

# DREAMS AND VISIONS IN THE WORLD OF FOLK ISLAM

## COULD THESE BE A PATHWAY TO JESUS CHRIST?

By L.K.A.

### INTRODUCTION

Throughout time, dreams and visions have served as warnings, as guides and sometimes merely as indications of the condition of the mind. They have been great mysteries to solve, keys to locked doors and hidden treasures from days gone by. Within the world of Islam, dreams and visions have often served as yet another purpose: a link to the mysterious space that separates man from God.

Historic Islamic literature dating back to medieval times illustrates a vast interest in the dream world and specifically in the interpretation of the dreams. Manuals were written detailing the art of dream interpretation. That same importance of the supernatural continues to be a part of the Islamic life today. Dreams and visions may provide a unique way for Muslims to seek out future decisions, seek out the relevance of present conditions, and ultimately, seek out truth. Dreams and visions have historically caused a reaction in, for example, the naming of a child or the direction of a job, but of particular note among Muslims is the direct link of this phenomenon with their cause to consider Christ as the Son of God.

Not all Muslims adhere to a belief in communication from God through dreams and visions, but these supernatural forms of communication have been a part of the Islamic past and today carry over into the lives of popular Islam. Not only did God use dreams and visions to bring people to himself in the past, but He continues to use them today as well. For the missionary seeking to reach out Muslims with the gospel of Christ, dreams and visions should be viewed as a critical tool for evangelism of the future.

### A LOOK BACK

The fortieth chapter of the book of Genesis records the beginning of what would become a key part of the ministry of Joseph. Joseph, imprisoned after a setup by his master's wife, is able to ultimately win the affections of the Pharaoh of Egypt by starting with the interpretation of the dreams of both the Cupbearer and the Baker. In the eighth verse, Joseph's telling response to the two men upon their doubt that there is anyone to interpret the dreams is simply, "Do not interpretations belong to God?"

The Bible alone contains nearly 200 references or allusions, if not outright statements, of dreams and visions. "Furthermore, in the New Testament, dreams and visions are described as characteristics of the age of the Spirit: 'young men will see visions . . . old men will dream dreams' (Acts 2:17)."

The history of turning to dreams and visions as communication, then, is based on a vast history. The same is true of the skill of dream interpretation. John C. Lamoreaux, author of *The Early Muslim Tradition of Dream Interpretation*, noted that Muslims "were not the first in the Near East to interpret dreams. This type of divination had a long history, and Muslims were not ignorant of that history." Lamoreaux further stated that the skill of dream interpretation was widely used within the Islamic community and can be traced to the 8th century AD when dream manuals were written to detail the process of interpretation itself.

Within the traditions of the prophet Muhammad himself, the concept of dreams can be traced. "According to Abu Hurayrah, the prophet said: 'In the end times, the dream of the Muslim will scarcely be able to be false. Those of them who have the truest dreams are likewise those who speak most truly. There are three types of dreams: the good dream that is 'a glad tidings from God' (Qur'an 10:64), the dream in which a man's own soul speaks, and the dream that Satan sends to make him sad.'"

Though not all Muslims adhered to the theology of dreams and dream interpretation from the start of the faith, many of the early Muslim dream manuals were written with one common understanding of the goal of dream interpretation as divination. A common theme echoed through those manuals: "There is a God who exercises a providential control over the events of the world. This same God, at times,

uses dreams to inform human beings about those events." Though a general understanding also seemed to be that not all dreams carried a divine message, the possibility for communication from God through dreams was a reality for some Muslims.

It should be noted that within the Qur'an itself are numerous references to dreams and their direct affect upon the lives of Muslims. Readers of the Qur'an can find references to similar stories similar to those found in the Bible of a dream that Joseph has, Joseph interpreting the dreams of fellow prisoners and finally interpreting the dreams of the king of Egypt. Additionally, the dreams of Muhammad play a part in the Qur'an itself, including the dream Muhammad had in which he saw himself entering the sacred mosque at Mecca. After this dream, Muhammad is reported to have decided on a journey which resulted in a treaty that allowed he and his followers to enter the mosque the next year "with minds secure, heads shaved, hair cut short, and without fear. For he knew what ye knew not, and he granted, besides this, a speedy victory."

