



Fidler, Ruth

“Dreams Speak Falsely”?: Dream Theophanies in the Bible: Their Place in Ancient Israelite Faith and Traditions [Hebrew]

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This book is based on Fidler’s 1996 doctoral dissertation, written under the direction of Prof. Alexander Rofé of the Hebrew University. Fidler’s work is an addition to the recently published literature on dreams in the Bible, the ancient Near East, and postbiblical literature. Noteworthy in this context are R. K. Gnuse (1984, 1996), S. A. L. Butler (1998), J.-M. Husser (1999), Shaul Bar (2001), and F. Flannery-Dailey (2004). (A detailed bibliography on dreams in the Bible is available on Scott Noegel’s website: <http://faculty.washington.edu/snoegel/dreamsanddreaminterpretatio.htm>.)

What are the main differences among these books? Only those by Gnuse (1984), Bar, Husser, and Fidler are devoted exclusively to dreams in the Bible. Gnuse (1984) focuses on 1 Sam 3; Bar and Fidler look at the entire biblical corpus. Fidler’s book deals with dream theophanies only—dreams in which God appears to the dreamer and speaks to him explicitly—and not with all types of dreams. The author traces the evolution of this genre, from the complete form found in the Pentateuch through its partial survival in the liminal theophanies of the prophetic and wisdom literature.

In her introduction Fidler presents the questions she intends to pose: Is the Bible’s attitude toward dreams identical throughout, or are different views reflected in different books? Which biblical authors saw dreams as a form of revelation? What terms did they

use to describe them? To what goals did they apply them? She states that her scrutiny of biblical texts associated with dreams combines synchronic and diachronic analysis. The synchronic analysis examines the function and status of the dream in its immediate biblical context, whereas the diachronic analysis compares the Bible with similar descriptions from the ancient Near East (her understanding of “synchronic” and “diachronic” is somewhat different from that common in modern biblical scholarship). Answering these questions requires a discussion of the dating of the various biblical sources, which Fidler provides throughout the book.

The first chapter, “Definitions, Classifications and Views,” is the longest in the book (ninety-one pages). This methodological chapter considers the various approaches to the study of dreams in the Bible. From this chapter it is clear why the dreams of Daniel (Dan 7:1, 2–27), Joseph (Gen 37), Pharaoh’s butler and baker, and Pharaoh himself (Gen 40–41) are excluded from the book: they are not dream theophanies but belong to other genres (3, 23–24). This chapter also looks at the criteria for analyzing biblical texts: first we must see whether the words “dream” or “vision” (a single English word that renders the four Hebrew terms מראה, חזיון, חזון, מוחזה) appear in the text. This is a necessary but not sufficient condition, however, because it would require us to include almost all of the prophecies in the Bible. Nor do texts that refer to sleep necessarily refer to dreams. Fidler believes that each text must be considered on its own, avoiding generalizations. Here she considers the following passages: 1 Sam 28; Num 21; Deut 13; Jer 23 and 27; Zech 10; Joel 3; Job 33; and Eccl 4–5. What all these texts have in common is that they are not complete accounts of the dream process but include reflection and thought.

The second chapter focuses on dreams by Gentiles: Laban (Gen 31:24), Abimelech (Gen 20:3–7), and Balaam. Fidler defines them as a “feeble theophany pattern.” In all these cases, the divine revelation is described in a faint and pallid light (96) and there is no allusion to an appearance by the deity or to the dreamer’s reactions. One of the interesting phenomena noted with regard to Balaam’s experience (Num 22:9–20) is that the word “dream” never appears. Nor is it used in the Deir Alla inscription. Fidler believes that the word was left out deliberately because the intention was to describe a Gentile prophet and not a dreamer such as Abimelech or Laban. This line continues through the prophetic literature, which deliberately avoids describing the prophet’s receptive state as a dream.

The third chapter (125–200) covers Jacob’s dreams (Gen 28:10–22; 31:10–13; 46:1–5). What all these stories have in common is that they derive from E and incorporate divine promises. According to Fidler, the literary genre of Jacob’s dream in Gen 28 is complex because, in addition to elements of the dream theophany model, it also includes elements of the symbolic dream. Fidler discusses Jacob’s dreams separately from the other dreams

in Genesis because, in her view, they constitute the most complete version of the dream theophany.

Chapter 4 (201–42) examines the other dreams in Genesis: chapters 15 (the covenant between the pieces); 21–22 (Hagar and Ishmael and the binding of Isaac); 32; and 35. Another reason Fidler relegates them to a separate chapter from Jacob’s dreams is that the theological and cultic nature of the latter is different from that of the stories of Abraham and Isaac and they stem from a different *Sitz im Leben* (126). Fidler asks whether the mode of connection between the deity and Jacob is conceived of in a way that is exclusive to Jacob or perhaps to E.

