

The Role of Pre-Conversion Dreams and Visions in Islamic Contexts: An Examination of the Evidence

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Dreams and visions in Islamic contexts are sometimes put forward as evidence for salvific revelation occurring apart from encounters with human gospel messengers. Reports of pre-conversion dreams and visions among Christians from a Muslim background suggest that while such experiences play a crucial role in conversion, pre-conversion dreams and visions contain little gospel content and play either a preparatory or confirming role for more substantive encounters with Scripture or Christian believers. To assess their common themes and patterns, the writer examined forty-four previously published conversion testimonies containing reports of pre-conversion dreams and visions. People ministering to Muslims and in Islamic contexts can benefit from understanding clearly the role of experience in Muslim conversions and how they can address experience pastorally.

Key Words: Acts 9–10, dreams and visions, Islam, missions, Muslim conversion, revelation

Introduction

In an interview in October 2011, pastor and theologian John Piper was asked what Christians should make of Muslim conversion stories involving dreams of Jesus.² He responded, “Jesus coming to them in their head, preaching the Gospel to them that they have never heard of before, and believing and being saved . . . that I am suspicious of . . . big time.”³ Nevertheless, he allowed for the possibility of “Cornelius type dreams” (Acts

10:1–48), which are accompanied by gospel proclamation through a human messenger. Piper continued, suggesting interest in the phenomenon of Muslim dreams of Jesus represents a “wave” or a fad among evangelicals that is likely to pass away with time.⁴ Piper’s response typifies the response of many evangelicals, which reflects both their eagerness to affirm God’s activity in the world to save sinners and their ambivalence concerning claims God is active in ways that could subvert the authority of his revealed Word. Meanwhile, an essential question looms over the discussion: What do Muslim conversion testimonies actually suggest about the role of dreams and visions?⁵

General revelation inclusivists, (soteriological) agnostics, and some special revelation exclusivists⁶ have pointed to dreams and visions as evidence for the possibility of salvific revelation apart from a natural encounter with the gospel through a human messenger.⁷ In the book *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, R. Douglas Geivett and W. Gary Phillips, responding to such a claim made by Alister McGrath, call for an examination of the evidence regarding dreams and visions among Muslim converts to Christianity. Geivett and Phillips protest, “[W]e are not familiar with the evidence for the claim that many Muslims have come to faith in Jesus Christ without the influence of any human agent. Even if dreams or visions are instrumental in the salvation of some, their precise role in the process of salvation would have to be investigated.”⁸ By examining the

Christian Post, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/why-john-piper-doubts-muslims-having-jesus-dreams-59988/>.

⁴ John Piper, “Let the Nations Be Glad! Q&A,” *Desiring God* video, 40:17, <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/let-the-nations-be-glad-q-a>.

⁵ This article uses the terms “dream” and “vision” according to their denotations in common parlance. The former refers to an experience while sleeping, the latter refers to a similar experience while awake. These definitions differ from how the terms are used in some English translations of the Bible.

⁶ This paper will use the taxonomy in the inclusivism and exclusivism debate outlined in Christopher W. Morgan, “Inclusivisms and Exclusivisms,” in *Faith Comes by Hearing: A Response to Inclusivism*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan, Robert A. Peterson, and Andreas J. Köstenberger (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 26–36.

⁷ Terrance L. Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved? Reassessing Salvation in Christ and World Religions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 200–1; Alister E. McGrath, “A Particularist View: A Post-Enlightenment Approach,” in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, ed. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 179.

⁸ R. Douglas Geivett and W. Gary Phillips, “Response to Alister McGrath,” in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, 196.

¹ Sam Martyn is a pseudonym due to the sensitive nature the work.

² Though aware of the significant differences between the Christian Jesus and the Muslim Isa, this writer will use the name Jesus to refer to Jesus in both his Christian and Muslim contexts, as most Muslims who have dreams and visions are unlikely to distinguish between them. An analysis of these differences is beyond the scope of this article.

³ Anugrah Kumar, “Why John Piper Doubts Muslims Having Jesus Dreams,”

role of dreams and visions in Islamic contexts and Scripture as well as the testimonies of Muslim converts to Christianity, this article aims to offer a modest contribution in response to Geivett and Phillips's appeal.

This article argues that while pre-conversion dreams and visions of believers from a Muslim background (BMB)⁹ involving Jesus or Christian themes should be wholeheartedly affirmed, they are not salvific and are best understood as acts of providence that either confirm the gospel or prepare Muslims to receive the gospel. BMB pre-conversion dreams and visions should be taken seriously. Such reports are too widespread and too numerous to be dismissed casually. The testimonies of these Christians offer compelling evidence that God uses such experiences in the process of conversion. Christians ministering to Muslim peoples will need to hone their theological understanding of such phenomena to avoid seeming reactionary on the one hand, and undiscerning on the other. Moreover, Christians should not be surprised by the prevalence of pre-conversion dreams and visions in Islamic contexts.¹⁰ Such cultures place a much higher emphasis on the authority of personal experience than do Western cultures. Finally, while BMB pre-conversion dreams and visions do not fall in the category of general revelation, they should not be understood as examples of special revelation that are salvific on their own. The evidence demonstrates BMB dreams and visions of Jesus generally do not occur apart from prior encounters with Christian believers, the gospel, or Scripture. They contain little to no gospel content. Thus, they mitigate neither the biblical expectation of a human gospel messenger nor

⁹ This article focuses on pre-conversion dreams and visions because of their relevance to the discussion regarding pluralism, inclusivism, and exclusivism. Post-conversion BMB dreams and visions are a similarly prevalent phenomenon with important implications for such issues as the authority of Scripture in discipleship. In addition, this article uses the abbreviation BMB as opposed to the more common MBB (Muslim background believer). Some BMBs have expressed dissatisfaction with the abbreviation MBB once they learn of it because it seems to root their spiritual identity in their former identity as Muslims.

