no under Hebrew law.

Job 7:14 Dreams here are seen as inescapable punishment from God, and the bed does not serve for comfort and relaxation. “If I say, ‘My bed will comfort me, My couch will ease my complaint,’ then Thou dost frighten me with dreams and terrify me by visions.” [*Terrebis me per somnia, et per visiones horrore concuties.*]

20:8 Not a dream *per se*, but a simile in which the wicked are compared to the transience of a dream, something passing, unremembered, forgotten. Dreams appear to have no lasting substance. Note that both the word *somnium* and the word *visio* appear in this passage; the *somnium* passes “as if” or “just like” [*sicut*] it were a *visio*: [*Velut somnium avolans non invenietur, transiet sicut visio nocturna.*] It is intriguing that the true dream or *somnium* is seen as transient, fading, rather than the *insomnium*, which is what I would expect to be the term if Macrobius or other Latin Christian were writing the passage.

33:13-18 Job blamed for asserting his innocence. There is a reference to Samuel, in which dreams are seen as a way of God to instruct men to what they ought to know:

“Why do you [Job] complain against Him, that He does not give an account of all His doings? Indeed, God speaks once, or twice, yet no one notices it. 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, and seals their instruction, that He may turn man aside from his conduct, and keep man from pride; he keeps back his soul from the pit, and his life from passing over into Sheol.”

Psalms 73:20 (72:20 in Vulgate) Emphasizes that the transience of a dream upon awakening (*somnium surgentium*), and makes a simile between the transient dream that has suddenly ceased to be, and the wicked. No dream actually takes place.

126:1 Again, a simile to *somniantes*, dreamers, but no actual dream takes place.

Ecc 5:3-7 While advising moderation in speech, the speaker connects dreams (*somnium*) to vanities and useless words.

Isaiah 29:7-8 “And it shall be as when a hungry man dreams—And behold, he is drinking, but when he awakens, behold he is faint, and his thirst is not quenched.” [*Et errit sicut somnium visionis nocturnae. . .*]. Again, we find a passage that deals with the transience of wicked nations, a prophecy concerning those who wage war against Zion. Here it seems to indicate that dreams do not necessarily reflect physical realities, but seems to connect loosely with the medical nature of false dreams. (One can dream about drinking because he falls asleep thirsty.)

Jeremiah 23:25-32 “I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy falsely in my name, saying ‘I had a dream, I had a dream’ [*Somniavi! Somniavi!*]” The passage continues in which God declares that he is against the prophets who steal his words from each other, and falsely assert dreams as originating in God. Again, there are strong implications here for heresy and nature of the dream vision.

27:9 “Harken not to your prophets, your diviners, your dreamers, your soothsayers, or your sorcerers. . . .” [*Nolite audire prophetas vestros, et divinos, et somniores, et augures, et maleficos. . . .*] who prophesy that Israel will not serve the King of Babylon.

29:8 Another warning to captives in Babylon not to heed any false dreams they might have. [*. . . Et ne attendatis ad somnia vestra quae vos somniatis.*]

31:26 After the word of God comes to Jeremiah (30:1), Jeremiah accounts many prophetic words without any mention of going to sleep. It appears to be a waking vision. However, In Jer. 31:26, Jeremiah awakens from his dream, saying his sleep was sweet to him [*et somnus meus dulcis mihi*]. Here it is interesting because there is a tail-end of a dream, but no dream-frame at the beginning of the chapter.

Daniel 4:2-25 An interesting account presented in the first person, in which Nebuchadnezzar recounts the events of his dreams in the past tense in a writing addressed to all the peoples, nations, and men of every language on earth. After an inexplicably frightening dream, [*somnium vidit*] Nebuchadnezzar calls wise men and soothsayers advisors who could not interpret dream until Daniel comes. In the dream, a huge tree grows, and an angel comes and orders it chopped down. The stump is ordered to be bound in iron, and he [the stump becomes personified as male] is turned into a beast to wander for “seven periods.” Daniel interprets the dream as the fall of Nebuchadnezzar, and predicts his transformation into a beast. It is interesting that the reason Nebuchadnezzar gives for Daniel’s ability to determine dreams is not his wisdom, but a sort of mystical inspiration--the fact that the “spirit of the holy gods is in you.” This implies inspiration is more vital than education for interpreting the true dream.

