

Jacob's dream: Useful for, and enlightened by, current dream research

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Summary. The biblical narration of Jacob's dream is analyzed in the light of current significant issues of dream research, specifically: the usefulness of historical data for the study of dreaming; the continuity theory; the phenomenological relationship between the dream experience and its sources; the relationship between music and dreaming; the latent role of archetypes in the construction of dreams; the significance of dreams for the cognitive study of religions; and the multiple levels of analysis of historically important dreams. Dream-evocative features in the biblical narration are also described, which are given by word-root recurrences and by the use of a "hapax legomenon" to indicate Jacob's vision. This analysis based on current dream research provides insights into Jacob's dream. In addition, Jacob's dream in itself is useful for dream research, because it highlights basic universal aspects of the dreaming experience.

Keywords: Jacob's dream, Dreams and the cognitive science of religion, Continuity theory of dreams, Music and dreams

1. Introduction

In this paper the biblical narration of Jacob's dream is analyzed in the light of current significant issues of dream research. The first aim of this analysis is to gain insights into the dream, highlighting that it markedly exhibits universal properties of the dream experience. A further aim is to show that Jacob's dream, in addition to being enlightened by, is also useful for, current dream research.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides essential data about the dream. Section 3 shows that the basic features of this dream are in close agreement with the continuity theory. Section 4, again on the basis of the continuity theory, analyzes phenomenological aspects of the relationship between the dream experience and the real-life events that constitute its sources. Section 5 concerns the immediate effects of the dream on the waking life of the dreamer. Section 6 deals with the archetypal polytheistic and animistic aspects of Jacob's dream. Sections 7 and 8 focus on dream-evocative linguistic features in biblical narration, respectively considering three word-root recurrences and the use of a "hapax legomenon" to describe the central vision. In Section 8 the point is also underlined of how this vision is closely connected with music. Section 9 shows how Jacob's dream, similarly to other historically significant dreams, can be analyzed at various levels, concerning the actual dream experience, its interpretation obtained by the dreamer, its importance for the dreamer's community, institutional value, and artistic representations. Finally, the discussion in Section 10 focuses on the usefulness of his-

torical data for the study of dreams and on the relationship between the dreaming experience and the foundations and developments of religions in the light of the cognitive science of religion.

2. Essential data on Jacob's dream

Verses 10-12 of Chapter 28 of Genesis describe Jacob's dream with angels ascending and descending a ladder that extends from the ground to the sky (as we will underline in Section 8, in the Hebrew text it is not clear whether the object in the vision was an actual ladder). The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible reads: "Jacob left Beer-sheba, and went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it."

Jacob, son of Isaac and Rebecca, and grandson of Abraham, had set out on a long journey from Beer-sheba (in Canaan, where Abraham and his kinfolk had moved from Mesopotamia), to Haran, where his uncle Labanon was living. His journey had two aims. The first was that he had to escape from the revengeful wishes of his brother Esau, who had been deprived of his birthright. The second reason was that his father had told him that he should marry one of Labanon's daughters.

Irrespectively of any assumption about the actual occurrence of Jacob's dream, we will formally deal with it as with a real dream, because, as our analysis shows, it remarkably exhibits basic universal features of real dreams.

3. Close agreement with the continuity theory

A first, immediately evident, point is that the vision of the ladder is in close agreement with the general theory of continuity between dreaming and waking life, which in the last few decades has provided a useful framework for vast research on dreaming (see, e.g., Nielsen et al., 2004; Hobson & Schredl, 2011; Blagrove et al., 2011; Schredl, 2017). In

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fact, Jacob had set out on a long, difficult, and dangerous journey: The dream reassured him that he found himself in a place made safe by the divine protection that he very much needed.

The terms of this protection not only applied to Jacob's journey but traced back to his father and grandfather, and would extend to his descendants. This point is clearly expressed in verses 13 and 14: "And the Lord stood beside him and said, 'I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring will be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring.'"

These words provide an interpretation of the dream, according to which the terms of the divine protection were characterized by continuity with respect to all of the serious concerns currently in the mind of the dreamer. These concerns regarded not only the safety of the journey and being able to avoid Esau's revenge, but also the hope for a successful marriage and for the safety and well-being of his descendants.

4. Phenomenological aspects of the relationship between the dream experience and its sources

Within the framework of the continuity theory, four phenomena (Barcaro et al., 2019) can generally be observed that are related to the waking events that constitute the sources of a dream:

1. After an initially identified present concern, a second, more important one, can be recognized;
2. A heuristic rule can account for the construction of links among the sources: they are such that the dreamer's present concerns are made less negative or even transformed into positive ones;
3. "Pervasive links" exist, i.e., semantic links among a plurality of sources.
4. The dream experience fulfills a "representative function": The overcoming of negative contents is actually represented in the dream.