¹⁰ The importance of pre-conversion dreams and visions in Islamic contexts has long had the attention of Christian missionaries serving among Muslims. C. E. Padwick, "Dream and Vision: Some Notes from a Diary," *International Review of Mission* 28.2 (1939): 207–16, reported on the phenomenon of Muslim dreams of Jesus while serving as a missionary in the Middle East. For her article, she drew on dream testimonies recorded in the diary of another late missionary to Algeria, Liliat Trotter, and classified the various dreams according to types she found patterned in the New Testament: moral warning (Matt 27:19; Acts 26:14), guidance (Matt 1:20; Acts 10:3–5), encouragement (Acts 18:9–10; 23:11), and presence (Acts 7:55; Rev 1:17–18).

the expectation that those who believe in Christ will come to faith in response to gospel proclamation.

Dreams and Visions in Islamic Contexts

The first place to turn to understand BMB pre-conversion dreams and visions is the cultural and religious framework from which they emerge. Dreams and visions have played an important role in Islamic societies since the time of Mohammed. In one sense, Islam began through a series of ecstatic visions of the angel Gabriel experienced by Mohammed, culminating in Mohammed's reception of the Qur'an ("The Recitation").¹¹ One hadith, recorded by Musa b. 'Uqba, teaches that Mohammed's initial revelations came in a dream or a vision while he slept.¹² The same source, along with al-Bukhari and Zuhri, even records a vision Mohammed had while circling the ka'ba in which he saw Jesus (Isa b. Maryam) between the two thieves with whom he was crucified.¹³

Following the teaching of the Sufi mystic and philosopher Ibn Arabi (1165–1240) and the philosopher Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), dreams in Islam traditionally have been categorized into three types: clear dreams providing "true knowledge, guidance, and inspiration," allegorical dreams containing symbols needing interpretation, and confused dreams having "no meaning and . . . merely sent to tempt and mislead the dreamer."¹⁴ Only dreams that come from Allah or from Satan are deemed to have spiritual significance. With respect to the third category, dreams are ruled by interpreters to be untrue if the message or content they contain runs counter to the Qur'an or the Hadiths.¹⁵ This tradition is clearly relevant for Muslims who have dreams in which Jesus appears. The natural question for the Muslim who has such a dream would be whether Satan had sent the dream to mislead the dreamer. On the other hand, there is a hadith in which Mohammed says, "Whoever has seen me in a dream, then no doubt, he has seen me, for Satan cannot imitate my shape."¹⁶ For Muslims

¹¹ Kelly Bulkeley, *Dreaming in the World's Religions: A Comparative History* (New York: NYU Press, 2008), 192–93.

¹² Bill Musk, "Dreams and the Ordinary Muslim," *Missiology* 16.2 (1988): 165.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 164–65.

¹⁴ Bulkeley, *Dreaming*, 212.

¹⁵ Iain R. Edgar, "A Comparison of Islamic and Western Psychological Dream Theories," in *Dreaming in Christianity and Islam: Culture, Conflict, and Creativity*, ed. Kelly Bulkeley, Kate Adams, and Patricia M. Davis (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 190.

¹⁶ Bukhari, *The Translations of the Meanings of Sahih al-Bukhari*, trans. M. M. Khan

who interpret this hadith to apply to the other prophets of Islam, Jesus' appearance may be understood as an authoritative message from God.

In addition to categorization, other Muslim teachings concerning dreams are part of a very complex tradition. Manuals for dream interpretation have been compiled over centuries, including more than sixty—equal in production to the number of commentaries on the Qur'an—which were compiled in the first five centuries of Islam.¹⁷ Morton Kelsey notes that the scientific approach to dream interpretation in Islam distinguishes it from the prophetic approach to interpretation found in the Bible and the early church.¹⁸ Dream practices such as *istikhara* developed as well. *Istikhara* refers to a practice of dream incubation whereby Muslims strive through rituals and prayer to elicit dreams from God.¹⁹ In addition to practices sanctioned in classical Islam, dreams serve numerous functions in contemporary folk Islam. Dreams are used for divination, diagnosing ailments, healing, personal instruction, communicating with the dead, and previewing fated events.²⁰

The point of the preceding discussion is to demonstrate the ubiquity and importance of dreams and visions for Muslims. As Bill Musk notes, "They are not optional; they are a meaningful component of life."²¹ Consequently, dreams are likely to play an important role in Muslim conversions, regardless of what Christians think of them. Muslims expect to have dreams about the things which are most important to them. Indeed, it is reasonable to surmise that Muslims pondering conversion may even take a lack of dreams as evidence they should not convert. This is likely to make many Western evangelicals nervous. To the extent Western evangelicals' concerns are motivated by a desire to subjugate personal experience to scriptural authority and to teach the same to new Christian converts from Islam, they are unquestionably right. To the extent they have absorbed the anti-supernatural bias of the modern spirit that is rooted in Aristotelian assumptions about the world, however, they do well to recognize that Muslim cultures seem much more reflective of the world of

(Lahore, Pakistan: Kazi Publications, 1979), 9:104, quoted in Edgar, "A Comparison," 190.

