

TASC*TASC's mission is to rebuild and strengthen the foundation of the Christian faith by increasing awareness of the scientific evidence supporting the literal biblical account of creation and refuting evolution.*Joe Spears, MS, Chairman
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Dreams and Visions

By Phillip Johnson

“All I have to do is dre-e-e-eam, dream dream dream...” This song by the Everly Brothers in 1958 is probably the foundation of how modern society considers the phenomenon of dreams. Rodgers and Hammerstein popularized the concept of dreams coming true in their movie *South Pacific*, asking, “If you don’t have a dream, then how do you expect to have a dream to come true?” Disney movies constantly push the concept of wishes and dreams coming true if you believe hard enough. Dreams in the sense of these examples are basically a desire as to how things would come to be in reality. They are based on desires of the heart or mind. Visions while sleeping is another form of dreams that can affect our reality in ways we may or may not notice.

We were not created to have our dreams and desires fulfilled, we were created to have fellowship with our Creator and to worship Him. Had the “fall” never occurred, we would still have “perfect” fellowship with Him and would actually have all we truly desire or “dream” of. But the “fall” did occur, and now men desire selfishly to be the center of everything in the universe. They dream of being their own god!

It is stated that no single theory explains why we dream. Psychologists have studied the phenomenon for years and still do not have an understanding as to the functions of dreams. Some of the most notable theories are that dreaming helps us process memories and better understand our emotions, also providing a way to express what we want or to practice facing our challenges. Dreams include the images, thoughts, and emotions that are experienced during sleep. They can range from extraordinarily intense or emotional to very vague, fleeting, confusing, or even boring.

In one study, researchers even created a rudimentary dream content map that was able to track what people dreamed about in real time using magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) patterns. The map was then backed up by the dreamers’ reports upon waking.¹ While many researchers believe that dreaming is essential to mental, emotional, and physical well-being, some scientists suggest that dreams serve no real purpose at all.

According to the activation-synthesis model of dreaming, proposed by J. Allan Hobson and Robert McCarley, circuits in the brain become activated during rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, which triggers the amygdala and hippocampus to create an array of electrical impulses.² In this hypothesis, dreams are a collection of

random events or concepts that appear in the sleeping mind and are brought together in a meaningful way when we awake.

According to the information-processing theory, sleep allows us to consolidate and process all of the information and memories that we have collected during the previous day. Some dream experts suggest that dreaming is a byproduct, or even an active part, of this experience processing.³ The self-organization theory of dreaming, explains that dreaming is a side effect of brain neural activity as memories are consolidated during sleep. During this process it appears that memories are either strengthened or weakened, helpful memories are made stronger while less useful ones fade away. Research supports this theory, finding improvement in complex tasks when a person dreams about doing them. Studies also show that during REM sleep, low-frequency theta waves were more active in the frontal lobe, just like they are when people are learning, storing, and remembering information when awake.⁴

Creativity and Problem-Solving Dream Theory states the purpose of dreams is to help us solve problems. The unconstrained, unconscious mind is free to wander its limitless potential while unburdened by the often-stifling realities of the conscious world. Research has shown dreaming to be an effective promoter of creative thinking.⁵

Under the continuity hypothesis, dreams function as a reflection of a person's real life, incorporating conscious experiences into their dreams.⁶ Rather than a straightforward replay of waking life, dreams show up as a patchwork of memory fragments. Still, studies show that non-REM sleep may be more involved with declarative memory (the more routine stuff), while REM dreams include more emotional and instructive memories.^{7,8}

The rehearsal and adaptive strategy theories of dreaming propose that we dream to better prepare ourselves to confront dangers in the real world. Dreams, theoretically, provide the dreamer a safe environment to practice important survival skills. Supposedly dreams tune our "flight or fight" instincts and teach us capabilities for handling threatening scenarios. These types of dreams would be like forgetting to study for an exam, falling off a cliff, being pursued, or any kind of stressful or embarrassing situation. These warning dreams give the dreamer an evolutionary advantage in that they can better cope with or avoid threatening situations in the real world. This explains why there are so many intense, scary, and dramatic dreams.⁹