It should also be noted that even within the history of dreams and visions in Islam, there undoubtedly were certain sects of the faith, such as the mystic Sufis, that viewed the purpose of dreams and visions in a different manner. While a follower of popular Islam may have sought out dreams and visions as a key to unlocking the future, the Sufi mystic, who "strove to achieve a psychological and experiential proximity with God" may have sought them as one more step closer to God himself and away from the cage of their earthly bodies.

## **VISIONS OF TRUTH**

A report by the Southern Baptist International Mission Board, titled *The Bleeding Edge*, details a global study on the nature of persecution and its implications for sending agencies and sending churches. Within the study, the researcher, Nik Ripkin, discovered that of the former Muslims who converted to Christianity that he interviewed, they mostly had three common features. "First, God moves into their lives through signs, miracles, dreams, visions and wonders." Further, the author related the story of one believer who had never met a Christian and had never known of the Bible, but he heard a "voice without a body" calling him to "find Jesus, find the gospel." The man was further led to a specific city where he was to ask for a man by name. "Being an oral person, in tune with the spirit world, he went. The Holy Spirit led him to the door of one of the few believers among the millions in his people group."

Of key note to the statistics of individuals coming to Christ through dreams and visions is their willingness to first believe in the validity of these supernatural forces. Some individuals less apt to believe in the spiritual world might consider a dream in which Jesus speaks to them as a bad meal they ate the night before. Within much of popular Islam, however, communication from God through dreams and visions is somewhat anticipated and longed for. What is often not expected, however, is communication from the Son of God. Ripkin wrote, "These signs, miracles and wonders serve to send the recipient on a spiritual journey, often lasting three to seven years. Most Muslims experience the emptiness of Islam and they cease ritualistically praying in the mosque."

The spiritual journey, however, can be a confusing one for a Muslim who has lived their lives surrounded by supernatural phenomena that is clearly not from Christ but displays a sort of power nonetheless. To understand this reality better, a clearer understanding of the present importance of power encounters must be detailed.

Within folk, or popular, Islam in the present Islamic world, dreams and their interpretation are used for a number of reasons: communication with the dead, diagnosis of an illness, a call to a profession and communication with the saints, to name a few. The author of *The Unseen Face of Islam* related, "Certainly, ordinary Muslims perceive dreams and visions as highly significant forces. They function in a strongly motivating way in most Muslim cultures." In Afghan Turkestan, for example, the doctor will spend the night sleeping in the house of his patient and will base their diagnosis on the dream that they have while sleeping there.

While dreams and visions may not be accepted as normal in the Western Evangelical experience of reality, they play an important and key role in the lives of many Muslims, especially when considering the arena of folk Islam. "The missionary God's method of communication is incarnational. He enters into our world to communicate his message. His revelation is contextual, meeting people where they are. Because many folk Muslims are beyond the reach of the gospel and because many of them are illiterate, dreams and visions are particularly relevant."

The presence of evil spirits is as equal of a reality as that of good spirits within the Muslim worldview. A fear of those spirits is a natural consequence and a desire to appease follows this logic. "A vast range of 'powers' both to bless and to harm, potentially affect the ordinary Muslim in the vagaries of human life among so many forms of 'being.'"

It is not surprising, then, that God would use dreams and visions, such as were used to bring individuals to Himself in the Bible, to bring Muslims to himself today. Ripkin noted, however, that every "manipulation and false expression of the spirit world that existed in the New Testament, in opposition to the Holy Spirit, is found today. Such is the consistent nature of satanic activity where expressions of faith are grounded neither in the Bible nor in community. Fear of the false should not cause the surrender of the truth." Author Phil Parshall also noted that it is not "illegitimate in our day to encounter evil spirits in the name of Christ, to expect God to speak in dreams and visions, to communicate, educate, lead, ritualize, and otherwise structure Christianity in ways reminiscent of the Old Testament and the Gospels. For the Bible shows such means to be adequate as expressions of Divine-human interrelationships."

