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## Joseph and the Dreams of Many Colors

Understanding the practice of dream interpretation in the Joseph story by using the ANE interpretive traditions as background.

Prof. Jack M. Sasson



Joseph's Dream. Illustrators of the 1890 Holman Bible

### Dreams across Centuries

Millennia before Sigmund Freud penned his classic work *Die Traumdeutung* (*The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1899) and long before the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE professional diviner, Artemidorus of Daldis, distilled centuries of traditions on dream interpretation into his *Oneirocritica*,<sup>[1]</sup> people in the Ancient Near East had cultivated a strong interest in dreams and their interpretations. From the Freudian perspective, dreams are an expression of a person's subconscious, and they teach us about a person's inner life.

In antiquity, however, a dream was understood as a message from a deity, often reflecting an issue of importance to an entire community. In fact, in the conception of the ancients, a dream could affect many people beyond its recipient. Thus, in the ANE, a process of evaluating dreams developed, which included the following investigations: their **viability**, their **veracity**, their **import**, and their **fulfillment**.

#### Viability

First, experts needed to determine the viability of a dream, i.e., whether the report of the dreamer should be taken seriously as containing a possible message from a god. Such a determination took into account both the time in which a dream was received as well as an

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examination of the dreamer. We learn about this process from documents that are non-literary, such as the letters exchanged among the elite.

For instance, at Mari, a city state in the mid-Euphrates region that has left us extensive archives mostly from the time of Hammurabi of Babylon (early 18th c. BCE), a diviner reported to the king (*From the Mari Archives* [FMA], 285),

I have taken omens about the dream of Sammetar (an official). That dream (occurred) at the first watch. It was (therefore) not seen (i.e., of no consequence).<sup>[2]</sup>

We see here that the diviner considered the timing of the dream to be wrong, disqualifying the dream from being a possible divine message.

The diviner could also come to the decision about a dream's viability by submitting test material taken from the dreamer, likely snippets of hair and items of his clothing. This material was then taken for testing through extispicy, the inspection of internal organs from a sacrificed sheep.<sup>[3]</sup> The process of testing is not fully clear to us. In the fullest extent account (FMA 277), a king writes to his wife,

About the lock (of hair) and (garment) fringes of the young man that you conveyed to me: I took omens over the lock and fringes, and they are favorable. The young man on whom is settled the "hand of God" (likely epilepsy) will fully restore (to health), as there is no damage....

Even when the king was the dreamer (FMA, 287), the diviner's judgment prevailed, royal status having little bearing on the decision.

### Veracity

A dream or dreamer's viability did not prove the dream's veracity, however. For this, some sort of confirmation was needed, either through another dream or evidence from some other medium.<sup>[4]</sup> Thus, a dream that recurred within a close interval (FMA, 286) demanded attention. So did differing, mutually reinforcing dreams that occurred in the same night. For example, in one case, a kin of the king of Mari had two dreams in prompt succession (FMA 285-286), both with unsettling signs—a goddess forsaking her shrine and a dead High Priest making eerie utterances. Furthermore, the dreamer evoked her alarm by piggy backing on a cautionary prophecy just then reported to her. This dream is so striking that it is worth citing almost in full:

...In my dream, I entered the chapel of Belet-ekallim ("Lady of the Palace"); but Belet-ekallim was not in residence! Moreover, the statues before her were not there either. Seeing this, I broke into weeping. This dream of mine occurred during the first watch. I then turned around and Dada, priest of the Bisra Ištar, was standing at the gate of Belet-ekallim's chapel; but an eerie voice kept uttering: "Return (to me), O Dagan; return (to me), O Dagan." This is what it kept on uttering. Another matter: A woman-ecstatic (*muḫḫutum*) rose in Annunitum's temple to say, "Zimri- Lim, you must not go on a journey. Stay in Mari, and I shall continue to be communicating (with you)." My lord should not neglect his personal safety. I have now personally placed sampling from my hair and garment under seal and have sent them to my lord.

The synchronism of persistent alerts via differing media (dreams and prophecy) obviously reinforced their substance, heightening certainty about the dream's truthfulness.

