

Dreams in Islam and Arabic Culture

By Abu Atallah

I. Introduction

Many Muslims around the world have had dreams of Christ. Some say God is reaching out in miraculous ways. Others say we are just paying more attention to this phenomenon today. Still others say the matter has been over emphasised by a leading Western seminary that is particularly interested in dreams and miracles. In this article we will focus first on how relevant dreams are to the Arab culture and the significance of this to ministering to Muslims. Secondly we will notice how the prophet of Islam and Islamic literature address the subject of dreams. We will concentrate on how the Arab Muslim world addresses the subject, although I believe that findings in this article will also be relevant to the rest of the Muslim world.

I will not here address the question of whether God uses dreams today or not. He is sovereign and will do what he sees fit to bring people to himself. More relevant to ministry among Muslims is the question of how they look at dreams and how influential dreams are in their everyday life. It is surprising what the prophet of Islam said and what Muslims still say. I hope this article will be informative and helpful in understanding what dreams mean to average Muslims.

II. Dreams and Dream Interpretation in the West

Discussing dreams and interpreting dreams have been going on through-

out history. The people of classical antiquity took for granted that dreams were related to the world of the supernatural beings in whom they believed, and that they brought inspiration from gods and demons.

Writers who preceded Aristotle did not regard the dream as a product of the psyche, but as an inspiration of divine origin. The two opposing tendencies which we find throughout the ages in regard to evaluation of dreams were already apparent. The ancients distinguished between true and valuable dreams which were sent as warnings or to foretell future events, and vain, fraudulent, and empty dreams whose object was to misguide the dreamer or lead him to destruction.

Gruppe, in his book *Griechische Mythologie und Religionsgeschichte*, p. 390] speaks of such a classification of dreams, citing Macrobius and Artemidorus:

"Dreams were divided into two classes; the first class was believed to be influenced only by the present (or the past), and was unimportant in respect of the future; it included the *enuknia* (insomnia), which directly reproduces a given idea or its opposite; e.g., hunger or its satiation; and the *phantasmata*, which elaborate the given idea fantastically, as e.g. the nightmare, *ephialtes*. The second class of dreams, on the other hand, was determinative of the future. To

this belonged 1) direct prophecies received in the dream (chrematismos, oraculum); 2) the foretelling of a future event (orama, visio); 3) the symbolic dream, which requires interpretation (oneiros, somnium.) This theory survived for many centuries."

In the two works of Aristotle in which there is mention of dreams, they are already regarded as constituting a matter of psychology, as the psychic activity of the sleeper. Aristotle considered that dreams are not of divine origin, but stem from human nature, which is really demonic. Although not a supernatural revelation, dreams are subject to the laws of the human spirit, which may have a relationship with the divine.

Westerners, both Christian and non-Christian, have been influenced by Freud's analysis of dreams. Freud stated his objectives as follows in the beginning of his book *The Interpretation of Dreams* (3rd edition), Translated by A. A. Brill (1911):

"In the following pages I shall demonstrate that there is a psychological technique which makes it possible to interpret dreams, and that on the application of this technique every dream will reveal itself as a psychological structure, full of significance, and one which may be assigned to a specific place in the psychic activities of the waking state. Further, I shall endeavour to elucidate the processes which underlie the strangeness and obscurity of dreams, and to deduce

from these processes the nature of the psychic forces whose conflict or co-operation is responsible for our dreams." He then states the Stimuli and Sources of Dreams as being 1) External Sensory Stimuli; 2) Internal (Subjective) Sensory Excitations; 3) Internal Organic Somatic Stimuli; 4) Psychical Sources of Stimulation.

Many of us adopt this interpretation that the stimuli for dreams are only psychological, not divine. In the West we tend to look at dreams as something that happens to everybody but don't give it any more credence than this. Hollywood addresses dreams in its movies more than we do as Christians. We have practically left God out of the dream phenomenon.

Muslims do not subscribe to this point of view. Most Islamic books on the subject distinguish themselves from the Freudian analysis of dreams. The Arab Muslim world has not met the scientific challenge of the interpretation and understanding of dreams. Islam and the prophets are basically the sole informers of their analysis.