¹⁷ Rick Kronk, *Dreams and Visions: Muslims' Miraculous Journey to Jesus* (San Giovanni Teatino, Italy: Destiny Image Europe, 2010), 68.

¹⁸ Morton T. Kelsey, *God, Dreams, and Revelation: A Christian Interpretation of Dreams* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1973), 162.

¹⁹ Bulkeley, *Dreaming*, 205–7.

²⁰ Musk, "Dreams," 165.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 164.

the Bible with respect to dreams.²²

Dreams and Visions in Christianity and the Bible

The next direction for exploring BMB pre-conversion dreams and visions involves discerning where they should be located in terms of Scripture and the Christian tradition. Put differently, are there resources within Christianity to help us grasp what is happening in this widespread phenomenon? Turning to Scripture, more than seventy passages in the Bible refer to dreams and visions. Dreams are understood to be vehicles for God's self-disclosure in both the Old and New Testaments. Indeed, such experiences constitute the main initial modality by which God reveals himself in Scripture. Revelations obtained through experience are only later inscripturated. As John Sanford comments, "Viewed from this perspective the entire Bible is the story of God's breakthrough into man's conscious mind via the unconscious."²³ The importance of dreams to the cultural world of the New Testament is reflected in the number of words available to refer to them.²⁴ Dreams and visions even make their way into the church age, with numerous examples occurring in Acts among five individuals: Stephen, Paul, Ananias, Cornelius, and Peter (Acts 7:56; 9:4–6, 10–16; 10:3–6, 10–16; 12:7; 16:9; 18:9; 22:17; 23:11; 27:23–24). This is not to suggest that in the age of a closed canon, dreams and visions function similarly to the way they functioned in biblical times. The New Testament offers clear warnings about such visions (e.g., Gal 1:8). Still, a wholly negative attitude that dismisses any role for experience outright is clearly inconsonant with Scripture.

Such an attitude also diverges from the understanding of dreams and visions that dominated the early church. Kelsey notes that nearly every

²² Kelsey, *God, Dreams, and Revelation*, 67, comments regarding Aristotle's view of dreams, "According to Aristotle man is in contact only with the world of sense experience, which he comes to understand through his reason. Since there is no experienceable non-physical world from which dreams may emerge, they cannot be seen as anything but residual impressions left upon the soul by the previous day's activities."

²³ John A. Sanford, *Dreams: God's Forgotten Language* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1968), 116.

²⁴ Kelsey, *God, Dreams and Revelation*, 81–85, lists several of them: *ὄναρ* ("dream"), *ἐνύπνιον* ("vision seen in sleep"), *ὄραμα* ("vision"), *ὄρασις* ("vision"), *ὄπτασία* ("vision"), *ἔκστασις* ("trance"), *γίνομαι ἐν πνεύματι* ("to become in the Spirit"), *ἵστημι* ("to stand by"), *βλέπω* ("to see" or "to perceive"), *ἀποκάλυψις* ("revelation").

major figure in the first millennium of Christianity—the apostolic fathers, Justin, Origen, Tertullian, Cyprian, Athanasius, Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, Chrysostom, Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome—expressed a positive attitude toward the role of dreams in the Christian life.²⁵ Kelsey contends that a shift only began to take place with the recovery of Aristotle in the theology of Aquinas. Aquinas, who was pulled between Aristotle's naturalistic understanding of dreams and the tradition of the church's positive teaching regarding dreams, simply opted to avoid the phenomenon. And so it has continued in the church to the present day.²⁶

Christians are not obligated to embrace an unrestricted continuationist understanding of New Testament signs and wonders in order to accommodate BMB pre-conversion dreams and visions. It is sufficient to believe God may reveal himself in any way he chooses, but that human experience must be subordinated to his “more fully confirmed” prophetic Word (2 Pet 1:19). Scripture and tradition permit a more open and positive—if cautious—attitude toward dreams and visions than is typically afforded to them in Western Christianity.

Characteristics of BMB Pre-Conversion Dreams and Visions

The best way to understand better BMB pre-conversion dreams and visions is to examine closely BMB testimonies that mention them. This writer examined more than 120 BMB conversion testimonies. Among these, forty-four testimonies included reports of pre-conversion dreams and visions. These testimonies were drawn from eleven different sources, including the writer's own newsletters. Roughly half of the testimonies are first-hand accounts, with the other half being second-hand accounts drawn directly from interviews with BMBs. Relying on previously published accounts rather than a methodical collection of testimonies is admittedly less than ideal. Nevertheless, these accounts share consistent features between them, and they contain ample information to draw some conclusions.²⁷ Further original research incorporating qualitative interviews would enhance our understanding of the phenomenon of dreams

²⁵ Kelsey, *God, Dreams, and Revelation*, 102–63.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 173.

²⁷ A brief word on how such testimonies can be assumed to be reliable is appropriate. Phillip H. Wiebe, *Visions of Jesus: Direct Encounters from the New Testament to Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 98–99, points to two principles that undergird the legitimacy of taking personal experiences such as dreams or visions seriously: the principle of credulity and the principle of testimony. The former refers to the idea that barring some previous experience of a person's testimony being unreliable, “if something seems present to a person it

and visions.