### Import

The import of a dream required an outside interpreter; in antiquity, dreamers would not determine the possible significance of their own dreams. To reveal their import, a dreamer in Mesopotamia, Egypt and elsewhere turned to expert interpreters. Gudea of Lagash (around 2100), a city in the south of modern day Iraq, had his dream explained by his mother, a goddess, who goes on to suggest concrete ways of applying the interpretation.<sup>[5]</sup> Those not as well connected, looked for specialists steeped in amassed lore or with ready access to written

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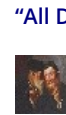
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compilations updated over the centuries, which essentially emulated the format and rules of divination. These anthologies are precursors to Artemidorus's work.

### Fulfillment

Written compilations of dreams also helped determine whether they were going to be fulfilled. In these works, an articulated dream from the past was paired with a significant event that followed it. This would then be applied to any future dream presented for analysis to a diviner. If the dream was identical to that in the book, the correlating event was sure to follow. A 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty Egyptian compilation offered these examples: If man saw himself in a dream copulating with his own sister,<sup>[6]</sup> the results were good: It meant transferal to him of property. But if he dreamed that he was uncovering his own rear, then the omens were bad, as he will be orphaned.<sup>[7]</sup> More elaborate compilations are known from Mesopotamia.

## Biblical Dreams

The Hebrew Bible includes dreams in practically every genre within its pages, and especially so in apocalyptic literature (Daniel and the like). **Viability** was determined by God. In Deuteronomy, a dream's viability was measured by the dreamer's adherence to Gods' laws as revealed to Moses (Deut 13:2). In Jeremiah, we read of examples in which God has to inform a true prophet that another prophet's dreams are false (Jer 23:25-28). The Bible also has its own version of a divination ritual, the *Urim VeTumim*, but we never hear of it being used to check the viability of dreams or dreamers.<sup>[8]</sup>

As in Mesopotamia, **veracity** could be affirmed when messages repeated. We will look at how this plays out in the Joseph story shortly, with the double repetition of each dream, but another example comes in the story of Gideon (Judges 7:9-14), in which God reassures a skittish Gideon by having him eavesdrop on a Midianite who, in reporting his dream to his companion, receives an interpretation that favors Israel, the entire scene having been choreographed by God.

Biblical texts emphasize the **import** of dreams. This is true both of narratives and apocalyptic texts. Their **fulfillment** often generates the plot line of relevant episodes and so it is in the Joseph story.

### Overview of the Context of the Joseph Story

The saga of Jacob occupies half of the chapters of Genesis. Flanked by notices about his birth and death, the story is blocked out by two major episodes (at 27 and 48) in which dim-eyed patriarchs (Isaac and Jacob) give blessings and birthrights to the younger of two brothers (Jacob/Esau; Ephraim/ Manasseh). The tale of Joseph is spliced within Jacob's biography ("This is Jacob's lineage" at 37:2). It begins when Joseph is 17 (Gen 37:2) and peters out just after Jacob had spent 17 years in Egypt (Gen 47:28).

After a delicious pun, יֹסֵף... הָיָא רֹעֵה אֶת-אֶהְיִי בַצֹּן (Joseph... *hāyâ rō'eh 'et-ēhā'v baššôn*), "Joseph tended flocks with his brothers," which can playfully also mean, "Joseph tended his brothers, among sheep," we meet with three sets of dreams, each pair covering similar grounds.

## Joseph's Youthful Dreams

The first essentially places the tale on its trajectory; for even when his brothers had other reasons to loathe Joseph, only when his father joined them as critic did their resolve to distance him hardened. As reported, the dreams themselves (about his brothers' sheaves bowing to his; about stars doing the same, Gen 37:5-11), had moved from describing to practically interpreting, and so had merged roles that were kept strictly separate in antiquity. Thus, when in his second dream Joseph included sun, moon, and 11 stars among the kowtowers, he had already deciphered its **import**. No one in his family misread what he meant and Jacob's indignant interpretation merely decoded the implicit and understood allegory already present in the dream.

