

Dreams

(part 1 of 2): Am I Dreaming?



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The Merriam Webster online Dictionary defines a dream as a series of thoughts, images, or emotions occurring during sleep. Dreams and musing over their meanings and interpretations enrich our lives. Dreams put us in touch with our deepest emotions; they enchant us and frighten us; they contain our most secret wishes and fears. This is not a passing fad or a new age trend. Dreams have been with humankind for countless generations and will no doubt be with us until the end of days.

Dreams most often portray events which are impossible or unlikely in physical reality, and are outside the control of the dreamer. Many people report strong emotions while dreaming, and frightening or upsetting dreams are referred to as nightmares.

The history of dreams and their interpretations leads us back to ancient Egypt and it is said that the first written record of dream interpretation dates back to 1350 BCE. Originally in Egypt dreams were thought to be part of the supernatural world. They were thought to be messages sent during the night perhaps as an early warning device for disaster or good fortune. For Muslims this is not surprising. Chapter 12 of the Quran entitled “Joseph” begins with a dream, and ends with the dream’s interpretation. At the time of Prophet Joseph, dreams and dream interpretation were very important, and this is clear throughout the story of Joseph. Prophet Joseph is able to interpret dreams and Prophet Jacob (Joseph’s father), the companions of the prison and the King of Egypt all experience dreams.

We know that in ancient Egypt dreams were predominantly interpreted by the priest and that in the early Greek and roman eras dreams were thought of in a religious context, and it was not until the Hellenistic era of Aristotle that dreams

were thought to have the ability to heal. Dream interpreters aided doctors making their diagnosis. There are many superstitions and beliefs that are associated with dreams.

For some Chinese, dreaming is an actual place that the soul visits every night and for this reason many people are wary of alarm clocks fearing that the soul will be awakened and not able to return to its body. Some Native American tribes and Mexican civilizations share the same understanding of a dream dimension.

During the Middle Ages in Judeo-Christian societies dreams were thought of as evil, temptations from Satan. Moving into the 19th century dreams were dismissed as symptoms of anxiety, that is, until Sigmund Freud reintroduced the notion of dreams having significance. In the Muslim world however dreams were thought of a little differently. In Pre-Islamic Arabic poetry there are frequent descriptions of shamanic dream visions of such things as ritual death and rebirth. The role of the shaman (a person who claims to have access to and influence in the world of the supernatural) included dream interpreter and poet, so it is little wonder that Prophet Muhammad frequently repeated that he was not a poet. The advent of Islam cleared up many misconceptions and incorrect practices that existed in Arab society not the least of which was the pervading attitude to dreams and their interpretation.

Islam says that dreams can be meaningful but the scholars have warned that not all dreams should be considered as such. Renowned Islamic scholar Ibn Sirin, an expert on dream interpretation mentions in his classical book on the subject that dream interpretation is a difficult science and that scholars treat it with the upmost care. Prophet Muhammad taught us about dreams, also with the upmost care, and he mentions dreams and dreaming often.

“Indeed the worst of lies is that of a person who falsely claims to have dream.” [1]

“True dreams are from Allah, and bad dreams are from *Shaitan* (Satan).” [2]

“Those of you with the truest dreams will be those who are most truthful in speech.” [3]

“If anyone of you has a dream that he likes then it is from Allah. He should thank Allah for it and narrate it to others.” [4]

It is from Prophet Muhammad that we learn that dreams are of three types, known in Arabic as, *Rahmani* (from God), *Nafsani* (from the self) and *Shaytani* (from Satan). He said, **“Dreams are of three types: a dream from God; a dream which causes distress and which comes from Satan; and a dream which comes from what a person thinks about when he is awake, and**

he sees it when he is asleep.”^[5] Prophet Muhammad continues to teach us about the significance of dreams quite pragmatically.

“If any one of you sees a dream that he dislikes, let him blow to his left three times^[6], and seek refuge with God from Satan three times, and turn over from the side on which he was sleeping.”^[7]

The importance of a dream is usually in direct proportion to the impression it makes on the dreamer. Most dreams happen under normal circumstances and have no real value or need for interpretation. They derive from our worldly experiences and activities, a person spoken about, a book read or TV program watched. Other dreams are fantasies or illusions, playful and harmless. And then there are the dreams that are prophetic, dreams that appear to predict the future. These dreams cannot be readily understood unless a person has the necessary skills or knowledge.

In part 2 we will examine the science of dream interpretation.

Footnotes:

^[1] Saheeh Bukhari

^[2] Ibid.

^[3] Saheeh Muslim

^[4] Saheeh Bukhari

^[5] Saheeh Bukhari & Muslim

^[6] The “spitting” referred to here is a soft, dry spitting with no saliva ejected

^[7] Saheeh Muslim

(part 2 of 2): Dream Interpretation

In his book about dream interpretation Ibn Qutaybah says, “There is nothing in which people deal with from the different sciences that is more obscure, delicate, exalted, noble, difficult and problematic than dreams because they are a type of revelation and a type of Prophethood.”