The emotional regulation dream theory says that the function of dreams is to help us process and cope with our emotions or traumatic experiences in the safe space of sleep. "Research shows that the amygdala, which is involved in processing emotions, and the hippocampus, which plays a vital role in condensing information and moving it from short-term to long-term memory storage, are active during vivid, intense dreaming."¹⁰ This demonstrates a strong link between dreaming, memory storage, and emotional processing.¹¹ Accordingly, REM sleep plays a vital role in emotional brain regulation. This theory also explains why so many dreams are emotionally vivid and why emotional or traumatic experiences tend to show up on repeat. Research has shown a direct link between the ability to process emotions and the amount of REM sleep a person gets.¹²

One dream theory contends that dreams are the result of our brains trying to interpret external stimuli during sleep. Stimuli such as music, a baby crying or dog barking could generate this type of dream. “Another theory uses a computer metaphor to account for dreams, noting that dreams serve to ‘clean up’ clutter from the mind, refreshing the brain for the next day.”¹³

“The reverse-learning theory suggests that we dream to forget. Our brains have thousands of neural connections between memories—too many to remember them all—and that dreaming is part of ‘pruning’ those connections.”^{13,14}

“In the continual-activation theory, we dream to keep the brain active while we sleep, in order to keep it functioning properly.”¹⁵

One recently introduced dream theory, known as the overfitted dream hypothesis, researcher Erik Hoel suggests that dreams are the brain’s way of introducing random, disruptive data to help break up repetitive daily tasks and information. He also suggests that such disruptions help to keep the brain fit.¹⁶

Lucid dreams are relatively rare dreams where the dreamer has some awareness of being in a dream and often has some control over the dream content. Experts are unclear as to why or how lucid dreaming occurs, preliminary research signals that the prefrontal and parietal regions of the brain play a significant role.¹⁷ A strong link has been found between lucid dreaming and highly imaginative thinking and creativity. Research has shown that lucid dreamers perform better on creative tasks than those who do not.¹⁸

Stressful situations and continuous stress in life tend to show up in our dream patterns. Stress tends to generate nightmarish dreams and interfere with a restful night sleep. Research has shown that those who experience greater levels of worry in their waking lives report higher frequency and intensity of nightmares.¹⁹ Research indicates a strong link between anxiety and stressful dream content.²⁰ These dreams may be the brain’s attempt to help us deal with and make sense of these stressful experiences.

How do dreams differ from visions? In the scriptural context, “vision” refers to a supernatural revelation or insight given by God to individuals, often through dreams or direct communication. These visions serve as a means for God to convey His will, guidance, and future events to His people. Throughout the Scriptures, visions play a significant role in the unfolding of God’s redemptive plan. A vision is a supernatural revelation that serves as a means of communication between God and a human recipient, often occurring while the person is awake. Visions can portray dramatic scenes or messages intended to convey divine guidance or prophecy. God can communicate directly or through visions or dreams.

The first vision recorded is when God told Abram, “Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great” (Gen. 15:1).²¹ The first recorded dream of God communicating with a man is when God came to Abimelech in a dream of the night warning him not to touch Sarah, Abraham’s wife. Abimelech obeyed God’s communication and was spared.

God communicated with Jacob in dreams and visions by night. “And he had a dream, and behold, a ladder was set up on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it” (Gen. 28:12). “And it came about at the time when the flock was breeding that I raised my eyes and saw in a dream—and behold—the male goats that were mating *were* striped, speckled, or mottled” (Gen. 31:10). The first dream a dream of revelation about His continued promise to the descendants of Abraham and another showing His provision and protection.

God also warned Laban in a dream of the night and said to him, “Be careful that you do not speak to Jacob either good or bad” (Gen. 31:24). God in His protection of His people will warn others as shown by Abimelech and Laban being warned.

Joseph was known as a dreamer by his brothers. God gave him special abilities to discern the meaning of dreams. The dreams Joseph had revealed that his brothers would one day bow down to him, two different dreams signifying the same truth. Joseph was blessed by the Lord to be able to interpret dreams. God’s plan for Israel was to send Joseph to Egypt to prepare a place for His people while the people in the promised land were given years to repent.