The most distinguishing characteristic of pre-conversion dreams and visions among BMBs is that these experiences occur subsequent to meeting Christian believers and to reading or hearing the Bible. In twenty-four of the forty-four documented cases surveyed by this writer, converts report having encountered *both* Christian believers and Scripture prior to their dream or vision experiences. In twelve of the cases, BMBs report having interacted with *either* Christian believers or Scripture prior to their experiences. In only two cases did it seem clear that no such interaction had occurred.²⁸ These findings dovetail with the personal experience of William Barrick, a missionary to Bangladesh for fifteen years, who observes that all those he interacted with who claimed to have dreams about Jesus had previously had contact with Christians, the gospel, or the Bible.²⁹ Most BMBs describe the encounter they had with Christians as evangelistic in nature; that is, the Christians they met sought to persuade them with the gospel message. Others note how they were attracted to the moral consistency evident in the lives of the Christians they knew. In terms of their interaction with Scripture, twenty-eight individuals report having read or heard part of the Bible, and most of those had received a copy of the Bible or the New Testament from a Christian contact. Additional research corroborates that Scripture plays a far more important role in Muslim conversions to Christianity than do dreams and visions. One researcher reports that according to nearly two hundred interviews with BMBs, “the Bible figures centrally in over 90% of those conversions. In research terms, this is awesome.”³⁰

A lack of gospel-specific content marks another feature of BMB pre-conversion dreams and visions. Themes of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration are generally absent from these experiences. There is no allusion to sin and the just penalty for rebellion and little reference to salvation and justification by faith. A small handful of the dreamers report an offer of forgiveness through faith in Jesus, but even dreams and visions in which Jesus appears as crucified usually do not include a theological

probably is.” The latter refers to the idea that a person's descriptions of their experience should be taken at face value, “revealing the way things appeared to them at the time.” To the best knowledge of the writer, testimonies used in this article meet the standards required by these principles.

²⁸ The remaining testimonies did not address this issue clearly.

²⁹ Dennis McBride, “An Evaluation of Muslim Dreams and Visions of Isa (Jesus),” 18, <http://www.yoyomaster.com/ministry.file/IsaDreams.pdf>.

³⁰ George H. Martin, “The God Who Reveals Mysteries: Dreams and World Evangelization,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 8.1 (2004): 69.

interpretation of that image. Randal Scott, a missionary serving among Muslim peoples, confirms this lack of gospel content: “Dreams prepare people to believe and repent; however, they never (in my experience) contain a clear gospel message.”³¹

A third feature of BMB pre-conversion dreams and visions relates to Jesus’ presence, his physical appearance, and the percipients’ intuitive knowledge of Jesus’ identity. Jesus is present in the dreams and visions of twenty-eight of the testimonies surveyed. His physical appearance across these experiences is relatively consistent. He is usually robed in white and illuminated with white light.³² In a few of the dreams, Jesus is seen hanging on the cross. When Jesus speaks in the dream or vision, he is most likely to tell the dreamer that he loves him or her, to declare the truth of his way, or to invite the dreamer to come to him or to follow him. What is most remarkable about appearances of Jesus in these experiences is how he seems to be recognized intuitively. On rare occasions, Jesus declares his identity, or his identity is not recognized until later. Most often, however, his identity is clear to the percipient. Jesus is a significant figure in Islam, so it could be that BMB dreamers recognize him on the basis of their preconceived imagination of his appearance, but as Phillip Wiebe, whose own research focuses on visions of Jesus in a Western context, remarks, “This [intuitive recognition] is quite inexplicable, suggesting a kind of experience that is self-disclosing or revelatory.”³³

A final feature of BMB pre-conversion dreams and visions is their relative frequency. In a survey of 750 BMBs between 1991 and 2007, 27 percent reported dreams and visions prior to their conversion and 40 percent at the time of their conversion.³⁴ Rick Kronk cites a second-generation missionary in Turkey who alleged “all of the Turkish Christians that he had met in his growing up years in Turkey had come to faith in Christ as a result of a dream or a vision.”³⁵ This writer’s personal experience

³¹ Randal Scott, “Evangelism and Dreams: Foundational Presuppositions to Interpret God-given Dreams of the Unreached,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 44.2 (2008): 183.

³² Interestingly, C. E. Padwick, “Dream and Vision: Some Notes from a Diary,” 206, noted similar reports of Jesus’ appearance in BMB dreams in the 1930s.

³³ Phillip H. Wiebe, *Visions of Jesus: Direct Encounters from the New Testament to Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 204.

³⁴ J. Dudley Woodberry, Russell G. Shubin, and G. Marks, “Why Muslims Follow Jesus: The Results of a Recent Survey of Converts from Islam,” *Christianity Today*, October 2007, 82.

³⁵ Kronk, *Dreams and Visions*, 46.

from six years ministering among evangelical BMBs in Central Asia affirms the percentage is very high.

The reasons for the frequency of dreams and visions are difficult to pinpoint. The most likely reason seems to be the normative role of personal experience in Islamic contexts. Dreams in these contexts are so ordinary they sometimes merit less attention from the BMBs who experience them than they do from Western theologians and missiologists who investigate them. In his study of Palestinian and Israeli BMBs, Anthony Greenham observes that even among converts to Christianity who had experienced dreams or visions, many do not mention them in their spiritual testimonies unless prompted to do so. Furthermore, “The experience of a conversion-related dream (or dream-like event) was not automatically of high significance.”³⁶ From a theological perspective, Christopher Little speculates God may use dreams to trigger a spiritual breakthrough. “When God’s human messenger or his written word is rejected outright because of an inherent prejudice on the part of an individual who happened to grow up in an environment hostile to Christianity, God may decide to use a dream to get through to that person and lead him or her toward beginning the process of converting to Christ.”³⁷ Negatively, Dennis McBride, who is suspicious of BMB dreams of Jesus, cites missionary William Barrick who reports that many dreams and visions of Jesus are fabricated so BMBs will have “a viable [in their opinion] response to those who accuse them of abandoning Islam.”³⁸ Because dreams are considered authoritative in Islamic contexts, claiming a dream as a reason for conversion could mitigate a convert’s persecution. This theory has merit but requires further investigation.