These are wise words and reflect the position of many Islamic scholars, that dreams should be interpreted by someone qualified. There are a number of problems and stumbling blocks inherent in the practice of interpreting dreams. For instance, a dream could be seen by a person but it could be for someone else.

From among the companions of Prophet Muhammad someone saw a dream for Abu Jahl^[1] that he became a Muslim and pledged allegiance to Prophet. This

never happened, this dream was for his son, Ikrimah who at a later date converted to Islam and pledged allegiance to the Prophet. In another example a dream was seen about Usayd ibn Abil Aas becoming the governor of Mecca, this did not happen however his son ‘Attab did become the governor of Mecca.

Symbols in dreams could also be a stumbling block to the correct interpretation of dreams. Symbols in dreams might mean different things for different people. For example, a dream about a cat could evoke happy childhood memories or it could symbolise fear and pain for a person who had been attacked and scratched by a feral cat.

It is enough to recognise a dream as being good, bad or of no consequence.

- a) Dreams are sometimes described as *true, good or from God*. What is meant by *true* is that they come true. What is meant by *good* is that they bring good news or draw attention to some mistakes that one is not aware of. What is meant by their being *from God* is that they happen by His grace and mercy or as warning, as glad tidings from Him, or as guidance from Him. Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, said, **“If anyone of you has a dream that he likes then it is from God. He should thank God for it and narrate it to others.”**^[2]
- b) Bad dreams as those that cause grief or distress to the dreamer. These dreams are from Satan. What is meant by *causing grief* is that they make one sad and cause distress. What is meant by them being *from Satan* is that they are instilled by him in an effort to cause fear or because of his toying with the sleeper.

“Secret counsels (conspiracies) are only from Satan, in order that he may cause grief to the believers. But he cannot harm them in the least, except as God permits...” (Quran 58:10)

Satan is eager to embrace anything that causes distress, it matters not whether the person is awake or asleep, and Satan is an enemy to humankind.

“Surely, Satan is an enemy to you, so take (treat) him as an enemy...” (Quran 35:6)

Thus if one sees a bad dream, sometimes referred to as a nightmare that causes fear, distress or unease he or she should do the following:

Firstly, acknowledge that this dream is from Satan who wants only to cause grief therefore pay no heed to the dream. Secondly, seek refuge with God from the accursed Satan and the evil of the dream and spit dryly to their left three times. A person should not divulge the details of a bad dream unless in a sincere effort to get advice from a suitably qualified person. In almost all cases distressing dreams should be ignored and dismissed. Turning over to the other

side of the bed or getting up to pray to units of prayer are also effective ways of breaking the feeling of helplessness sometimes associated with bad dreams.

- c) There are some dreams that do not fall in either of the above two categories. These dreams are called “confused dreams” and they stem from what one is thinking about, and from events and fears stored in the memory and the subconscious, which are then replayed during sleep. There is no interpretation for such dreams.

A clear rule about dreams is that lying about a dream is a very serious matter. Prophet Muhammad warned us that “The worst lie is that a person claims to have seen a dream which he has not seen.”^[3] Perhaps a person is so anxious to have a good dream he feels compelled to make one up. This is not an acceptable practice, honesty is a value highly prized in Islam. “Those of you with the truest dreams will be those who are most truthful in speech”.^[4]

The dreams of the Prophets are revelation and the dreams of people other than the Prophets must be looked at in the light of revelation (Quran and authentic traditions of Prophet Muhammad). But what about dreaming about the Prophets, particularly Prophet Muhammad? If Prophet Muhammad appears in a dream and looks as he is described in authentic traditions, we can be sure that this is a true dream and a dream of glad tidings. Prophet Muhammad said, **“Whoever sees me (in a dream) then he indeed has seen the truth, as Satan cannot appear in my shape.”**^[5]

What does Islam say about seeing God in a dream? Some scholars including Sheikh Ibn Taymiyah assert that it is possible to see God Himself in dreams, however he stresses that what a person sees in his dream is not what God looks like. There is nothing comparable to God therefore our minds are not capable of forming a true image.

“...There is nothing like Him, and He is the All-Hearer, the All-Seer”. (Quran 42:11)

Dreams do hold some significance in the way of life that is Islam however we must be careful not to rely too much on them or believe that they are filled with hidden messages and symbols. The great majority of dreams are a product of active, healthy mind and are not prophetic in anyway. It is also incorrect to assume that the prayer for guidance (*Istikarah*) should be answered with a dream. In conclusion we are able to sum up dream interpretation with the words of Ibn Sireen, the most well-known Islamic dream interpreter. On a day when asked about 100 or more different dreams, he said in answer to all the questions, “Fear God and do good whilst you are awake, and whatever you see in your sleep will not harm you”.

Footnotes:

[1] A staunch enemy of Islam

[2] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*

[3] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*

[4] *Saheeh Muslim*

[5] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*