In my childhood as an Arab dreams were very significant in my family, to the neighbours and the community. People gave a lot more credence to dreams than we do in the West. People named their children after an uncle who had died and then appeared to the person in a dream. They would name the child Ali because that was the name of the night visitor. Some of you have seen the movie *Fiddler on the Roof*. Do you remember when the husband

wanted to let his daughter marry the younger chap that she was in love with? He had to mention that he had seen his wife's aunt in a dream to convince his wife to agree. I know it is only a movie but it reminds us of the cultural relevance of dreams.

III. Dreams and Dream Interpretation in Islam

There are a number of Islamic books written on dreams and dream interpretation. In visiting the Middle East, the Gulf and North Africa, I am struck by how many books on shelves and on street selling points have to do with dreams. Attention to this phenomenon is especially prominent among women.

A. Dreams in the Hadith

1. Types of Dreams

There are three types of dreams according to the prophet.

Al-Bukhari 9:144, narrated by Abu-Hurayrah:

Muhammad ibn Sirin said, "But I say this." He said, "It used to be said, 'there are three types of dreams: 1) The reflection of one's thoughts and experiences one has during the working hours, 2) What is suggested by Satan to frighten the dreamer, 3) Or glad tidings from Allah.' So, if someone has a dream which he dislikes, he should not tell it to others, but get up and offer a prayer." He added, "He (AbuHurayrah) hated to see a Ghull (i.e. iron collar) around his neck in a dream and people liked to see fetters (on their feet in a dream). The fetters on the feet

symbolise one's constant and firm adherence to religion." And AbuAbdullah said, "Ghulls (iron collars) are used only for necks." Allah's Messenger (*PBUH*) said, "When the Day of Resurrection approaches, the dreams of a believer will hardly fail to come true, and a dream of a believer is one of the forty-six parts of prophecy, and whatever belongs to prophecy can never be false."

From this Hadith we find that the prophet takes both the divine or satanic source, as well as the physical or the person's experience.

2. Good Dreams and Bad Dreams

Al-Bukhari 9:168, narrated by Abu-Qatadah:

AbuSalamah narrated that I used to see a dream which would make me sick till I heard AbuQatadah saying, "I too, used to see a dream which would make me sick till I heard the Prophet (*PBUH*) saying, "A good dream is from Allah, so if anyone of you saw a dream which he liked, he should not tell it to anybody except to the one whom he loves, and if he saw a dream which he disliked, then he should seek refuge with Allah from its evil and from the evil of Satan, and spit three times (on his left) and should not tell it to anybody, for it will not harm him." (See also *Al-Bukhari 9:169, 7:643*)

Al-Bukhari 9:112, narrated by Anas ibn Malik:

Allah's Messenger (*PBUH*) said, "A good dream (that comes true) of a righteous man is one of forty-six parts of prophecy."

Sahih Muslim 5640, narrated by Jabir ibn Abdullah:

Allah's Messenger (*PBUH*) said: There came to him (the Prophet) a desert Arab and said: I saw in a dream that I had been beheaded and I had been following it (the severed head). Allah's Apostle (*PBUH*) reprimanded him saying: Do not inform about the vain sporting of the devil with you during the night.

3. Satan Could Never Take the Form of a Prophet in a Dream.

Al-Bukhari 9:122, narrated by Abu-Hurayrah:

I heard the Prophet (*PBUH*) saying, "Whoever sees me in a dream will see me when he is awake, and Satan cannot imitate me in shape." ...

Al-Bukhari 1:110, narrated by Abu Hurayrah:

The Prophet (*PBUH*) said, "... And whoever sees me in a dream, then surely he has seen me for Satan cannot impersonate me. And whoever tells a lie against me (intentionally), then (surely) let him occupy his seat in Hell-fire."

4. Dreams of Future Events

Al-Bukhari 4:818, narrated by Abu Musa:

The Prophet (*PBUH*) said, "In a dream I saw myself migrating from Makkah to a place having plenty of

date trees. I thought that it was al-Yamamah or Hajar, but it came to be Medina i.e. Yathrib. In the same dream I saw myself brandishing a sword and its blade got broken. It came to symbolise the defeat which the Muslims suffered from on the Day of Uhud. I moved the sword again, and it became normal as before, and that was the symbol of the victory Allah bestowed upon Muslims and their gathering together. I saw some cows in my dream, and (heard) 'Allah is Khayr'. They symbolised the believers on the Day of Uhud. And the Khayr was the good Allah bestowed upon us and the reward of true belief which Allah gave us after the day of Badr.