Theological Evaluation of Pre-Conversion Muslim Dreams and Visions

Comparison of BMB Pre-Conversion Dreams with Acts 9–10

Evaluation of BMB pre-conversion dreams and visions should begin

³⁶ Anthony Bryan Greenham, *Muslim Conversions to Christ: An Investigation of Palestinian Converts Living in the Holy Land*, Evangelical Missiological Society Dissertation Series (Pasadena, CA: WCIU Press, 2004), 210.

³⁷ Christopher R. Little, *The Revelation of God among the Unevangelized: An Evangelical Appraisal and Missiological Contribution to the Debate* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2001), 126; cf., Jean-Marie Gaudeul, *Called from Islam to Christ: Why Muslims Become Christians* (Crowborough, UK: Monarch, 1999), 223, who writes, “God’s call is being repressed and pushed back into the subconscious. As a result, it has to ‘raise its voice’ to make itself heard.”

³⁸ McBride, “An Evaluation of Muslim Dreams,” 18.

with Scripture. To frame the discussion, one should ask whether BMB experiences have any precedent in the New Testament. The texts most likely to provide answers to this question are accounts of conversions involving dreams and visions. The New Testament contains two conversion accounts involving dreams: Saul in Acts 9:1–19 and Cornelius in Acts 10.

In Acts 9, Saul is confronted with a bright, powerful vision of Jesus who asks Saul why he is persecuting him. Several aspects of the account stand out. First, together with Stephen's vision of Jesus in Acts 7:56, this is the only appearance of Jesus outside of Revelation to occur after his ascension, so the nature of his appearance is presumably different from that which the disciples experienced after the Resurrection. Jesus' appearance is so intense, Saul prostrates himself before Jesus. Other verses in Acts reference visions, especially "the Lord" (ὁ κύριος) speaking, but the identity of Jesus in these visions is not as clear and the experiences described are not as intense (Acts 12:7; 16:9; 18:9; 22:17; 23:11; 27:23–24). Second, Saul is clearly awake during the encounter. Third, Saul and Jesus are enveloped in a "light from heaven" (Acts 9:3; *αὐτὸν περιήστραψεν φῶς ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ*). Barrett notes that *φῶς* connotes "inward illumination—salvation," and that "Paul understood the event as revelation (Gal. 1.12, 15), but not in the gnostic sense."³⁹ Fourth, it is interesting that in the account, no one communicates the content of the gospel to Saul, neither in the vision nor after his arrival in Damascus. In Gal 1:12, Paul claims to have received the gospel by revelation rather than through a human teacher.⁴⁰ Fifth, though Saul uses the term *κύριε*, he does not immediately recognize who Jesus is. Rather, Jesus identifies himself to Saul (Acts 9:5–6).⁴¹

Both parallels and differences emerge between BMB pre-conversion dreams and visions and the account of Saul's conversion in Acts 9. In many BMB dreams, Jesus appears bathed in light in ways very similar to the account recorded in Acts 9. In one modern account, a man named Khaled AbdelRahman, an Iraqi persecutor of Christians, describes an experience closely resembling Paul's encounter. He reports Jesus asking him in a dream, "Son, why do you attack my sheep?"⁴² Modern accounts also differ from the Acts 9 account. Though some BMBs experience pre-conversion waking visions, most of the reports include dreams. Though Saul did not recognize Jesus immediately, most BMB testimonies report the percipients' knowing Jesus' identity intuitively. Though Paul immediately

³⁹ C. K. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles*, ICC 1 (London: T&T Clark, 1994), 449.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 443.

⁴¹ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 358.

⁴² Stan Guthrie, "Doors into Islam," *Christianity Today*, October 2002, 40.

had personal interaction with a Christian believer, Ananias, Paul claims to have received the gospel through this revelatory encounter (Gal 1:12). By contrast, BMBs report hearing the gospel either prior to or after their experience, but not through the experience itself.

A second conversion experience connected with a dream occurs in the following chapter, Acts 10. In this account, a centurion named Cornelius receives a visit from an angel who instructs him to retrieve Simon Peter from the house of Simon the tanner in Joppa. One unique feature of this account is Luke's description of Cornelius's character. In addition to describing him as "God-fearing" (Acts 10:2; *φοβούμενος τὸν θεόν*), Luke uses a word meaning "devout" (Acts 10:2; *εὐσεβής*), which is used in only one other place in the New Testament, 2 Peter 2:9. Luke also reports that Cornelius gave generously to the poor and prayed constantly. Cornelius even experiences the vision as he is praying (Acts 10:30). Clearly, Luke means for the reader to understand that God has been at work in Cornelius's life prior to the experience of this vision. At the same time, the controversy that ensues over Cornelius's conversion indicates he was not a full proselyte to Judaism.⁴³ Another aspect of the account that stands out is that the angel gives Cornelius instructions but does not reveal spiritual information to him. Later, the reader discovers that the directions were meant to bring Cornelius into an encounter with the gospel (Acts 11:14). Presumably, the angel could have proclaimed the gospel to Cornelius directly but chose instead to work through a human mediator, Peter.