It is clear that all of these phenomena characterize Jacob's dream.

Regarding point (1), as we observed above, two other serious concerns, about Esau's revenge and the hope to successfully marry one of his cousins, are added to the concern about the dangerous journey.

The negative situation is thoroughly reversed (heuristic rule, point 2): The dreamer's problems had been caused by Isaac's order to set out on a long journey, but obeying his father meant inheriting the divine protection that Isaac had in turn inherited from Abraham.

This transformation from negative to positive was based on events that ensured the divine protection. These events were connected by the pervasive link (point 3) provided by the concept of "blessing" (verb *bārāk*, p. 5 of the dictionary edited by Mitchel, 1984) : (a) God blessed Abraham, (b) God blessed Isaac, (c) Jacob was blessed by Isaac, thus obtaining his birthright, and (d) Jacob was blessed again by Isaac before starting his journey. The notion of blessing is also important in the biblical report of the dream, precisely in verse 14 quoted above.

Regarding point (4), the image of a ladder reaching to the sky established the direct contact between Jacob and God, thus enabling the dream experience to actually represent the overcoming of Jacob's current concerns.

Interestingly, the inheritance of the divine blessing was a consequence of the dreamer cheating his father and thus obtaining his birthright. In other words, the dream experience reversed this morally negative action into a positive one from the point of view of the dreamer's concerns and wishes.

5. Effect of the dream on the waking life of the dreamer

The continuity aspects considered in Sections 3 and 4 concern the connection between the dream and previous events. On the other hand, the overcoming of negative situations described by the heuristic rule (point 2 in the previous section) acts on the subsequent feelings and attitudes of the dreamer: Indeed, a mood-regulatory function can be attributed to dreaming (Kramer, 1993). In cognitive terms, the dream-building system, whose input is given by memory sources in the dreamer's mind (Cavallero & Cicogna, 1993), produces an output (the dream experience) which in turn affects the dreamer's mind.

In addition to acting on the dreamer's feelings, a dream can also directly prompt the actions of the dreamer, which immediately happened in the case of Jacob's dream: "And he was afraid, and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.' So Jacob rose up early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put under his head, and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it." (verses 17-18) Jacob also changed the name of the place into Bethel, which means "house of God".

The dreamer thus transposed the meaning of the dream into reality, by consecrating the place to God and thus definitely establishing his and his descendants' right to divine protection and wealth.

As a consequence of the dream, Jacob felt himself to be a privileged and powerful man, who was even able to define his relationship with God in terms of a vow that resembled a bargain: if God maintained his promise, Jacob would honor Him and would return a tenth of everything received from Him. The biblical text however highlights the limits of Jacob's acquisition of self-confidence: his power depended on God's will; the first feeling he had after dreaming and before erecting the pillar was fear.

The complex episode narrated in Chapter 32 and generally referred to as "the struggle with the angel" can be seen as a further extension of the power that, according to the biblical text, Jacob had gained as a consequence of the dream: he was able to defeat a supernatural entity, who admitted (verse 28): "you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Also considering this episode, the limits of Jacob's acquisition of self-confidence and power are evident: He did win, but paid the price of suffering hip injury while wrestling.

6. Polytheistic and animistic elements in the dream

Historians generally place the Patriarchal era, during which Jacob's dream took place, in the first half of the second millennium BCE. The origin of the dream can thus be traced

back to an ancient epoch during which great cultural and social developments took place in Mesopotamia.

The biblical text was written many centuries later. However, it preserved the traces of the original polytheistic environment. The word that in the above quoted verse 12 indicates God (ĕlo/hĭm, Mitchel, p. 1) has the typical ending of (male) plural nouns, which may indicate a polytheistic origin. The same word, one of the most frequent in the Bible, is also found in verse 14, when the divine voice introduces itself as the Lord, God of Abraham and of Isaac. Indeed, "God" can be plausibly interpreted as "one of the gods", precisely the one who had been protecting Abraham and Isaac, and was promising to protect Jacob and his descendants. The angels ascending and descending the ladder in the dream were supernatural messengers of God (or better Abraham's god). The entity that Jacob defeated in Chapter 32 can also be viewed as one of the many supernatural entities of the ancient Mesopotamian religions. (For dreams as possible sources of concepts regarding supernatural agents, see McNamara & Bulkeley, 2017)

Stones were present in the place where the dream took place, and Jacob took one, which he used as a pillow. (The fact that he used a stone as a pillow is not as clear in the Hebrew text; perhaps the stones served other purposes.) After awaking, he positioned the stone as a sacred pillar. The fundamental role of the stone can be traced back to the animistic religions that worshiped sacred stones. Indeed, many cultures throughout the world have attributed supernatural power to stones (for a detailed analysis of this issue, see the classic book by Frazer, 1918, pp 58-77).