Al-Bukhari 5:31, narrated by Abdullah ibn Umar:

The Prophet (*PBUH*) said, "In a dream I saw myself drawing water with a bucket from a well. AbuBakr came and drew a bucket or two weakly. May Allah forgive him. Then Umar ibn al-Khattab came and the bucket turned into a very large one in his hands. I had never seen such a mighty person as he in doing such hard work till all the people drank to their satisfaction and watered their camels that knelt down there.

Al-Bukhari 9:161, narrated by Abdullah ibn Umar:

The Prophet (*PBUH*) said, "I saw (in a dream) a black woman with unkempt hair leaving Medina and settling at Mahay'ah, i.e. al-Juhfah.

I interpreted that as a symbol of the epidemic of Medina being transferred to that place (al-Juhfah)."

5. The Dreams of Prophets Were Divine Inspiration

Al-Bukhari 1:140:

... Sufyan said to Amr that some people said, "The eyes of Allah's Apostle (PBUH) sleep but his heart does not sleep." Amr replied, "I heard Ubayd Ibn Umayr saying that the dreams of Prophets were Divine Inspiration," and then he recited the verse: 'I (Abraham) see in a dream, (O my son) that I offer you in sacrifice (to Allah).'

Al-Bukhari 1:82:

Allah's Apostle (PBUH) said, "While I was sleeping, I saw that a cup full of milk was brought to me and I drank my fill till I noticed (the milk) its wetness coming out of my nails. Then I gave the remaining milk to Umar ibn al-Khattab." The companions of the Prophet (PBUH) asked, "What have you interpreted (about this dream) O Allah's Apostle?" He replied, "(It is religious) knowledge."

6. The Prophet's Ascendance to Heaven in a Dream

Al-Bukhari 9:608, narrated by Anas ibn Malik:

One night Allah's Messenger (PBUH) was taken for a journey from the Sacred Mosque (of Makkah) al-Ka'bah. Three persons came to him (in a dream) while he was sleeping in the Sacred Mosque

before the Divine inspiration was revealed to Him. One of them said, "Which of them is he?" The middle (second) angel said, "He is the best of them." The last (third) angel said, "Take the best of them." Only that much happened on that night and he did not see them till they came on another night, (i.e. after The Divine Inspiration was revealed to him (Fath al-Bari Page 258.Vol.17)). When he saw them, his eyes were asleep but his heart was not—and so is the case with the prophets: their eyes sleep while their hearts do not sleep.

7. The Companions of the Prophet and Dreams

Al-Bukhari 9:171, narrated by Samurah ibn Jundub:

Allah's Messenger (PBUH) very often used to ask his companions, "Did any one of you have a dream?" So dreams would be narrated to him by those whom Allah wished to tell.

Al Muat'a 2.1.2, narrated by AbuHurayrah:

When the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, left the morning prayer, he would say, "Has any of you had a dream last night? All that will remain of prophecy after me will be the true dream."

Al-Bukhari 9:170, narrated by Abdullah ibn Abbas:

A man came to Allah's Messenger (PBUH) and said, "I saw in a dream an overshadowing cloud. Butter

and honey were dropping from it and I saw the people gathering it in their hands, some gathering much and some a little. And behold, there was a rope extending from the earth to the sky, and I saw that you (the Prophet (PBUH)) held it and went up, then another man held it and went up, after that another held it and went up, and then after another (fourth) man held it, but it broke and then was joined again." AbuBakr said, "O Allah's Messenger! Let my father be sacrificed for you! Allow me to interpret this dream." The Prophet (PBUH) said to him, "Interpret it." AbuBakr said, "The overshadowing clouds symbolise Islam, and the butter and honey dropping from it symbolise the Qur'an, its sweetness dropping and some people learning much of the Qur'an and some a little. The rope which is extended from the sky to the earth is the truth which you (the Prophet (PBUH)) are following. You follow it and Allah will raise you high with it, then another man will follow it and will rise up with it, another person will follow it then and then another man will follow it but it will break and then it will be joined together for him and he will rise up with it. O Allah's Messenger! Let my father be sacrificed for you! Am I right or wrong?" The Prophet (PBUH) replied, "You are right in some of it and wrong in some." AbuBakr said, "O Allah's Prophet (PBUH)! By Allah, you must tell me

in what I was wrong." The Prophet (PBUH) said, "Do not swear."

