

God Still Speaks:

Exploring God's Communication Through Angels, Dreams, and Prophets

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Introduction

There continues to be significant controversy over the methods God employs to communicate with people. Recently John MacArthur has harangued the charismatic movement in such a bold manner that even conservative Evangelicals are segregated on his conclusions. There are many who claim that revelation ceased with the closing of the canon of Scripture. The alternative end of the spectrum, generally the charismatic movement, concludes that God is speaking in copious ways, but often these views conclude that God distributes *new* revelation not yet implicit within Scripture.¹ There seems to be sufficient evidence that a worthwhile middle ground exists which is always congruent with the Bible, never minimizing it, that allows God to continue to unfold His plan in the world by continual communication with mankind in order to answer prayer, give direction, and draw the elect to Himself. The objective of this paper is to demonstrate the history of God's employment of angels, prophets, and dreams/visions to communicate with people throughout history and further display that the Bible never infers that these modes of communication will suspend prior to the return of Christ. Thus, it should be concluded that God is still interacting intentionally with people in many of the same ways displayed within Scripture.

Angels, prophets, and dreams were typical ways in which God communicated throughout the Old and New Testaments. These modes of communication are normative. Nonetheless, there seems to be a chasm separating the two ways in which people respond to these phenomena. On the one hand, a considerable amount of conservative Evangelicals are hesitant to believe that

¹ It is important to remark that this is not the belief of the Assemblies of God, see Guy P. Duffield and Nathaniel M. Van Cleave, *Foundations of Pentecostal Theology* (Los Angeles, CA: Creation House, 2008), 344-347. There are, however, other neo-Pentecostal traditions that do hold to this stance of new, authoritative revelation. See John MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1993), 54-71, and Cecil M. Robeck Jr., "Written Prophecies: A Question of Authority", *Pneuma* 2, no. 2 (Fall 1980): 26-45.

God still employs these mediums of communication today. Amy Plantinga Pauw comments on how common it is for Christians to regard such experiences with speculation and doubt if they have not themselves had such an experience.² H. Richard Niebuhr rightly assesses the human condition when he comments, "we are inclined to regard beliefs to be speculative which are not found on analyses we have not ourselves made."³ This reluctance to believe such things, however, is not necessarily a negative thing, for the opposite opinion assumes whole-hearted belief bordering on naiveté. Bookshelves are filled with supposed interactions with the supernatural. At the time of the writing of this essay, two books concerning trips to heaven and back are ranked in the top two spots on the New York Times bestsellers list.⁴ There is no lack of literature and media dedicated to angels, demons, and other supernatural phenomena. The issue to be dealt with is not the supernatural - for we know that the supernatural realm is legitimate - but stories of supernatural phenomena and experiences that are incongruent with what the Bible teaches. While Neibuhr's thoughts are true of the human experience, this is assuredly not the way in which spiritual things are discerned. Being swallowed by a whale, experiencing the splitting of a sea, and walking on water are not common occurrences – yet they must be believed based on the fact that the Word of God claims them to be true. This paper, therefore, will reference experiences, but the true test of valid supernatural phenomena is whether or not the Bible affirms their validity on a continual basis. Furthermore, it needs to be established whether or not these occurrences found in the Bible are meant for people outside of the biblical time periods. The conclusion, as will be exhibited, is affirmative.

² Amy Plantinga Pauw, "Where Theologians Fear to Tread", *Modern Theology* 16, no. 1 (January 2000): 56.

³ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth: an Inquiry Into the Structure of Human Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 106.

⁴ "New York Times Best Sellers," The New York Times, April 22, 2014, accessed April 22, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/best-sellers-books/2014-04-27/paperback-nonfiction/list.html>.

Angels

Biblical Evidence for Angels

There are multiple examples of God using angels as a means of communication throughout the Bible. Two angels rescued Lot and his family from Sodom, an angel encouraged Gideon to fight the Midianites, and angels shut the mouths of the lions to save the life of Daniel.⁵ The birth of Jesus is of particular importance as angels appeared to Mary, Joseph, and the Shepherds.⁶ Throughout the book of Acts angels appear to Philip, Cornelius, Peter, and Paul. And, of course, the revelation of John is filled with references to the angelic beings and the role that they play in the eschaton. When one reviews the list of men and women to whom angels appeared, what is found is a virtual “who’s who” of Bible characters. Angels underscore some of the most significant moments in Judeo-Christian history with messages from God.

The Role of Angels and the Scope of Their Authority

It is necessary to evaluate the doctrine of angels in order to establish their function and, consequently, propose a filter through which experiences with God’s messengers can be discerned. John Frame specifies three distinct roles of angels: Bringing God’s word, fighting God’s battles, and ministering to God’s people.⁷ It is appropriate here to address only the first of these three roles as it deals explicitly with God’s direct communication to mankind. There are certain instances where angels communicate with authority - in the first person - speaking as God

⁵ Gen. 19:1-22 ; Judg. 6:11-23; Dan. 6:22

⁶ Luke 1:26-38; Matt. 2:13; Luke 2:8-15

⁷ John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg,: P & R Publishing, 2013), 773.

himself.⁸ In other instances angels are messengers with a word from God. Nevertheless, God unfolds a portion of His scheme for those receiving the message.