Joseph interpreted the baker’s and cupbearer’s dreams correctly, making it plain that all interpretation comes from God.²² Pharaoh had two dreams that Joseph interpreted for him.²³ These dreams sent to Pharaoh saved both Egypt and Israel. Joseph remembered the dreams he had when his brothers came to buy food. His brothers meant it for evil, but God used it for good.

God spoke and dealt uniquely with His servant Moses! Then the Lord came down in a pillar of cloud and stood at the entrance of the tent; and He called Aaron and Miriam. When they had both come forward, He said,

Now hear My words:

If there is a prophet among you,
I, the Lord, will make Myself known to him in a vision.

I will speak with him in a dream.

It is not this way for My servant Moses;

He is faithful in all My household;

With him I speak mouth to mouth,

That is, openly, and not using mysterious language,

And he beholds the form of the Lord.

So why were you not afraid

To speak against My servant, against Moses?

(Num. 12:5–8)

The Lord now warns about false dreamers and prophets:

If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes *true*, of which he spoke to you, saying, “Let’s follow other gods (whom you have not

known) and let's serve them," you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer of dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you to find out whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall follow the Lord your God and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him. (Deut. 13:1–4)

This makes it clear, even if the prophesy comes true, yet if they say to follow other gods, they are not of God. Jesus also warns us: "For false christs and false prophets will arise and will provide great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect. Behold, I have told you in advance" (Matt. 24:24–25).

God also used dreams other people had to communicate to His people. For example, God told Gideon He had delivered the camp of the Midianites and the Amalekites into his hand:

Now on the same night it came about that the Lord said to him, "Arise, go down against the camp, for I have handed it over to you. But if you are afraid to go down, go with Purah your servant down to the camp, so that you will hear what they say; and afterward you will have the courage to go down against the camp." So he went down with Purah his servant to the outposts of the army that was in the camp. Now the Midianites, the Amalekites, and all the people of the east were lying in the valley as numerous as locusts; and their camels were without number, as numerous as the sand on the seashore. When Gideon came, behold, a man was relating a dream to his friend. And he said, "Behold, I had a dream; a loaf of barley bread was tumbling into the camp of Midian, and it came to the tent and struck it so that it fell, and turned it upside down so that the tent collapsed." And his friend replied, "This is nothing other than the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel; God has handed over to him Midian and all the camp." When Gideon heard the account of the dream and its interpretation, he bowed in worship. Then he returned to the camp of Israel and said, "Arise, for the Lord has handed over to you the camp of Midian!" (Judg. 7:9–15).

Balaam, son of Beor, declared he was one: "Who sees the vision of the Almighty, Falling down, yet having his eyes uncovered" (Num. 24:4,16). While Balaam was unable to curse children of Israel, he still did not honor God. He showed Balak how to corrupt Israel by enticing them with beautiful women. Even with his seeing visions from God his heart was not for Him, he was eventually killed by the Israelites when they came and entered the land.

Visions from the Lord were infrequent when the Lord called Samuel. Saul was anointed king over Israel by Samuel by the Lord's direction. God rejected Saul; when faced with enemies, "Saul inquired of the Lord, but the Lord did not answer him, either in dreams, or by the Urim, or by the prophets" (1 Sam. 28:6). He sinned against God and went to a witch and had Samuel raised from the dead to get advice. Saul was killed in battle afterwards.

God used a vision to Nathan the prophet to say to David His servant:

Moreover, I tell you that the Lord will build a house for you. When your days are fulfilled that you must go to be with your fathers, then I will set up *one of* your descendants after you, who will be from your sons; and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build for Me a house, and I will establish his throne forever. I will be his

father and he shall be My son; and I will not take My favor away from him, as I took it from him who was before you. But I will settle him in My house and in My kingdom forever, and his throne will be established forever (1 Chron. 17:10b–14).