5:12 Daniel praised as the true interpreter of dreams and enigmas again, rather than the false soothsayer. However, Daniel in the following material does not interpret a dream, but rather the physical manifestation of writing left on a wall by a disembodied hand.

7:1 Daniel’s vision of the four beasts. writing the dream, he comprehended it in few words. It is referred to as both a *somnium* and a *visio* in 7:1. The narrative frame is that of text, since Daniel is writing the dream down and relating it in summary rather than in complete form [*scribens brevi sermone comprehendit.*] The dream is distressing, and he keeps approaching those standing nearby in the dream and asking for interpretation. One of those standing nearby explains it to him, in a manner akin to a spirit-guide.

8:1-19 (a *Visio* of the Ram and the Goat): No dream frame or any hint that the *visio* occurs while asleep. Indeed, it seems to occur while Daniel is awake in the province of Susa (a Persian satrapy), because the spiritual interpreter of his vision (Gabriel) is still talking to him when Daniel drifts off to sleep (8:18), only to be reawakened by the Gabriel. It is an apocalyptic vision concerning the end of Media and Persia. Note that Daniel is sick and exhausted days afterwards (after words?), but goes on about the king’s business. He mysteriously seems to still want an

interpreter of the dream, in spite of the fact that Gabriel interpreted it for him previously [*et non erat qui interpretaretur*].

10:1-21 (*Visio*) Again, a waking vision that appears to occur while Daniel is awake, this time by the banks of the Tigris River. He has been fasting for three entire weeks, without fine food, meat, wine, or using any cleansing ointment on his body. Note the spirit-guide who appears to Daniel is quite similar to the spirit-guide who appears before John on isle of Patmos in the New Testament. There is some blurred liminality between awake and unconscious, however, since in the midst of the vision, Daniel faints away at the dream-guide's thundering words. It becomes hard to ascertain then, if the following part of the vision occurs after the dream-guide awakens Daniel, or if he merely dreams that the dream-guide wakes him up.

Joel 2:28 A prediction of dreams and prophesying and vision in the last days, linking apocalyptic events with dreams. "And it will come about after this that I will pour out My spirit on all mankind [*super omnem carnem*]; and your sons and daughters will prophesy, Your old men will dream dreams, Your young men will see visions." [*somnia somniabunt . . . visiones videbunt*].

Zech 10:2 (anti-heresy verse, dreamers who speak vanity)

New Testament

Note: The New Testament has far fewer dreams than the Old Testament. Most of them appear in Matthew, the N.T. Book with the most "Judaisms" of all the four gospels.

Matt. 1:20 Joseph told by angel while asleep [*in somnis*] to go ahead and marry Mary. [An interesting gender note is that God speaks to Joseph in dreams, but Mary gets to talk to Gabriel face-to-face in the annunciation.]

2:12-22 The dreams [*in somnis*] of Magi warn them not to return to Herod, but to take an escape route. Likewise, in verse 13, an angel tells Joseph in dreams [*somnis*] to flee to Egypt.

27:19 The Wife of Pilate suffers in a dream as a warning not to crucify Christ.

Acts 2:17 Paul quotes Joel 2:28, see above.

Note: In the book of **Ezekiel**, there is no mention of falling asleep. All the visions [*visiones*] appear to occur physically. (1:1 "while I was by the river Chebar among the exiles, the heavens were opened and I saw visions [*visiones*] of God." In the same way, the narrator in Book of **Revelation** describes himself as not being asleep, but being "in the spirit" [*in spiritu*] on the isle of Patmos. There, he hears a trumpet-like voice speaking to him, and he turns around, instantly in a visionary state, to see seven lamp stands and a humanoid being akin to that which led Ezekiel in his visions. This spirit-guide leads him through a lengthy vision of apocalypse, and ends with a dire warning not to add or delete words to the account.

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