

Crossing biblical dreams and contemporary dreamers

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Locating biblical dreams

THE BIBLE IS FAIRLY CONSISTENT ABOUT DREAMS, not that it projects only one viewpoint, but the immediately relevant texts can be sorted into a few piles. There is a general consensus across time, testaments, books and genres that dreams are one of God's modes of communication.¹ But riding close to that assertion comes the caveat that not everyone announcing divine visitation can be believed;² in fact, such claims are dangerous, presumably because untested. Dreams are also acknowledged to be a common human phenomenon: sometimes healthy and helpful,³ sometimes futile and misleading.⁴ Some biblical characters dream but divulge sparse information;⁵ others dream in more detail.⁶ From the set of those who dream in some textual detail, it is useful to make one more sorting. In the majority of instances, the fuller dreams seem to be of primary interest for their immediate, practical, allegorical content: so Jacob learns how to breed sheep (Genesis 31), Gideon receives military intelligence (Judges 7), Daniel copes at court (Daniel 1, 2, 4, 5, 7), and Mordecai sees the future with clarity (Esther 1, Greek version). In these episodes, the dreams exist for the sake of interpretation.

The dreamer most useful for present purposes remains Joseph of Genesis 37—50, whose dreams are not immediately apparent as divine, nor is their impact accessible for years. And though there are allegorical dreams in the story, his own are red herrings when read too didactically. So Joseph is our dreamer of choice here, with insights from his dream experiences being ploughed back into other dreams – both biblical and our own personal texts. It should also be clear by the end of the piece that the resourceful need not limit themselves to dreams per se but may investigate visions, trances, parables, proverbs and other imaginative texts. But in order to proceed responsibly with Joseph's dreams we must first clarify what we are aiming to accomplish and how it can be done.

Clarifying the task at hand

How do contemporary dreamers approach biblical dreams? To read Joseph's dreams well touches the heart of our biblical engagement: how to read that text with sufficient depth to sustain the lives we lead over the long haul, such as those may be. It is my consistent experience that most serious, committed Christians encounter Scripture primarily in the finite and limited set of tiny snippets heard liturgically and preached often rather poorly. Over time, the sameness kills our taste and interest, whether we acknowledge the fact consciously or not.⁷ The story of Joseph's dreams is a good place to seek some alternative interpretation strategies.⁸

We may first ask some questions to bring to consciousness our underlying assumptions. Do we think that biblical characters are fundamentally like us or not? When they dream, is it essentially the same as when we do so or different in kind? A related question: do we understand God to act in fundamentally the same way now as then, or have divine modes changed? Do biblical stories tap us on the shoulder primarily to offer us role models or something more nuanced? Underlying and uniting these queries is the matter of how Scripture addresses us and we engage it. If the biblical characters are 'special', or if God has changed mode, or if the characters are primarily to be imitated (or eschewed), then our appropriation will go one way; if we choose to assume some basic continuities and a wider surface of exposure, then it will go differently.

My suggestion is that we assume God acted with Joseph much as with us. Genesis itself underlines that unlike his forebears, Joseph had no dramatic experiences of God. His dreams come without divine labels, as is the case with ours. Though sometimes biblical characters function for us to imitate, that is far from their only contribution. The North American journalist Richard Rodriguez, who self-identifies as a gay, Hispanic, Roman Catholic male, speaks about his early educators, Irish Mercy Sisters. They were not role models, he emphatically points out – but much more. He did not need them to look, talk, act in a way he could imitate but to challenge and mentor him in many other ways. It strikes me as a useful point. So as we enter the family circle of Genesis 37–50 we can take our cue from what the characters say and do and from what they omit doing. And since we, standing with the narrator, have considerable information that they lack – both textual and personal – we can bring this to bear as well.

But why should we bother with biblical dreams? How can these few, rather flat texts help our post-Freudian selves, we who may keep lively dream journals and be far more knowledgeable about our oneiric lives than the ancients can possibly have been? This question arises from the question of why we read Scripture, and more pointedly, how we may understand it in ways most helpful to ourselves.