What an awesome promise and prophesy, God told him that the very Son of God would come through David's lineage!²⁴

God also came to Solomon in a dream and asked what he wished. Solomon was given great wisdom that was known throughout the world. This man was the wisest man on earth, yet he still allowed his wives to turn his heart away from the Lord.

The book of Job talks about dream of terror so intense that death would be preferred.²⁵ It also describes our existence as a dream that flies away.²⁶ Elihu asks:

Why do you complain to Him
That He does not give an account of all His doings?
Indeed God speaks once, Or twice, *yet* no one notices it.
In a dream, a vision of the night,
When deep sleep falls on people,
While they slumber in their beds,
Then He opens the ears of people,
And horrifies them with warnings,
So that He may turn a person away *from bad* conduct,
And keep a man from pride
(Job 33:13–17).

“For in many dreams and in many words there is futility. Rather, fear God” (Eccles. 5:7). If God is graceful and shows us or warns us, usually we should make sure we are yielded to him. God is Holy and we should never forget that.

The visions of Isaiah revealed many facts about the coming of the Messiah. His was God's representative through four kings of Judah. Isaiah reveals the heart of the people:

For this is a rebellious people, false sons,
Sons who refuse to listen
To the instruction of the Lord;
Who say to the seers, “You must not see *visions*”;
And to the prophets, “You must not prophesy the truth to us.
Speak to us pleasant words,
Prophesy illusions.
Get out of the way, turn aside from the path,

Stop *speaking* before us *about* the Holy One of Israel!

(Isa. 30:9–11)

Jeremiah also dealt with the rejection of God by His people. Just like with Isaiah there were false prophets who had no dream or vision from God, they were trying to make the people forget the Lord their God. God told Jeremiah: “The prophet who has a dream may report *his* dream, but let him who has My word speak My word truthfully. What does straw have *in common* with grain?” declares the Lord. ‘Is My word not like fire?’ declares the Lord, ‘and like a hammer *which* shatters a rock?’” (Jer. 23:28–29).

Ezekiel saw the vision of God’s presence leaving the temple. He records:

Then the glory of the Lord departed from the threshold of the temple and stood over the cherubim. When the cherubim departed, they lifted their wings and rose up from the ground in my sight with the wheels beside them; and they stood still at the entrance of the east gate of the Lord’s house, and the glory of the God of Israel hovered over them (Ezek. 10:18–19).

He also had warnings for false prophets. “And her prophets have coated with whitewash for them, seeing false visions and divining lies for them, saying, ‘This is what the Lord God says,’ when the Lord has not spoken” (Ezek. 22:28).

God not only gave Daniel the ability to understand dreams,²⁷ He also by divine power revealed the dream that was dreamed after Daniel prayed. This is unique in the Scriptures. Daniel not only interpreted the dream, but he also told Nebuchadnezzar what he dreamed. God showed that He is sovereign and can reveal Himself to any man He chooses. God also warned Nebuchadnezzar about his pride through a dream. Daniel himself saw visions as he relates his visions of future events.

The promise of the Spirit coming is given to the prophet Joel:

It will come about after this
That I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind;
And your sons and your daughters will prophesy,
Your old men will have dreams,
Your young men will see visions.
And even on the male and female servants I will pour out My Spirit in those days
(Joel 2:28–29).

Amos receives warning through visions concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah king of Judah.²⁸ Obadiah received a vision of judgment on Edom and a vision of the day of the Lord.²⁹ Micah states:

This is what the Lord says concerning the prophets who lead my people astray:
When they have *something* to bite with their teeth,
They cry out, “Peace!”
But against him who puts nothing in their mouths

They declare holy war.
Therefore *it will be* night for you—without vision,
And darkness for you—without divination.
The sun will go down on the prophets,
And the day will become dark over them.
The seers will be put to shame,
And the diviners will be ashamed.
Indeed, they will all cover *their* lips
Because there is no answer from God
(Micah 3:5–7).