Once again, parallels with the accounts of BMBs are evident. As in Cornelius's life, the reports of BMBs indicate that God has been at work in their lives prior to experiencing dreams and visions. In addition, nearly all BMB reports of pre-conversion dreams and visions indicate subsequent interaction with a human gospel messenger, just as had occurred with Cornelius. Some dreamers even report being given instructions that lead them to the gospel messenger.⁴⁴ It is worth mentioning, based on Acts 10, a lack of gospel content in dreams does not mean pre-conversion dreams should be suspect.

To summarize, significant parallels emerge between contemporary BMB pre-conversion dreams and visions and the conversion accounts in Acts 9 and 10. This lends credibility to the notion God is at work in the pre-conversion dreams and visions of Muslims since such experiences are not unprecedented in the New Testament age. To say such experiences are lent credibility by their parallels with New Testament accounts is not

⁴³ Bock, *Acts*, 385–86.

⁴⁴ M. D., "Unable to Hold It In," *Silkroaders Newsletter*, March 2017.

to suggest they should be expected as normative. The intent is not to erect a missiological rubric by which BMBs' conversion accounts can be judged authentic. It is merely to say such experiences should not be dismissed as demonic or bizarre, and they should not be viewed as threats to the authority of Scripture in themselves. To the contrary, they typically support the Bible's clear teaching on the primacy of gospel proclamation and the role of a human gospel messenger, and they demonstrate continuity between how God has worked to bring people to himself in the past and how he does the same today.

Are Revelatory Dreams for Today?

Some people are not so convinced of God's involvement in Muslim pre-conversion dreams and visions. Dennis McBride is typical of a cessationist approach that rejects a continuing role for dreams and visions in the life of the church. McBride is concerned to uphold the uniqueness of Scripture as God's revelation against any claim of continuing revelation. While he maintains that he distinguishes between a "dream about Jesus, even a Spirit-directed dream," and "Jesus revealing himself in a dream," his approach leaves little room even for the former.⁴⁵ What McBride finds most disturbing about BMB dreams is the presence of Jesus himself. His *a priori* conviction that such appearances cannot happen outside of the apostolic age constrains him to conclude that such "extra-biblical experiences [are] generated from sources other than the Holy Spirit."⁴⁶

McBride even makes reference to "supporters of Muslim dreams," as if it were possible to encourage the prevalence of the phenomenon. The issue is not whether Christians serving in Islamic contexts should promote dreams and visions of Jesus in order to facilitate Muslim conversions. It's hard to imagine how that could even be possible. Dreams and visions of Jesus *are* occurring and Muslims who experience them *are* converting. The issue is what Christians who have the privilege of serving their BMB brothers and sisters should make of these experiences and how they should counsel those who have them. Would cessationists have such Christians explain to the potential convert that the invitation of Jesus to follow him in a dream is likely the invitation of a demon?

McBride takes issue with the use of Joel 2 in Acts 2:17 as an explanatory text for the phenomenon of dreams and visions. He argues that the passage is only fulfilled in the immediacy of Pentecost and at the Second Coming, but not in between. As proof, he argues that if dreams and visions described in the passage continue during the church age, the cosmic

⁴⁵ Dennis McBride, "An Evaluation of Muslim Dreams and Visions of Isa (Jesus)" 8, <http://www.yoyomaster.com/ministry.file/IsaDreams.pdf>.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

signs described in the passage should continue as well. Since such signs do not continue, neither should the expectation of dreams and visions. Samuel Storms offers a helpful response to such approaches to the Joel passage in Acts 2. He writes,

The cessationist is asking us to believe that the long-awaited promise in Joel 2 of the unprecedented outpouring of the Holy Spirit on "all people" (Acts 2:17), with its resultant revelatory activity of dreams, visions, and prophecy, was exhaustively fulfilled in only a handful of individuals whose gifting functioned in an exclusively foundational, initiatory, and therefore temporary fashion! Does this theory adequately explain the text? The revelatory and charismatic experience of the Spirit, foretold by Joel and cited by Peter, can hardly be viewed as exhaustively fulfilled by a small minority of believers during a mere sixty-year span in only the first century of the church. It seems rather that Joel 2 and Acts 2 are together describing normative Christian experience for the entire Christian community in the whole of the new covenant age, called "the last days."⁴⁷

Indeed, such a position not only struggles to explain the text adequately, it struggles to understand how God is actually at work in the Muslim world. One need not give herself over fully to a Third Wave charismatic understanding of the sign gifts to appreciate that God is giving people dreams and visions that prepare them to receive the gospel or confirm the gospel they have already heard. She can use caution while classifying BMB dreams and visions into the appropriate theological categories in order to uphold the authority of Scripture, while at the same time recognizing God is at work in ways she may not expect.

Neither General nor Special Revelation

If one allows for God's involvement in BMB pre-conversion dreams and visions, the question shifts to what sort of revelation they constitute. Are BMB pre-conversion dreams and visions evidence of special revelation in the pattern of how God revealed himself to Old Testament saints, for example? Does their ubiquity indicate they are examples of general revelation that is not salvific, but nevertheless discloses knowledge of God? Are they something else entirely?