The field of spirituality offers us some language for understanding our quest here. A leading practitioner, Sandra Schneiders, writes helpfully.⁹ She names Christian spirituality as the experience of conscious and intentional commitment to the project of life integration through a transformation of ourselves toward the ultimate value of the triune God. That is, our fundamental concern, the single eye with which we construct our life experience, is the horizon of God's self-revelation in Jesus and through the Spirit, with all that is implied in such a relationship.¹⁰ When we read Scripture, we reflect upon it critically and carefully as well as prayerfully, asking and trusting it to further our transformation. The text, both normative and formative for Christians, offers us many ways of access to God's workings in our lives. But the process does not work by osmosis, particularly when those reading the text are educated, critical adults. A major way in which narratives work is by offering us self-knowledge of our human condition in all its dappled glory. A story like Joseph's dreaming offers us not so much a single, clear mirror for our reflection but a series of surfaces in which the fabric of our lives – personal and social, human and divine-shaped – is represented. It is just such artistry which will engage us here and guide us as we cross into Joseph's dream world.

Characters run the dreams: Genesis 37

The whole Joseph story hinges on the pair of dreams he has almost – but not quite – as soon as the saga begins. In the first four verses of the story we are told by the narrator that Joseph is a younger brother, that he works as an assistant for some of his siblings, that he brings back reports (whether true or false) to their father, who not only loves him best but demonstrates the fact by giving him a special coat. The narrator tells us that the result of all of these factors is that the brothers cannot speak a civil word to Joseph. As we enter the story, we have choices – all of which we can pick up at different times. We may observe and reflect from the angle of any character – not simply Joseph; we may stand with the narrator and attend to how much information we receive over the heads of the characters, of course all the while factoring in our

own cognate experiences. I will not spell out all the complex detail here but just give a few examples.¹¹

Joseph dreams, we next learn. And he reports what he dreamed: sheaves of wheat in varied positions, with no interpretation beyond his spare articulation. It is his brothers who angrily construe it in terms of family relationships, accusing Joseph of royal aspirations. Again he dreams – this time of celestial phenomena, which he reports laconically; and his father constructs of this dream Joseph's desire to be dominant in the family. Joseph either has no more dreams or does not share them aloud – small wonder. Nor, we may note, does he respond to what others said of his dreams, in fact, he never mentions them again. But the dreams, in all their ambiguity – and we need not agree with his kin in their assessment – are out and operative.

What does that mean? As texts, they have been articulated and they now live in common space, not simply within the confines of their dreamer's privacy. Did the dreams come from God? Joseph will theologize about dreams later in the story, but about the dreams of others, not his own. He will instruct two men in gaol with him that dreams are from God, and he will advise Pharaoh, a man troubled as well by dreams enigmatic to him, that interpretation is from God (Gen 40:8; 41:16, 25–32). Are Joseph's dreams from God? Are the family interpretations also from God? Perhaps so. But what else can we see about the process? Joseph dreams about what he has been experiencing: unevenness of family relationships, his own isolation from his kin. And his brothers blurt out what is currently on *their* minds: Joseph's arrogation of the best place for himself. His father – and Jacob is a wonderful character throughout this story – scolds Joseph for singling himself out at the expense of the others, reproaching his son for a situation that he himself contributed to: one coat in a family of twelve children (actually thirteen, if we count daughter Dinah). So the dreams and their interpretation are, at very least, made from the material of the lives the characters are living.

A similar point may be seen in the other dreams of the Joseph saga: the two servants of Pharaoh, in prison for offending his sensitive self, dream about waiting on him, fearful of his disapproval; Pharaoh, with a fertile kingdom to rule, dreams about meat and grain – base of his power – slipping away from him. We can see readily here that dreams and their interpretations come from our rich experience, and are composed from the fabric of our conscious (and no doubt unconscious) lives. Such a claim does not mean they are not also from God, but it does suggest that such a claim does not excuse the dreams from also

being local. In this story, in any case, God reaches for what is lying ready to hand. Our exegesis will start in a local context as well.