Both polytheism and the worshiping of stones were common in ancient cultures as they still are today though more implicitly than overtly. Jacob's dream thus assumes a universal value not only because it shares general properties of dreams, but also because it goes beyond the frameworks of a defined culture, with archetypal contents. This unique property of Jacob's dream can be accounted for by the fact the written Hebrew text was the result of a long succession of metamorphoses which included a plurality of experiences, tales and beliefs.

7. Linguistic dream-evocative items: word-root recurrences

The narration of Jacob's dream reveals a deep, and of course partly unconscious, knowledge of the psychological mechanisms of dreaming. This is confirmed by a textual analysis of three recurrences of word roots.

In verse 12, an interjection (hin/nĕh, "behold!", Mitchel, 1984, p. 2) underlines the visual impact of the image of the ladder in the dream and prompts the reader to share this vision. The result is very effective: Every time the report of the dream is read in Genesis, the reader shares Jacob's vision (see Fokkelman, 2004, pp. 51-52). The same word is also found in verses 13 and 15. Indeed, Jacob's dream is characterized by a "central image", which, according to Hartmann (2008), "can often lead very quickly to an important underlying emotion or concern".

In verses 11 and 18 the dreamers head (noun *rō'š*, Mitchel, 1984, p. 3), is associated with the stone (noun *'ē/ben*, Mitchel, 1984, p. 6), thus underlining the sacred value of the stone and the close contact of the dreamer with this sacred item. Interestingly, in verse 12 the same word-root indicates the top of the ladder, thus implicitly suggesting

that the dreamer shared the power of ascending to the sky with the angels.

Another stone characterizes the place where Jacob encounters his female cousin: This event would seem to represent the real-life fulfillment of the wish for a successful marriage that was anticipated in the dream. The emotional connection between this encounter and the dream is effectively expressed by Frazer (1918, pp. 78-79): "Under the charm of the hour and of the scene even the hard mercenary character of Jacob melted into something like tenderness; he forgot for once the cool calculations of gain and gave way to an impulse of love, almost of chivalry: for at the sight of the fair damsel approaching with her flocks, he ran to the well and rolling away the heavy stone which blocked its mouth he watered the sheep for her. Then he kissed his cousin's pretty face and wept. Did he remember his dream of angels at Bethel and find the vision come true in love's young dream? We cannot tell. Certainly for a time the selfish schemer appeared to be transformed into the impassioned lover."

A third interesting word-root recurrence is provided by the pillar (noun *maš/šē/bā*, Mitchel, 1984, p. 28). Indeed, the idea of pillar, which Jacob erected as a consequence of his dream (verse 18), was previously referred to in Genesis, because the same word-root is also found in verses 12 and 13 to respectively indicate that the ladder was solidly erected on the earth and that Abraham's and Isaac's God was standing on the top of the ladder.

8. Linguistic dream-evocative items: A "hapax legomenon"

In the context of the narration, the word indicating the ladder (noun *sul/lām*) assumes a value of ambiguity, suggesting a latent plurality of meanings, as often happens for items of the dream experience. In fact, this word is a "hapax legomenon", i.e., it occurs only once in the Bible: The interpretation of the image as that of a ladder is thus somewhat arbitrary or at least incomplete.

As Bulkeley (2008, p. 130) underlines, the image of a ladder evokes that of the sacred towers (ziggurats) which were common throughout Mesopotamia. According to van Wolde (2019), the "*sul/lām*", far from being a ladder (indeed, there are no steps in the biblical report), was, "first of all, the gradient access road of a city, envisioned as a descent road built from the top downwards, leading from the city of gods to the earth." Peleg (2015, p. xiii) considers the vision as "a miniature tale embedded in the Patriarchal Narratives according to the literary model of 'a tale within the tale'. In a compact and symbolic manner, the vision in the dream reflects the attitude towards the patriarch's entering and leaving the Promised Land in the frame of the wider narrative."

In the novel "The Oath" Elie Wiesel (1986) compares Jacob's ladder to a musical scale, and underlines the implications of this comparison: "Through song man climbs to the highest palace. (...) Song is Jacob's ladder, forgotten on earth by the angels. Sing and you shall defeat death, sing and you shall disarm the foe." Indeed, the image of a ladder, or a stairway, evokes that of a musical scale (in many languages the word for a ladder is the same as that for a musical scale). Jacob's vision could be viewed as a significant example of the marked psychological similarities between music and dreaming. In musical compositions, notes go up and down the scale as Jacob's angels go up

and down the “*sul/lām*”. The study of the complex connections between dreaming and music is an interesting area of current research (see, e.g., Olbrich & Schredl, 2019; Barcaro & Magrini, 2020). The relationship between music and dreaming has also been analyzed in the light of the continuity theory (Vogelsang et al., 2016).

