



Conducted by
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“We frequently read in the Bible about ‘dreams’ and ‘visions’. Would you please explain the difference, if any?”

Dreams and visions! Conditions attributed to the human condition and beloved of mystics, songwriters, romantic novelists, and such like. Millions of people, otherwise quite sane and intelligent, have been ‘dreaming’ of ‘White Christmases’ ever since the song was written and sung. ‘Visions’ of beauty, poise, and elegance stare out at us from glossy magazines and brochures. Such ideas are designed quite specifically to appeal to the emotions and are sensually evocative, and they seem to bear little relationship to the Biblical concept of visions and dreams.

I use the phrase ‘conditions attributed to the human condition’ because I believe that the subject should be taken out of the super-natural realm as much as possible. The reader will no doubt be able to recall the famous ‘I have a dream’ speech made by the late Dr. Martin Luther King shortly before he was shot to death. It seems to me that Dr. King’s ‘dream’ was an intrinsic consciousness, which came across in almost prophetic terms, of the reality of complete future racial integration which he and others would strive to bring into being; in other words, his ‘dream’ was a product of his human condition. Bearing this in mind, although not exclusively so, let us turn our attention to the Biblical concept of dreams and visions. At the outset, having made the point of the importance of the human condition, we must acknowledge that we understand that the *influence* of the Spirit of God can be brought to bear on every aspect of the human condition.

Dreams

Dreams. What are they. How do they come? I have not the slightest doubt that a psychologist would be able to advance theories which would make a lot of sense, but as I am certainly not qualified to comment on this channel of knowledge, I will stick to Biblical concepts. In the Book of Ecclesiastes we read, "For a dream cometh through the multitude of business" (5:3). The N.I.V. gives the same passage, "As a dream comes when there are many cares". Now I take this to mean that the agitated state of the mind can conjure up in the sub-conscious state, such as when we sleep, ideas which have a *direct relationship* to the thoughts which have exercised the mind during its *conscious* state, such as when we are awake; and so we dream. Let us apply this Biblical concept to a Biblical example.

Jacob, as is recorded, deceived his father Isaac and stole the birthright of his brother Esau. Rebekah, their mother, who had conspired with Jacob, learned that after the days of mourning for Isaac, Esau planned to kill Jacob. She thus encouraged Jacob to flee immediately from the wrath of Esau and go to Haran to live with her brother Laban. Thus Jacob had to flee from his own family, he was threatened with death, and he had to pass through hostile territory; furthermore, he was no doubt thinking that because of his perfidy, God also would have forsaken him. It was in this trauma of mind that he fell asleep and had the dream of the ladder stretching from earth to heaven, and God Himself reiterating His promise to him. Whatever the source of the dream, and I am inclined to the view expressed in Ecclesiastes, it certainly gave Jacob great encouragement, and resolve of purpose.

Concerning Solomon at Gibeon, we are expressly told that the Lord *appeared* to him in a dream, and asked what He should give to him. This seems to indicate that Deity used dreams to communicate the Divine revelation to specific people on special occasions. See 1 Kings 3:5ff.

It is quite evident from the O.T. that there were false prophets and dreamers of dreams who, by the statements they made to others, subverted the Will of God. In this context read Deuteronomy 13:2ff., and Jeremiah 23:25ff. We can see from these scriptures that God sternly condemns the dreamer of dreams who expressed the figure of *his own* imagination as if it were the truth of God.

It would seem that the revelation from God by dreams was confined to earlier days; as a matter of fact, many of the recorded dreams in the O.T. are concerned with people who were not of God's *chosen* people, Israel, e.g., Pharaoh (Gen.41); Nehuchadnezzar (Dan. 2:1); and others. The interpretation of dreams was granted to some, particularly Joseph and Daniel.

In the N.T. it would appear that dreams were used almost exclusively to give specific directions in times of difficulty and peril, e.g. instructions for Joseph to flee into Egypt (Matt. 2:13); Pilate's wife (Matt. 27:19). Here again we are left with an interesting thought; if the dream of Pilate's wife is attributed to the action of God, then it would appear that God, through the dream, was attempting to thwart His own Will, i.e. in the crucifixion of Jesus. However, in the case of the Magi (Matt. 2:12) *their* dream was ostensibly *furthering* the Will of God.

In view of the fact that there is so little reporting of dreams in the N.T., I think we must conclude that more importance is attached to the *conscious* decisions that man has to make relative to his acceptance by God, in other words, the directions for man's salvation have been clearly revealed, and the warnings of non-compliance have been clearly stated.

Visions

According to the dictionary, vision is the act or faculty of seeing, sight; the power of discerning future conditions, foretelling; that which is seen in a dream or trance. In order to complement this, I believe that we should also define the word 'trance'; this

can be 'a sleep-like state, a mental abstraction from external things, total absorption in anything, or a state of ecstatic experience. As many of the recorded visions are directly connected with prophecy, we can safely assume that the state of mind in which a prophet was when he received a Divine communication is important.

Ezekiel is quite literal in what he *saw*. In Ezek. 1:1 we read, "as I was among the captives by the river of Chebar, that the heavens were opened, and I saw the visions of God". This is a direct communication from God, literally recorded. Similarly with Daniel concerning the dream of Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel consulted with his companions, "That they would desire mercies of the God of heaven concerning this secret" (2:17,18). Verse 19 then says, "Then was the secret revealed unto Daniel in a night vision. Then Daniel blessed the God of heaven."

On the other hand, Isaiah, out of the burden of that which was oppressing him, records a truly *prophetic* vision, "The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah" (Isa. 1:1). We must understand, of course, that concerning prophetic statements there would always be a dual witness to the events prophesied; the prophet's own spiritual nature which would be filled with the message of God, and the prophet being seized upon by the Divine Spirit so that no error would be made in the thing prophesied. You will remember that when Paul wrote his letter to Rome he indicated the assurance of salvation like this, "The Spirit Himself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God (Rom. 8:16).

Concerning the Apostle Paul, we have a recorded ecstatic experience which seems to transcend the natural but we cannot be sure of this. It is generally accepted that in 2 Cor. 12 the Apostle is referring to his own experience in what may be a trance-like experience. He himself says that he did not know whether he was 'in the body, or out of the body'; he just couldn't tell. As regards Peter, the scripture states quite specifically that he went into a trance, and it was in this state of trance that he had his vision. He *saw* certain things, but didn't understand what they meant. It was in his conscious and released state of mind that God revealed to him by subsequent events what the Divine Will was. (See Acts 10 and 11).

Conclusion

It is quite evident that dreams and visions are very closely inter-woven. From what we have studied — and there is quite a bit more to be looked at — it would seem that dreams were used as the vehicle for instruction and direction. Visions, on the other hand, seem to be part of the phenomena of prophecy. Beyond that I would not like to go.