The articulation of the dreams is diagnostic, a point made obvious as we watch the family of Jacob. Possibilities abound. Is Joseph teasing his angry brothers, with the energetic sheaves? Or is his naïveté apparent when he follows the first tale with a second announcement? What makes the brothers blurt out the very thing they so hate: Joseph's special position in the family? What prompts them to add reality to the matter by articulating it rather than by verbally heading his aspiration off at the pass? Or is their intent to expose his arrogance before their father? It is impossible to know their motive but highly provocative for us to quiz ourselves. Dreams exegete all involved. The brothers' blurtings instruct us. And how can the father act with such consistent blindness about his own role in the family strife? Is it merely coincidental that he projects on to his son the fault in himself, if such it is?¹² Again, dreams are instructive for self-knowledge. But in any case, the dreams – whatever they have in mind and from whatever source – will now patiently manage the life of the family of Jacob for years to come. How are dreams powerfully directive as well as diagnostic? How do they direct us even while we construe them? So we, with the characters, ponder the significance of the dreams; or have they dismissed them from their minds? Jacob at least, we are told, continues to muse on them (37:11). We now watch for the dreams' continued presence as well, especially if we understand them as communications from God.

Dreams run the characters: Genesis 37—41

The first hint of the power of Joseph's dreams about family positions comes shortly after the dreams, when his brothers drop Joseph into a pit and then sell him to traders who take him down to Egypt (37:12–36). The dreams seem inverted, as Joseph literally goes down before his family. This key episode, over which we cannot linger, is filled with psychological and spiritual insight into what blindness, jealousy, fear and guilt can generate, especially among those who also love each other. Joseph's dreams about relative position continue their effect, as he rises high (though a captive) only to plunge down into gaol: a pit within a pit. It is from that low spot that the reversal begins; thanks to the dreams of fellow prisoners and of Pharaoh Joseph begins his climb upward.

We may note here, since Joseph is prompting us rather than simply acting as a model, that in the text there is little explicit reflection on his

life.¹³ Reading carefully, we note that though the narrator and some characters see and say that God is with Joseph (e.g. at 39:2, 3, 5, 21, 23), we do not hear *him* say it. Such narrative artistry need not imply that he does not think it, since Joseph's language exposes a relationship with God (39:9; 40:8). But the gap in his characterization reminds us that our take on his ups and downs comes from our privileged position at the narrator's side (and from knowing how the story ends); he cannot reflect on his own experience from such a position any more than we can escape our lives to understand them better. We read our texts circularly, implicated in them. The now successful dream interpreter is presumably still very uncertain of whence his dreams came or where they may be headed. For those watching, the position of Joseph relative to his family is indeed on the bounce. But what does it signify?

Genesis 42—44

The next dramatic scenes in the story jolt Joseph into consideration of familial positions, if not of his presaging dreams themselves. That the dreams are organizing the story's topography becomes freshly clear to *us*. For Joseph is confronted with his ten brothers bowing before the powerful vicar of Egypt. He recognizes them as they bow to him, and we (if not he) recognize the dreams. Who is managing these dreams? How are the dreams scripting lives? Are the dreams from God? What does God have in mind?

Joseph himself now puts his hungry brothers through a series of ups and downs; again our wider angle hints that he is not sole orchestrator of events. Commentators are split over whether Joseph is vindictive or forgiving in these scenes: he surely speaks harshly, imprisons all his brothers, finally keeps one hostage, and programmes the family need for food in such a way that his youngest brother will be torn from a doting father when bare shelves force the family down before Joseph again. Alternatively, is he patiently offering his brothers the opportunity to experience something they need for their own reflection? If – and it is one of the options we may take – he is putting his brothers through the itinerary they designed for him, is it with glee, with regret, with increasing self-knowledge, with concern for them? The storyteller leaves scope for many possibilities. They may not all suit the biblical Joseph, but they are at hand for us. Does this dreamer know exactly what he is doing?¹⁴ We are not privy to his motives in detail but will, if honest, read his moves prompted by our own patterns. Joseph weeps (42:23 and 43:30); but why? What might we expect from ourselves in

his place, given our own ups and downs, our own 'father and brothers', our enjoyment of foreign perks or our readings of world hunger?