Many theologians have noted the inadequacy of the categories of general and special revelation to account for such phenomena as the dreams

⁴⁷ C. Samuel Storms, "A Third Wave Response to Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.," in *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin and Wayne A. Grudem (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 79–80.

and visions described in this article. For example, Daniel Strange argues that “while this separation and distinction [between general and special revelation] is absolutely necessary, there is a sense in which it is somewhat abstract and artificial. Our theological categorization of revelation, general and special, as hermetically sealed compartments can be shown to be rather inadequate.”⁴⁸ Similarly, Robert Johnston argues for a more expansive understanding of general revelation that “would recognize that God reveals himself not only through Scripture and in the believing community but also through creation, conscience, and culture.”⁴⁹ Peter Jensen seems to go so far as to stretch the category of general revelation to include “experiences of God,” and he cites Cornelius as an example.⁵⁰ Gerald McDermott, asserting the existence of “a revelation of a sort in at least some of the religions,” argues for a category he calls “revealed types.”⁵¹ It is “not ‘general revelation,’ because it was not available to all; nor was it ‘special’ revelation of the covenantal kind, because it did not point to salvation.”⁵² Terrence Tiessen proposes a category he calls “particular non-universally normative revelation” to cover the phenomenon of prophecy as well as, presumably, dreams and visions.⁵³

One is not constrained, therefore, to choose between categorizing BMB pre-conversion dreams and visions with unsatisfactory categories such as salvific acts of private special revelation, general revelation about God that comes to all in some way but is only perceived by some, meaningless projections of the psyche, or demonic manifestations. Instead, we can say several things. First, we can affirm God’s involvement in dreams and visions as acts of his providential direction. God has long used dreams and visions as vehicles for communicating with his creatures, and there is no reason to suppose he would not use them as a condescension to the

⁴⁸ Daniel Strange, “General Revelation: Sufficient or Insufficient?” in *Faith Comes by Hearing: A Response to Inclusivism*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan, Robert A. Peterson, and Andreas J. Köstenberger (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 72.

⁴⁹ Robert K. Johnston, *God’s Wider Presence: Reconsidering General Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 8–9.

⁵⁰ Peter Jensen, *The Revelation of God*, Contours of Christian Theology Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 139–40.

⁵¹ Gerald R. McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions? Jesus, Revelation and Religious Traditions* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 13.

⁵² Terrence L. Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved? Reassessing Salvation in Christ and World Religions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 116.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 120–22. Tiessen goes on to suggest that the existence of such a category means that God not only might reveal himself to individuals salvifically apart from normative special revelation, he does reveal in this way.

Muslim worldview in order to authenticate his gospel. Second, we can attest that such experiences are not salvific as they generally contain no gospel content. Just as in the case of Cornelius, it is the message of the gospel that is the power of God to the salvation of Muslim dreamers. In Peter’s report to the church in Acts 11, he recounts the angel’s words to Cornelius, who was told that Peter would come to declare a “message by which you will be saved” (Acts 11:14; *ῥήματα πρὸς σὲ ἐν οἷς σωθήσῃ*).⁵⁴ Third, we can affirm that such dreams and visions prepare Muslims to receive the gospel or provide experiential confirmation of the gospel they have already heard. As preparation or confirmation, BMB dreams and visions lie between the categories of general and special revelation, in what Herman Bavinck describes as the “progressive approach of God to his creatures.”⁵⁵

Insufficient Evidence for BMB Pre-Conversion Dreams as Special Revelation

Some general revelation inclusivists, agnostics, and special revelation exclusivists have pointed to pre-conversion BMB testimonies of dreams and visions as evidence of personal non-normative salvific revelation. For example, Alister McGrath writes,

The doctrine of prevenient grace has been severely neglected in our theology of mission, so that we have overlooked the simple yet glorious fact that God has gone ahead of us, preparing the way for

⁵⁴ As John Piper points out, *σωθήσῃ* is future. This means Cornelius was not saved prior to his encounter with Peter, contra some inclusivists’ claims about him. See Little, *The Revelation of God*, 159.

⁵⁵ Herman Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909), 27–28, describes the relationship between general and special revelation, “The foundations of creation and redemption are the same. The Logos who became flesh is the same by whom all things were made. The first-born from the dead is also the first-born of every creature. The Son, whom the Father made heir of all things, is the same by whom he also made the worlds. Notwithstanding the separation wrought by sin, there is a progressive approach of God to his creatures. The transcendence does not cease to exist but becomes an ever deeper immanence. But as a disclosure of the greatness of God’s heart, special revelation far surpasses general revelation, which makes known to us the power of his mind. General revelation leads to special, special revelation points back to general. The one calls for the other, and without it remains imperfect and unintelligible. Together they proclaim the manifold wisdom which God has displayed in creation and redemption.”

those who follow. In the harshly intolerant cultural climate of many Islamic nations, in which the open preaching of the gospel is impossible and conversion to Christianity punishable by imprisonment or death, many Muslims become Christians through dreams and visions in which they are addressed by the risen Christ. Perhaps we need to be more sensitive to the ways in which God is at work and realize that, important though our preaching may be, in the end God does not depend on it.⁵⁶

To be sure, God is not dependent on anything to accomplish his purposes, much less the preaching of his servants. However, the actual evidence supplied by BMB testimonies fails to support McGrath's claim. Dreams and visions are not being reported as happening in place of gospel proclamation when no such proclamation can occur but as supplemental to it. Nearly all who report dreams and visions claim they occurred after having contact with Christian believers or with Scripture, and many experience them *after* hearing the gospel message.