With the dreams driving the plot, the Joseph narratives will not find a satisfying resolution until their **fulfillment**. Even as ten of his brothers were bowing down to him on their first encounter in Egypt, Joseph recalled his own dreams (Gen 42:8) and strove to actualize their main feature: that his brother's earthly (sheaves) as well as their eleven cosmic (stars) representations will pay him obeisance. For this to happen, his father's resolve to keep Benjamin away from Egypt had to be broken.

Joseph forces on his family (and on us) some of the most psychologically harrowing scenarios ever found in biblical narratives. Eventually, broken in spirit, keen to embrace his long-lost son, but also seduced by pharaoh's promised land (Gen 45:19-20), Jacob abandons the Promised Land, receiving divine approbation while already on his way (Gen 46:1-5). He was to return there as a mummified corpse (Gen 50:1-14). His descendants, however, would enter an exile and enslavement that swallowed many centuries. So much for the gift of Joseph's success.

### Dreams in Pharaoh's court

The other two sets of dream-sequences embedded in the Joseph story prove more prosaic in their adherence to ancient oneiric tenets and criteria: They feature dreamers but also interpreters; their **viability** is bolstered by the proximity of manifestations; their **veracity** is hardly in doubt, given their origin and purpose; and their **import** is promptly fulfilled in one case, in the other eventually so.

#### The Cup-Bearer and the Chief Baker

The first set (Gen 40) involves two major officials in pharaoh's court, both disgraced, having a dream on the same night. The first (a cup-bearer) had a dream gravitating to the benign. The second (the chief baker) needed reassurance before reporting, for his dream was ominous. As often occurs in divination and dream interpretation, the exegesis depended on coordinating numbers (3 branches/baskets = 3 days) and on establishing meanings for the same idiom that prove opposite in consequence: *nāšā' 'et-rō' š*, "to lift up the head" of someone is metaphoric for "honoring" and concrete for "decapitating." Eventually, one official was honored while the other beheaded.

#### Pharaoh's Dreams

The second set of dreams came to pharaoh in the same night, both were so clearly duplicate in their use of numbers and symbols that they must be significant dreams from a deity. Their meaning is so patently ominous and transparent, that it strains credulity when no one in Pharaoh's kingdom could decipher them. Seizing the occasion, Joseph reassured pharaoh that whatever the contents of the dreams, God would realize for them a good outcome (Gen 41:16).

Listening to pharaoh's dreams, Joseph audaciously charted their **import** into a libretto for a successful **fulfillment**. Joseph was clearly acting beyond the duty of a dream interpreter, much as Gudea's divine interpreter had done (see above). In fact, Joseph was setting himself on the path toward a felicitous fulfillment of his own, earlier dreams.



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[1] A good translation of the work is accessible online at <http://www.attalus.org/translate/artemidorus.html>.

[2] Cited documents are drawn from Jack M. Sasson, *From the Mari Archives: An Anthology of Old Babylonian Letters* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2015), where can be found documentation and bibliography. On pp. 271-293 will be found many letters that treat divination, prophecy, visions, dreams, natural phenomena, and ordeals.

[3] Editor's note: For more on extispicy and similar divination practices, see Uri Gabbay's TABS essay, "[The Practice of Divination in the Ancient Near East.](#)"

[4] Homer's Penelope (*Odyssey* 19:562-67) distinguished between a deceitful dream (originating in the Gates of Ivory) and a truthful one (arising from the Gates of Horns).

[5] The documents is translated at <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.2.1.7#>

[6] In the section on dream interpretation in the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of b. *Berakhot*, we read (57a):

הבא על אחותו בחלום יצפה	He who dreams of having intercourse with his sister may hope
לחכמה, שנאמר אמר לחכמה	for wisdom, as it is said, "Say to Wisdom, you are my sister"
.אחתי את.	(Prov 7:4).

[7] From Robert K. Rittner in *The Context of Scripture* (Leiden, 1997), I:50-52. The compendia from ancient Mesopotamia were much more elaborate and diverse; see A. Leo Oppenheim, *The Interpretation of Dreams in the Ancient Near East* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1956).

[8] Editor's note: For more on the *Urim VeTumim* and a survey of suggestions of what this may have been, see the TABS essay, "[The Urim VeTumim.](#)"

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