The question of how characters appropriate dreams presses further here. Both the brothers and the father ponder, each suitably in the role the storyteller has crafted. We heard his brothers squabble over how to dispose of Joseph (37:18–27); we now hear them regretful and even insightful on family relationships during the short hospitality they enjoy in Egypt's gaol (42:21–22); and we hear them panic on the road back to Canaan with their first loads of grain (42:28). The dreams the brothers hated are driving their lives – though how, they can scarcely see. We listen as they uneasily bring their father not only food but an unpleasant ultimatum from the man who sold it to them. There is some progress in self-knowledge as they talk among themselves, granted we never in the whole story see them face very fully what they did to Joseph. The old man Jacob, though not commenting directly on the dreams, does remark pointedly about the tendency of his sons to vanish from the midst of the brothers (Gen 42:36), a comment that cannot have been easy for the guilty to hear and a hint that he knows more than he admits.¹⁵

Since both Joseph and his brother Judah are about to demonstrate by their behaviour evidence of a substantial change of heart, it is a good time to ask how such a thing takes place. What do we advise or anticipate these characters ought to be doing as his brothers wend their way back toward Joseph's powerful self? Again, we are not restricted to what they say or do but can triangulate from our own expectations. We inevitably read the story from our own specific situations as dreamers, as siblings, as pit-fallen or -placed, not to mention as designers of such traps for others. By the time the brothers arrive with Benjamin, the new favoured of their father, Joseph seems determined to detain the young man with him. To trick his brothers into co-operation is again not difficult. But a speech from Judah (44:18–34) stops Joseph in his tracks. That appeal, produced with apparent spontaneity, is a wonderful reworking of the changes of fortune experienced by this tangled family. Without lying, Judah reorganizes and recalibrates the details of their position so as to be maximally persuasive to 'the Egyptian' to let the youngest boy go back up to his grieving father. Judah's angle of interpretation resembles little what we overheard him voice in 37:26, where he expressed concern about gain from sale of his brother. In his intervening journeys up and down in his brothers' presence, he has become able to understand and speak the grief of the querulous old man who is unlikely to survive another diminution of favourite sons. And

Judah's plea, whatever else might be said about it, shows that something also has happened in Joseph; he now abandons manipulation and synchronizes more deeply with the dreams' compelling action, acting to bring his family down around him to Egypt that they may not only eat but survive.

Converting dreams – biblical and contemporary

Selftalk and 'the others'

Before resolving this dream-powered story of God and the Hebrew people, we need to consider what procedures can convert bitter or vengeful hearts to compassionate ones. Let me name briefly two possibilities, drawing not so much on the story of Joseph but on my own experience (and on other biblical passages). Though few of us may have acted toward 'the others' by selling them off, many will readily identify with the brothers' state just prior to that incident: so angry they could not speak a civil word to Joseph. Often in absence of speech *to* our opponents, we talk *about* them, to others and to ourselves. This biblical story, so careful about language, demonstrates the capacity of wordless rage and murmured thoughts to construct reality. The scenes we replay in our heads, continuously recasting roles and redistributing prizes in the great drama of our lives, work as powerful engines in driving our relationships with others. The point scarcely needs elaboration. And yet it is impossible to shut off these verbal streams. Our selves and 'the others' are constituted substantially in terms of our selftalk, for good or for ill. So the question is, how can we reroute such language so that it is less lethal for ourselves and others? That is, what process can we hypothesize for Joseph and Judah and prescribe for ourselves in order genuinely to convert our insistent and often deleterious inner speech into something more generous and creative?

Selftalk and the Other

The Russian thinker and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin supposes that all of our language is constructed in anticipation of response from others.¹⁶ We frame our words, silent and social, with various 'thems' already in mind. He also posits that there is a third presence in our dialogues, an Other, for whose ear we also frame our language. Though not inevitably linked to God, this ear can be the presence of God, who hears and accepts our talk about 'the others' but who can also woo us patiently to greater empathy and a shift of anger. This Other, who implicitly for Bakhtin understands our deepest utterances, who accepts without condoning them, provides the stage on which we can replay

ancient hurts and current injustices in fresh genres of prayer, new audiences, different contexts. In conscious relation to such an Other, we can hear ourselves more honestly and engage more generously with our many 'others'. The transformation for which we struggle emerges from the immediate circumstances of our lives, dreamed and articulated, pondered and appropriated – rather than the need to ignore or deny them. It strikes me as a creative way to take responsibility for the force of our language.