9. The five analysis levels

Historically important dreams can be analyzed on five levels: a) the individual dream experience; b) the dreamer's interpretation; c) the diffusion in an initially small community; d) the institutional level; and e) the artistic representation (Barcaro, 2017).

In Sections 2, 3 and 4 we analyzed the individual experience and interpretation in detail. In addition, the meaning of the dream, related to the idea of safety and wealth, went beyond the limits of the individual dreamer and extended to his descendants. Its sharing certainly contributed to the cohesion and trust of the ancient community which regarded itself as being under the protection of the god of Abraham and Isaac (for the empathic effect of dream sharing, see Blagrove et al., 2019; for the stability of dream sharing, see Schredl & Görizt, 2020).

The biblical text provided the dream with an enormous institutional value. Over the centuries, this value was repeatedly confirmed and renewed, thanks to the Bible being read throughout the world. Significant moments in a variety of religions present a close similarity to Jacob's dreams. For instance, Buddha, after ascending to the “Heaven of thirty-three gods” to visit his mother, was fervently supplicated by the inhabitants of the Earth to return: He coasted downwards with the help of a thirty-three-rung ladder, which had been handcrafted by the divine architect Viśvakarmā (see, e.g., Akester, 2001-2007). In Islamic tradition, the “*Isra and Mi'raj*” is a journey that Muhammad took with the angel Gabriel: Over one night, he ascended the seven levels of heaven. Jacob's dream also inspired other dreams. Among the many examples is the vision that Vibia Perpetua had before dying as a martyr at Carthage in the year 203: She saw “a bronze ladder, marvelously long, reaching as far as heaven, and narrow” (Dronke, 1984, p. 2; see also Davis, 2005).

There have been countless literary, visual, and musical representations of and references to Jacob's dream over the centuries. Many of them are real masterpieces. An analysis of this complex, certainly very interesting, topic goes far beyond the scope of the present study. As to the visual arts, we have not referred to the numerous paintings that depict the dream but limit ourselves to mentioning the two ladders carved into the north and south piers of the west front of Bath Abbey: It is said that Oliver King, who became bishop of Bath and Wells in 1495, had a dream with angels ascending a ladder, which inspired the design of this impressive work. Musical compositions inspired by Jacob's dream include Arnold Schönberg's “*Jacobsleiter*”, a complex work scored for a large orchestra, choruses and soloists, which was worked on by the author from 1912 to 1917, and the popular hymn “*Near My God to Thee*”, written by Sarah Flower Adams in 1841: According to some reports of survivors, the orchestra of the Titanic, in the final moment preceding the sinking of the ship, sung this hymn as an expression of hope for divine salvation.

10. Discussion: Jacob's dream offers a remarkable example of the usefulness of historical data for research on dreaming

Historical data have been widely exploited by researchers in a variety of scientific fields (see, e.g., Kwok, 2017). Trivial examples are provided by seismology, ecology, and astronomy: for instance, long-term movements of the stars can only be studied by drawing on historical data.

The study of dreams also makes use of historical data. Firstly, long-term effects are important for analyzing how the features of the initially individual experience of having a dream can trigger widespread phenomena in time and space.

An equally important reason is the fact that some historically important dreams can highlight universal features of dreams very clearly and effectively. This is particularly true for Jacob's dream: The long-term elaboration that preceded its canonical fixation in the biblical text somehow refined and filtered the description by highlighting fundamental properties of the dreaming experience, including the role of archetypes that were more explicit in ancient cultures.

Thirdly, essential properties of dreaming can only be studied by considering historical documents: In particular, the cognitive study of religions has provided data that support the hypothesis of a connection between the foundation and the evolution of religions and the dreaming experience. This point is clearly expressed by Bulkeley (2008, p. 4): “The world's religious and spiritual traditions provide the best source of historical information about the broad phenomenological patterns of human dream life”. Other issues that can be effectively investigated by analyzing historical data are the fact that some dreams can be sources of dreams for other people, and the close connection between esthetic (in particular, but not exclusively, musical) experiences and the dreaming experience. Indeed, significant studies have been based on the analysis of historically important dreams, such as dreams directly connected to religions (Bulkeley, 2008) and highly memorable dreams (Bulkeley, 2016). Another example is the vast literature about Gilgamesh's dreams (see Özcan et al., 2020, and the bibliographical references in this paper).

The value of Jacob's dream as regards all of these issues is remarkable. Results obtained by recent research on dreaming offer an interesting insight into its significance. On the other hand, Jacob's dream offers useful multi-faced data for dream research.

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