

Jacob's dreams and ours

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July 11, 2011

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The dream of a ladder linking earth to heaven is surely among the most familiar images of biblical literature. From "We are Climbing Jacob's Ladder" to "Stairway to Heaven," the idea has been deeply embedded in our collective consciousness.

Scholars have long recognized that dream theophanies are a characteristic of the Elohist (or "E") source of the Pentateuch. Vivid descriptions of visions are scattered throughout the prophetic books as well. In antiquity, dreams and visions were considered to have revelatory significance--they were a means by which gods communicated with humans. Sometimes straightforward and imperative, often full of symbols and portents, dreams provided encrypted information, gave warning, determined fates, revealed God's will.

In our modern sophistication we are sanguine about the interpretation of dreams. Whatever images we see and voices we hear in our heads, those of us deemed to be of sound mind tend not to equate nocturnal visions with divine revelation. But the visionary capacities of the mind continue to fascinate us--from the spontaneous, vivid, symbol-laden picture-stories of our dream life to the wildly disturbing and putatively revelatory hallucinations of drug-induced trances. Many of us continue to believe that dreams reveal aspects of our own subconscious not otherwise available to us.

And finally, we do acknowledge the revelatory potential of the imagination, that deeply human capacity to access realities beyond our immediate perception and to synthesize disparate and complex bits of data into meaningful patterns. Perhaps this is the best parallel in our experience to the hypnomantic beliefs and practices of antiquity. With each instance of insight or inspiration that seems to come from

beyond ourselves, we are "climbing Jacob's ladder."