Such was the case for a girl named Simin. According to Miriam Adeney, author of the book, *Daughters of Islam: Building Bridges with Muslim Women*, Simin hungered for God even at an early age. She recalled that at the young age of four, she heard screaming from a neighbor. Upon investigation, she discovered that the screaming was coming from a woman who was washing her dead baby. Simin followed the woman, along with other individuals as they carried the baby away and buried it. Simin quickly returned to her home and began asking a series of questions of her grandmother, which were all met with answers that placed more fear than peace in Simin's heart. Later that evening, she fled from what she thought was demons coming to take her to hell. At the river's edge, she met a man who asked her why she was afraid. His reply to her fears was simply, "I am the one who decides who goes to heaven and who goes to hell. And you are going to be with me."

It took several years before, as an adult, Simin accepted Christ as her savior, but the memory of that moment at the river was just a beginning for her pursuit of truth, and ultimately of God's pursuit of her. The power of the words of Christ in Simin's vision rang out over the power of the evils that attacked her throughout her life and sought to keep her from Him.

In many cases, the name of Christ can seem just another power rather than the power above all other powers. "It would seem that signs of the kingdom ought to lead people exalt the king. But usually, folk Muslims just want healing and do not care about its source. In other words, people seeking power do not necessarily seek the Savior."

It could easily be argued, as has been illustrated above, that people within the Islamic world have a worldview that is more readily willing to accept the validity of the supernatural, but because they "live in a world of magic and the supernatural, they are not necessarily awestruck by demonstrations of God's power. On the other hand, if we cannot demonstrate God's power, they are even less impressed."

### **A VISION FOR THE FUTURE**

What, then, should be the response of missionaries today who are seeking to impact the lives of Muslims with gospel of Jesus Christ? Bill Musk, author of *The Unseen Face of Islam*, suggested that though dreams and visions are certainly not the only channel of reaching Muslims, they are significant since dreams already "function in a significant way within Muslims' lives. Dreams are in fact strongly visible in the Old Testament, and considerably so in the New Testament. History records the importance

of dreams in effective evangelism of Muslims where care has been taken to note their significance."

One missionary shared the story of an opportunity they had to witness to a Muslim for three hours one evening. The Muslim man said that though he believed what the missionary said, he wanted to wait two months before making a decision to trust Christ. The next morning, he approached the missionary and said that after the missionary left him, he laid awake considering what they had talked about. "When I finally got to sleep I had a dream about making the Haj to Mecca. In my dream I was so excited about being able to fulfill the deepest desire of my heart . . . Then at last I realized that around the next curve I was to arrive in Mecca. Just as I came around the turn I saw - not Mecca, but a huge sign which said, 'Follow the Holy Bible.'"

Certainly, dreams and visions are not the only ways in which Muslims are coming to Christ, however. Ripkin noted in his research that along with dreams and visions, two other common characteristics of most Muslims who turned to Christ were that at some point, they were introduced to the word of God (whether orally or in written form) and that they had contact with a local believer or near-culture Christian in their midst. "These three elements were found in the majority of the Muslim Background Believer interviews, particularly in environments where a church has yet to emerge and in the absence of an expatriate missionary presence."

At the same time, however, there could easily be a tendency on the part of western missionaries to overlook the validity of dreams and visions, simply because they have not experienced these supernatural phenomena themselves. "The interviews show that the nature and works of God have not changed from New Testament times until today. The conflicting views of the West in regard to the Holy Spirit should not prohibit the cross-cultural missionary from humbly acknowledging the miraculous nature of God."

Muslims may be accustomed to power encounters with the spiritual world, but the power of Christ to intervene over all other powers should never be underestimated. Neither should the power only Christ can give for others to accept his gift of eternal life. Missiologist Seppo Syrjanen interviewed one former Muslim who met a Christian doctor and began discussing religious matters on a regular basis. One night, the two discussed the issue of sacrifice and the Muslim was compelled to further consider Christ. That night, he saw Jesus in a dream, holding three flowers in his hand. Jesus simply said to him, "Rise and give witness to my name" and the following day, the man publicly gave his life to Christ in a town in Pakistan.