Resolutions: Genesis 45–50 – and issues still unresolved

So having heard our characters move from laconic articulation and angry denunciation to a deeper understanding of the dreams of family position, we can note our growth in insight as well. No biblical character fully 'gets' the dreams. Joseph comes to see and say that God has directed the family paths (Gen 45:58; 50:19–21). The brothers, realistically, are less confident (50:15–18). And which of us can 'get' fully the mystery of God's resettling of this family from the land promised their ancestors to the dangerous Egypt? Famine is not sufficient explanation, since occasional shopping trips were sufficing, and in any case, the family long outstays the famine. Why down to Egypt? Why the exodus up from there? What do dreams mean? How do they mean? Where are they from? How do we manage them? How do they direct us? As we cross into these dream texts, bringing our contemporary issues with us, we confront mentors, not role models. Cued by characters' moves and omissions, hearing silence as well as speech, we can participate with characters in the process of insight from patient rereading. As characters talk, we enter the conversation, with them but also with those engaged by our lives as well. Our language, if we so choose, is also directed to the presence of a God who mysteriously but lovingly draws us to horizons we can scarcely see but come to approach with confidence.

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NOTES

- 1 For example, Numbers 12, Deuteronomy 13, 1 Samuel 28, 1 Kings 3, Job 7, 20, 33 note dreams as a mode of divine communication.
- 2 Suspicion about dreams is exemplified in Deuteronomy 13, Qoheleth 5, Jeremiah 23, 27, 29.
- 3 Dreams which seem credited as positive include Psalm 126, Joel 2, Wisdom 18.
- 4 For this type, consult Psalms 73 and 90, Isaiah 29 and 56, Zechariah 10, Sirach 34.
- 5 Such 'abstract dreamers' include Abimelech (Genesis 20), Joseph (Matthew 1—2), Pilate's wife (Matthew 27). We may think we know what their dreams consisted of, but in fact textual detail is scanty.
- 6 In this category of more elaborate dreamers we may find Jacob (Genesis 28 and 31), Joseph (Genesis 37—50), Gideon (Judges 7), Daniel (Daniel 1, 2, 4, 5, 7), and Mordecai (Esther additions). Others might classify differently, of course.
- 7 I am well aware that there are exceptions: people who hear consistently good biblical preaching, who have found it deeply enriching for prayer. But I fear that most fall into the category of those who find their access to the deeply sustaining riches of Scripture largely blocked.
- 8 The Joseph story is included in the lectionary but in eight small fragments, not even all read in a given sequence. It is not a good way to hear a story well.
- 9 See Schneiders, 'The study of Christian spirituality: contours and dynamics of a discipline', *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 6.1 (1998), pp 1–12 for a good overview of the topic.
- 10 It is clear that spiritualities other than Christian would focus on some different horizon but share certain things with Christian spirituality. Though we will be working with a Hebrew Bible text here, we need not – ought not – immediately match it up with its New Testament lookalikes. That is one time-honoured way to proceed, but it is not the only way and probably ought not to be the first move. This Old Testament story about how God intersects with certain of the Hebrew people does not require immediate baptism by us!
- 11 For some assistance with this story, especially to get a sense of its highly skilled and intricate composition, consult my *What profit for us? remembering the Joseph story* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1996).
- 12 Scholars do well to query the cultural valences of dreams in 'ancient times' (one of the problems being that it is difficult to pin down the specific context for the story) lest we unthinkingly import our own assumptions as though they were inevitable. To work in such factors – e.g., do dreams have to be told? would they inevitably be about the future? can they be personal or are they likely to be more social and public? – simply adds possible readings, and does not really eliminate any.
- 13 There are a couple of instances that can be construed as such: a comment to a fellow prisoner about his own innocence (40:14) and possibly the names of his two sons (41:51–52). But it is sparse.
- 14 Careful attention to the story helps us see how little Joseph may in fact know of what actually happened to him and who was involved with it. The story has all the makings of an excellent mystery!
- 15 Jacob, in fact, never alludes to the 'incident' that levered his whole family down to Egypt; and in his final scene (Genesis 49), as he blesses his sons, his words seem designed to exacerbate afresh the differences among them. Jacob seems unrepentant of any parental sins with which we might wish to charge him.
- 16 Bakhtin's writings are not easy to dip into. The best introduction and context can be found in Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984).