Similarly, after admitting that all known cases of dreams or visions involve people who later had contact with the gospel through a human messenger, Tiessen asks if we can assume this is always the case. He writes, "We commonly hear of people who come to believe in Jesus as God as a result of a dream or vision that convinced them of this truth. This seems to be particularly true of Muslims, for instance."⁵⁷ The answer to his question, based on the evidence, is that not only can we expect God to provide follow-up through a human messenger after a Muslim's experience of a dream or vision, in most cases we can expect there will be contact with a human messenger *before* the experience of a dream or vision. Even in the one case Tiessen cites of a Muslim experiencing a dream that led him to faith in Christ, the man had interacted with Christians who had discussed spiritual matters with him.⁵⁸

Put simply, the dreams and visions occurring among converts in the Muslim world do not support the claims often made about them. If anything, they support the burden of Rom 10:14–17, that those who can call on Christ have faith, those who have faith have heard, and those who have heard have heard because a human messenger went to them with the gospel, just as Peter went to Cornelius. Nevertheless, a caveat is in order at this point. Just because BMB dreams and visions do not provide

⁵⁶ Alister E. McGrath, "A Particularist View: A Post-Enlightenment Approach," in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, ed. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 179.

⁵⁷ Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?*, 116.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 200–1.

evidence that God is at work revealing salvation apart from a human messenger, does not mean it is impossible he is doing such a thing. That is, the arguments of special revelation particularists are not undone by the realities of BMB dreams and visions; they are merely set back to the extent such phenomena do not provide the hoped-for evidence. And we must still allow for the possibility that we only know a segment of BMB testimonies because these individuals were acquainted with Christians who led them to take the next step in their conversion. Theoretically, there could be many Muslims who have received dreams and visions apart from any contact with Christians and Scripture, have remained ignorant of traditional appropriate responses to such revelation, and have therefore remained unknown. Although, amid the inter-connectedness of the Information Age, this seems increasingly implausible.

There may be other reasons to remain positive about the possibility of personal special revelation. Christopher Little, following Bernard Ramm, argues for multiple modalities of special revelation, of which he identifies seven: oral tradition, miraculous events, dreams, visions, angels, human messengers, and the written word of God.⁵⁹ By pointing to these modalities, Little contends God has numerous means for getting his message through to those he wishes to hear it. He argues,

We must recognise that God is not limited either by the activity of the Church or the spread of the Bible to accomplish His redemptive purposes in history. Just as He employed the modalities of special revelation throughout redemptive history as recorded in Scripture, He is able to utilize them today in view of His desire to call a people unto himself (Rev. 5:9). As Alister McGrath explains, "God's saving work must never be exclusively restricted to human preaching, as if the Holy Spirit was silent or inactive in God's world, or as if the actualization of God's saving purposes depended totally on human agencies. The Creator is not dependent on His creation in achieving His purposes."⁶⁰

Bruce Demarest agrees with this view, suggesting, "Through a special revelatory initiative, God could disclose Himself to a sinner and so move

⁵⁹ Little, *The Revelation of God*, 119–30; Bernard Ramm, *Special Revelation and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 45–51; Strange, "General Revelation," 75–76.

⁶⁰ Christopher R. Little, "Toward Solving the Problem of the Unevangelized," *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 21.1 (2002): 45–62 quoted in Strange, "General Revelation," 75–76.

upon his heart that the person who had no contact with the explicit message of the gospel would respond to God with faith and trust.”⁶¹ Thus, if we expand McGrath’s statement to say that God’s saving work must never be restricted to human preaching *and* dreams and visions among Muslims, the possibility of God working through other modalities still remains open.

Implications for Missiology and Ministry

Several missiological and ministry implications emerge from the foregoing study. First, missionaries and others who minister to Muslim peoples should expect to encounter reports of dreams and visions. They will need to demonstrate openness toward understanding the phenomenon. They will also need to think through how they will respond in a pastorally sensitive manner when confronted with experiential claims. Second, BMBs need to be encouraged to understand their dreams and visions in light of Scripture and be equipped to submit their experiences to the authority of Scripture. Third, dreams and visions should never serve as the focus of ministry to Muslims. Karl Barth warns about the desire to trade a focus on Scripture with a focus on personal experience. He writes, “We may be tempted to find in this material addition of an immediate spiritual inspiration the very essence of the divine conviction. But if we are, . . . we are trying to find a something better which God might have told us, instead of looking at the supposedly less good which He has actually told us.”⁶² Many Christians have prayed for and have called others to pray for Muslims to have dreams and visions to lead them to faith. Perhaps a better prayer would be to ask God to send laborers to the harvest (Matt 9:38). Regardless, even if Christians “pray that the Lord would send dreams and visions to religious others to arouse curiosity in Christ, . . . only the poorest and laziest of mission strategies would end there.”⁶³

Conclusion

Dreams and visions are a part of the warp and woof of the worldview in Islamic societies. They impose their authority onto the daily lives of

ordinary Muslims, offering guidance, direction, and warning. It is not surprising, therefore, that the same God who is providentially involved in the waking lives of all his human creatures is also involved in their non-waking lives, using their experiences to draw them to salvation. When Muslims experience dreams and visions leading them to faith in Christ, they experience them within the context of God’s providence, already active in their lives. They may hear the gospel over a glass of tea with a new Christian friend. They may view an Internet video such as the film series *More than Dreams*, produced by a Christian ministry to Muslims. They may sit down on a bed next to a dresser containing an Arabic Bible. When they do these things, God may intervene in their dreams to confirm the message they have heard or to prepare them for the experience of having their lives changed for eternity.

⁶¹ Bruce A. Demarest, *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 260.

⁶² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, vol. 1.2, ed. Thomas F. Torrance and Geoffrey William Bromiley (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 236.

⁶³ Todd L. Miles, *A God of Many Understandings? The Gospel and a Theology of Religions* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 336.