Nahum has a vision of God’s awesomeness!³⁰ Habakkuk’s vision reiterates that the visions God has given to His prophets will come to pass.³¹ Zechariah warns of shame for false visions and they will not provide comfort to the people.³²

Zechariah saw a vision while doing his priestly duties telling him about the birth of his son, John the Baptist.³³ An angel appeared to Mary telling her how blessed she was and that she would give birth to the Messiah. After the birth of Jesus, God used dreams to warn the magi to not go back to Herod³⁴ and to warn Joseph to flee to Egypt.³⁵ He also in a dream told Joseph when to return to Israel after Herod’s death.³⁶ During the Lord’s ministry here on earth, Peter, James, and John were privileged to see the transformation of Jesus on the mountain, but He told them not to tell anybody until after His death.³⁷

The book of Acts relates God speaking through visions to the early church. Ananias was told by God in a vision that He was also giving a vision to a man named Saul, that a man named Ananias would come and lay his hands on him and he would regain his sight. He gave both of them visions as to His purpose. Cornelius of the Italian cohort saw a vision of an angel and was told to send for Peter who was staying in Joppa.³⁸ Peter had the three visions of the sheet filled with animals while the men from Cornelius were coming.³⁹ He realized that God had opened the door for him to minister to gentiles. Peter thought he was seeing a vision when the angel led him out of prison.⁴⁰ “And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing and pleading with him, and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us’” (Acts 16:9). “And the Lord said to Paul by a vision at night, ‘Do not be afraid *any longer*, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many people in this city’” (Acts 18:9–10). To King Agrippa Paul proclaimed: “I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision” (Acts 26:19).

Paul also relates this vision:

Boasting is necessary, though it is not beneficial; but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a man in Christ, who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven. And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows—was caught up into Paradise and

heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak. In behalf of such a man I will boast; but in my own behalf I will not boast, except regarding *my* weaknesses. For if I do wish to boast I will not be foolish, for I will be speaking the truth; but I refrain *from this*, so that no one will credit me with more than he sees *in* me or hears from me (2 Cor. 12:1–6).

Dreams and visions can lead to error, depending on the source.

Take care that no one keeps defrauding you of your prize by delighting in humility and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, and not holding firmly to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God (Col. 2:18–19).

God continues to warn us against rejecting Him.

Now I want to remind you, though you know everything once *and* for all, that the Lord, after saving a people out of the land of Egypt, subsequently destroyed those who did not believe. And angels who did not keep their own domain but abandoned their proper dwelling place, *these* He has kept in eternal restraints under darkness for the judgment of the great day, just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them, since they in the same way as these *angels* indulged in sexual perversion and went after strange flesh, are exhibited as an example in undergoing the punishment of eternal fire. Yet in the same way these people also, dreaming, defile the flesh, reject authority, and speak abusively of *angelic* majesties (Jude 5–8).

The whole book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ to the apostle John is a vision. It reveals the future and the great promises of God to His people. The warning to the churches in the seven letters shows God's mercies and warnings to repent. The book promises a blessing to the reader and also a warning to not add to or take away from the writings of the book.

Like the object of faith is more important than the amount of faith, so is the source of dreams and visions. The object of your faith must be worthy of your faith; Jesus is the one in whom having faith can produce life. It does not matter how much faith you have if Jesus is not the object. Tons of faith in anything else still leads to death. Visions and dreams can lead you to be warned, directed, or informed in some way, but they are insufficient to build theological doctrine. The Word of God is the only dependable source of truth. "All Scripture is inspired by God and beneficial for teaching, for rebuke, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man or woman of God may be fully capable, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

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- ²² Genesis 40:1–23
- ²³ Genesis 41
- ²⁴ See also 2 Samuel 7
- ²⁵ Job 7:14
- ²⁶ Job 20:8
- ²⁷ Daniel 1:17

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- 28 Amos 1:1
 - 29 Obadiah 1–21
 - 30 Nahum 1:2–11
 - 31 Habakkuk 2:1–3
 - 32 Zechariah 10:2, 13:4
 - 33 Luke 1:22
 - 34 Matthew 2:12
 - 35 Matthew 2:13
 - 36 Matthew 2:19–20
 - 37 Matthew 17:9
 - 38 Acts 10:1–5
 - 39 Acts 10:11–16
 - 40 Acts 12:9