Fidler explains the favorable attitude toward dreams in the stories of the patriarchs by their affiliation with the Elohist source, which was produced in the northern kingdom. She does not assign E specifically to prophetic circles (unlike Gnuse, *JBL* 119 [2000]: 201–20, and others) but to the “multifaceted and volatile social and political situation” in this kingdom (240). Nor does she cite a specific era (Jenks and others suggest the tenth century B.C.E.), although she does believe that the roots of the tradition antedate the monarchy.

Chapter 5 (243–71) examines Solomon’s dream (1 Kgs 3:4–15). Fidler analyzes the accounts of the dream in Kings and Chronicles and compares them to similar dreams in the ancient Near East. She believes that the account of the dream in Gibeon serves mainly as propaganda for Solomon.

Chapter 6 (273–335) looks at other biblical sources in the historical, prophetic, and wisdom literature: 1 Sam 3; 1 Kgs 19; Jer 31:26; Zechariah, and Job 4:12–22. Fidler defines these passages as “liminal descriptions”: they can be read as descriptions of a dream state but also of a waking experience. The dreamers—from Gideon to Jeremiah—are prophets or messengers of the Lord. Fidler does not accept the definition of the story in 1 Sam 3 as an incubatory dream because the story avoids using the word “dream” and has prophetic qualities (286, 290–91).

An excursus (341–60) discusses dreams in the ancient Near East (Sumer, Egypt, Babylonia, Assyria, etc.), including the accounts of the dreams of Gudea, Hattushili, and Ashurbanipal and various texts from Mari. The book concludes with a list of abbreviations, a detailed bibliography (thirty-seven pages!), an index of passages quoted, and a topical index.

The book can be criticized on a number of counts. Fidler’s statement that that she will examine the various stories in their context (ת"ו, Hebrew pagination) is realized only in

part (e.g., in her discussion of the Jacob stories). But the issue of their integration into the broader context is not considered for other texts discussed. For example, there is nothing about this in her analysis of 2 Sam 7 and 24 (294–304). The author does not refer or even allude to the broader corpus of the David stories, of which these two episodes are part. Instead, 2 Sam 7 is considered as it relates to “succession narratives,” while chapter 24 is relegated to the “appendices” of the books of Samuel. Nor is the context of Solomon’s dream discussed. What we are dealing with here is a fundamental problem in the analysis of biblical topics: scholars discuss specific biblical phenomena by cataloguing the various texts that deal with them; this makes them prone to sever the various texts from their context, thereby missing an important exegetical level of the story.

In general, the book devotes too much space to a philological analysis of the stories and the evolution of the sources. Fidler attempts to reconstruct the original portions of the texts that deal with dreams only for the stories from the Pentateuch and not for those from other books of the Bible, such as Solomon’s dreams (unlike D. M. Carr 1991, for example). She herself notes the limitations of the Documentary Hypothesis in her analysis of Gen 28 (151–52). In fact, the difficulties that made her prefer to use other tools to analyze this story apply to the entire method. A comprehensive discussion of the problems it raises can be found in the books by Whybray (1987) and Nicholson (1998). Fidler’s book also sticks to closely to form criticism and lacks adequate consideration of the canonical and plot functions of the stories. For example, she does not consider the symbolic function of Jacob’s dream. The genre assignment of the various stories does not permit comparison of the various elements and their changing role.

The same can be said about the texts from the ancient Near East. These are relegated to an appendix, which means that readers cannot fully appreciate the similarities and differences between these descriptions and their biblical counterparts. For example, one might profitably compare Nathan’s vision in 2 Sam 7 with Gudea’s dream and other construction inscriptions that include a description of a dream or nocturnal revelation (see, e.g., D. F. Murray, *Divine Prerogative and Royal Pretension* [Sheffield, 1998]). Fidler does refer to this comparison, but only in a footnote (294 n. 101).

The writing is generally clear and fluent and almost free of errors. I noted only two: (1) in the English table of contents, “Balaam” is given using the German spelling, “Bileam”; (2) the transliteration into Hebrew of “Heaton” is inconsistent (היטון in the text but איטון in the bibliographical abbreviations).

Although the bibliography has been updated to reflect material published since the date of Fidler’s dissertation, some relevant commentaries and studies are missing. These include Sara Japhet on Chronicles (OTL; 1993), Milgrom on Numbers (JPS; 1990), and

Mulder on Kings (HCOT; 1998). Important studies published in the last few years on Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, and the like are also omitted. Nor is there any reference to the extensive studies of dreams by Bar (2001) and Flannery-Dailey (2004).

None of this criticism detracts from the importance of the book, however. It makes a significant contribution to the study of dreams in the Bible, their comparison to similar accounts from the ancient Near East, the study of the history of prophecy, and especially the unveiling of the diverse biblical voices relating to them. Fidler's book, which is much more detailed and profound than Bar's, is of special importance to Hebrew readers, because it is the first book on the subject published in Hebrew.