Another author documented the story of a Muslim who saw in a dream a huge palace with a cross on its roof. He heard a voice saying that the palace belonged to Jesus Christ and only He could open the gate. Sometime later, the Muslim man was reading *Pilgrim's Progress* and saw on one of the pages a picture identical to his dream. It was this experience that directly led to his conversion.

Western missionaries should not expect every Muslim to respond in the same manner to a dream or vision, but instead should anticipate being there for the Muslims and waiting patiently for God to do the work in them. Part of the challenge for missionaries, then, is not always sharing the message of Christ as much as it is being patient for that message to be received and knowing that this may not even happen while the missionary is with that Muslim. Ripkin reported that most Muslims are led on a spiritual journey toward Christ after receiving a dream or a vision, but that journey often lasts three to seven years.

Adeney told the story of one Muslim woman, Esmat, who stumbled into a church after fleeing her country and arriving in the United States. The people were warm and inviting to Esmat, though she consistently reminded them that she was Muslim and came only to learn English. Many months after she first attended the church, she had a dream in which she "dreamed she was in Iran, going down the street dressed in her chador. She had to go through a narrow passage. It was lined on both rows by armed guards. Like walls, they hemmed her in. 'I want to be free,' she cried to the Lord. At once the walls fell down and the face of the man who had prayed for her that day showed through the broken wall." It was some time later, through continual encounters with the truth of Christ, that Esmat finally

came to accept Christ as her savior, but part of Esmat's story is the continual perseverance and patience of the Christians around her.

Just as Joel prophesied, "Your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions," missionaries are continuing to see how God is working in the Muslim world and are asking God to give dreams and visions to their Muslim friends as well. One missionary shared that he and his teammate once specifically prayed that God would send a dream to a Muslim with whom they had been sharing the gospel. "God heard our prayer.

Soon afterward our Muslim friend had a dream about Jesus and was converted."

Another missionary related the story of the day that Muslim man rang his doorbell and proceeded to tell the man living there that in a dream, he had been told by an angel to come to his home. After three hours of discussion, the man accepted Christ as his savior. He was, however, distraught over the suggestion that he share his newfound faith with his wife and he went home discouraged. That night, his wife had a dream that her husband was in a garden, but she was not allowed in because it was reserved only for Christians. "She awoke, rolled over, shook her husband, looked him in the eyes and said, 'Why didn't you tell me you had become a Christian? I want to become a Christian too.'"

## **CONCLUSION**

There are many ways that people who have grown up and lived their lives in the Western part of the world will differ from the person who has grown up in the Eastern part of the world. Their foods differ. Their clothing differs. These things are mostly accepted and understood, but that same sort of understanding must continue to be brought to the forefront with regard to views on the supernatural.

Dreams and visions have been a known reality especially within region we now know as the Middle East dating back to the days of Joseph. Both the Bible and the Qur'an document the stories of Joseph and his interpretation of dreams, not to mention the vision he was given. God was moving through dreams and visions then and He continues to speak through them today. Likewise, there is no reason not to believe that He will speak through them in the future. Instead, the words of Joel once again serve as a reminder that old men will "dream dreams" and young men will "see visions."

In lands where people have never seen the words of God in written form and they may not even know how to read at all, God is still speaking to them and revealing Himself to them through dreams and visions. Within the lives of people so entrenched in the rituals and structure of Islam, God is breaking through with dreams and visions. In societies that are already open to the reality of the supernatural, God is showing himself to be a power above all powers, a name above all names. In the still of the night or the calm of a moment, God is using a form of communication that is not new, but instead echoes through generations. It is not the only way for Him to reach them, but case after case shows that it is one way. Missionaries have a choice to either ignore the reality or dare to believe and ask that God would invade their friends' dreams, too, and reveal the truth of Jesus Christ to them as he has done in the lives of countless individuals.