8. The Prophet's Dream About the Antichrist

Al-Bukhari 4:649:

The Prophet (PBUH) mentioned the Masih Ad-Dajjal in front of the people saying, Allah is not one-eyed while Masih Ad-Dajjal is blind in the right eye and his eye looks like a bulging out grape. While sleeping near the Ka'bah last night, I saw in my dream a man of brown colour, the best one can see amongst brown colour, and his hair was so long that it fell between his shoulders. His hair was lank and water was dribbling from his head and he was placing his hands on the shoulders of two men while circumambulating the ka'bah. I asked, 'Who is this?' They replied, 'This is Jesus, son of Mary.' Behind him I saw a man who had very curly hair and was blind in the right eye, resembling ibn Qatan in appearance. He was placing his hands on the shoulders of a person while performing Tawaf around the Ka'bah. I asked, 'Who is this?' They replied, 'The Masih, Ad-Dajjal.'" (See also *Al-Bukhari 4:650*)

9. The Prophet's Dream to Marry Aisha

Al-Bukhari 9:140, narrated by Aisha:

Allah's Messenger (PBUH) said to me, "You were shown to me twice (in my dream) before I married you. I saw an angel carrying you in a silken piece of cloth, and I said to

him, 'Uncover (her).' and behold, it was you. I said (to myself), 'If this is from Allah, then it must happen.' Then you were shown to me, the angel carrying you in a silken piece of cloth, and I said (to him), 'Uncover (her), and behold, it was you. I said (to myself), 'If this is from Allah, then it must happen.'" (See also *Al-Bukhari* 9:143)

10. The Consequences of Lying About a Dream

Al-Bukhari 9:167, narrated by Abdullah ibn Umar:

Allah's Messenger (*PBUH*) said, "The worst lie is that of a person who claims to have seen a dream which he has not seen." (See also *Al-Bukhari* 1:110, 4:712)

11. The Call to Prayer Decided Through a Dream

Abu Dawud 0498, narrated by Abu-Umayr ibn Anas:

AbuUmayr reported on the authority of his uncle who was from the Ansar (the helpers of the Prophet): The Prophet (*PBUH*) was anxious as to how to gather the people for prayer. The people told him: Hoist a flag at the time of prayer; when they see it, they will inform one another. But he (the Prophet) did not like it. Then someone mentioned to him the horn. Ziyad said: A horn of the Jews. He (the Prophet) did not like it. He said: This is the matter of the Jews. Then they mentioned to him the bell of the Christians. He said: This is the matter of the Christians.

Abdullah ibn Zayd returned anxiously from there because of the anxiety of the Apostle (*PBUH*). He was then taught the call to prayer in his dream. Next day he came to the Apostle of Allah (*PBUH*) and informed him about it. He said: Apostle of Allah, I was between sleep and wakefulness; all of a sudden a newcomer came (to me) and taught me the call to prayer. Umar ibn al-Khattab had also seen it in his dream before, but he kept it hidden for twenty days. The Prophet (*PBUH*) said to me (Umar): What did prevent you from saying it to me? He said: Abdullah ibn Zayd had already told you about it before me: hence I was ashamed. Then the Apostle of Allah (*PBUH*) said: Bilal, stand up, see what Abdullah ibn Zayd tells you (to do), then do it. Bilal then called them to prayer. AbuBishr reported on the authority of Abu-Umayr: The Ansar thought that if Abdullah ibn Zayd had not been ill on that day, the Apostle of Allah (*PBUH*) would have made him mu'adhdhin. (See also *Abu Dawud* 0507, 0512)

12. Dreams About Heaven

Al-Bukhari 9:151, narrated by Jabir ibn Abdullah:

Allah's Messenger (*PBUH*) said, (I saw in a dream that) I entered Paradise, and behold, there was a palace built of gold! I asked, For whom is this palace?" They (the angels) replied, "For a man from the Quraysh." The Prophet (*PBUH*)

added, "O ibn al-Khattab! Nothing stopped me from entering it except your Ghirah (sense of honour)." Umar said, "How dare I think of my Ghirah (sense of honour) being offended by you, O Allah's Messenger (PBUH)?"

Mishkat Al-Masabih 0161:, narrated by Rabi'ah al-Jurashi

The Prophet of Allah (PBUH) was shown a heavenly visitant (in a dream) and it was said to him: Let your eyes sleep and your ears hear and your heart perceive. He (the Prophet) said: My eyes slept, my ears heard and my heart perceived. He (the Prophet) said: It was said to me: The master built a house, arranged a feast and sent someone to issue invitations. He who responded to the host entered the house, ate the feast and the master was well-pleased with him. He who did not respond to the host neither entered the house nor ate the feast and the master was annoyed with him. He explained: Allah is the Master; Muhammad is the one who extends invitation; the house is al-Islam and the feast is Paradise.

13. A Dream About the Christian Monk [The cousin of Khadijah]

Mishkat Al-Masabih 4623, Narrated by Aisha, transmitted by Darimi:

Allah's Messenger (PBUH) was questioned about Waraqah, and Khadijah said to him, "He believed in you, but died before you appeared as a prophet." Allah's Messenger (PBUH) then said, "I was shown him in a dream, wearing white

clothes, and if he had been one of the inhabitants of Hell he would have been wearing different clothing."

B. Dreams in the Qur'an

The Qura'n speaks of the whole story of Joseph as well as of Abraham and others. I have included this verse because here Allah is speaking to the prophet in a dream.

8:43

إِذْ يُرِيكَهُمُ اللَّهُ فِي مَنَامِكَ قَلِيلًا وَلَوْ أَرٰسَكَهُمْ
كَثِيرًا لَّفَشِلْتُمْ وَلَتَنَازَعْتُمْ فِي الْأَمْرِ وَلٰكِنَّ اللَّهَ
سَلَّمَ إِنَّهُ عَلِيمٌ بِذَاتِ الصُّدُورِ

Remember in thy dream God showed them to thee as few: if He had shown them to thee as many, ye would surely have been discouraged, and ye would surely have disputed in (your) decision; but God saved (you): for He knoweth well the (secrets) of (all) hearts. (Yusuf Ali)

When Allah showed them unto thee (O Muhammad) in thy dream as few in number, and if He had shown them to thee as many, ye (Muslims) would have faltered and would have quarreled over the affair. But Allah saved (you). Lo! He knoweth what is in the breasts (of men). (Pickthall)

C. Dreams in Popular or Folk Islam

I have seen many books on this aspect of Islam. I will only mention a few interpretations.

Seeing the prophets in dreams signifies either good news or a warning. If you

see a prophet looking normal this signifies that the dreamer is a righteous man, honored and having victory over his enemy. If you see a prophet looking not normal with a gloomy face this signifies that the dreamer is going through a hard time, but Allah will release him from his trials. If the dreamer sees that he killed a prophet this signifies that he is a traitor and one who nullifies his covenant with people.

Seeing Jesus in a dream means that the dreamer is a helpful, blessed man, that he will travel often and be well educated. Seeing Jesus looking well in a dream means the dreamer will get money, children and a prosperous living. If a woman sees Jesus when she is pregnant she will deliver a wise boy.

He who sees in a dream the prophet of Islam awake, blessed is he, because he

follows him. If you see him in debt, Allah will pay your debt. If you see him sick, Allah will heal you. If you see him fighting a battle, Allah will give you victory. If you see him in a barren land, Allah will give you a bumper crop. If you see him in a place of injustice, Allah will change the injustice into justice. If you see him in a fearful place, the people will be safe and secure.

There are multiple books on this subject. It is very clear from all the evidence above that dreams are important for Muslims, both culturally and religiously. This explains why Muslims pay serious attention when they see Christ in a dream.