God brings clarity through the messages of the angels, but these messages should never be contrary to the whole of Scripture. Wayne Grudem concludes that, “[t]hough angels would not add to the doctrinal and moral content of Scripture, God *could* communicate information to us through angels.”⁹ Angels can grant encouragement and provide divine direction.¹⁰ In all of these scenarios, angels are acting on behalf of God, under His authority. The importance of this point for the objectives of this paper is underscored by George Landes, “[angels] are instrumental toward enlarging the idea of God’s nature as He has revealed himself to man...there is a sense in which it can be validly asserted that “theology” and “angelology” fundamentally amount to the same thing.”¹¹

Caution Concerning Angels

It has been demonstrated that angels are obviously one of the available ways in which God communicates with people. Moreover, the Bible exhibits no evidence of this ministry ceasing. Nevertheless, these scenarios should be approached with considerable caution, especially considering the human fascination with the supernatural and Paul's warning of Satan disguising himself as an angel. Thus, any encounter with an angel should be comprehensively tested. The message should comply with Scripture and should encourage or give direction.

⁸ Gen. 22:12, Exod. 3:2-6.

⁹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 408.

¹⁰ Acts 27:23-25; Acts 8:26

¹¹ George M. Landes, "Shall We Neglect the Angels?", *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 14, no. 4 (May 1959): 20.

Nonetheless, Frame is right when he says, “Scripture mentions angels over three hundred times. This fact suggests that we need to take angels into account in the decisions of our lives.”¹²

Dreams and Visions¹³

Surely the vision given to John that resulted in the content that is now displayed in the book of Revelation is one of the most incredible examples of God’s revelation to man through the use of a vision. However, due to the fact that the canon of Scripture has been closed, there is no longer any need for visions of this specific nature – visions that result in inerrant Scripture. Nonetheless, dreams and visions need not be of this nature in order for God to utilize them to communicate. God is still employing dreams and visions to draw people to himself, most specifically in Muslim areas all over the world.

Biblical Evidence for Dreams and Visions

There are obvious correlations between angels and dreams. Many biblical encounters with angels occur within the context of dreams.¹⁴ However, the presence of angels is not always an element inherent in visions.¹⁵ In any case, God has utilized dreams as a way to communicate with both believers and non-believers¹⁶ in order to accomplish His purposes. Visions occur throughout the story of redemptive history – from Genesis to Revelation. The Lord spoke to

¹² Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 777.

¹³ The terms “dream” and “vision” will be used interchangeably throughout this section for the sake of clarity and brevity.

¹⁴ Matt. 1:20-14; Matt. 2:13-15; Acts 10:33;

¹⁵ Gen. 37:5-11; Gen. 41:1-8; Dan. 2:1; Acts 16:9; Acts 11:5

¹⁶ The terms “believers” and “non-believers” are used generically here to delineate between those who followed Yahweh and Jesus and those who did not.

Abraham in a vision, God reveals himself to Jacob in a dream, and Samuel hears an audible voice of God which is referred to as a vision.¹⁷ In the New Testament Joseph is the recipient of considerable divine dreams.¹⁸ Additionally, Peter's instructions concerning clean food were given via a vision, and Paul's call to the Macedonian provinces occurs by way of a vision.¹⁹

Notwithstanding, God also gave visions and dreams to people who were not believers in order to see his objectives accomplished. For instance, Joseph's interpretation of dreams is what promotes him into Pharaoh's court.²⁰ Indeed, the entire Joseph narrative proceeds through the occurrence of dreams. In the same way, Nebuchadnezzar is troubled by dreams and the interpretation of these dreams by Daniel, as opposed to the sorcerers and enchanters, likewise elevates Daniel into a place of influence.²¹ Pilate's wife is agitated by dreams about Jesus and attempts to convince her husband to abandon his involvement with the case.²² The Bible gives ample and distinct evidence of dreams and visions being a mode of God's communication, but as with angelic appearances, there are dangers inherent here as well.

Cautions Concerning Dreams and Visions

In Jeremiah 23:9-40 God gives a stern warning against prophets that, "prophesy lies," saying, "I have dreamed! I have dreamed!"²³ God declares that He is in opposition to these

¹⁷ Gen. 15:1; Gen 28:10-22; Sam. 3:4-15

¹⁸ Matt. 1:20; Matt, 2:13, Matt. 2:22

¹⁹ Acts 10:4-9 ; Acts 16:9-10

²⁰ Gen. 41:14-40.

²¹ Dan. 2

²² Matt. 27:19

²³ Jer. 23:25

people. These are very strong words and hence, as this subject is approached, it ought to be approached very carefully and with awe. Furthermore, Jude 8 sounds a warning concerning the correlation of dreams to false prophets: “Yet in like manner these people also, relying on their dreams, defile the flesh, reject authority, and blaspheme the glorious ones.”²⁴ The “these people” referred to in this verse are the false prophets introduced in verse 4 and incredibly heavy punishments are levied against such people. So while dreams are an approach in which God consistently communicates with people in order to make His will known and advance His purposes, there were those in both the Old and New Testaments that were imposters – they claimed to have dreams and visions from God and they are openly dismissed in Scripture. Therefore, as with angels, there must be a grid by which to discern whether or not dreams and visions are the product of God or the flesh.

In Deuteronomy 13, the Lord tells the people of Israel that any dreamer or prophet that leads them towards any God except Yahweh is not to be trusted. In the aforementioned prophesy of Jeremiah, the Lord specifies that false prophets with distorted visions do not call people to repentance. Alternatively, they comfort people in their sin and attempt to rid their minds of judgment.²⁵ Paul warns that false teachers with false visions speak of things contrary to Scripture including worship of angels, asceticism, and neglect of Christ as the head of the Body.²⁶ Additionally, Joel concludes that false visions come from the mouths of those who reject authority.²⁷ Thus, any dreams or visions should call people to worship God alone, elevate Jesus Christ, call them to repentance, and always be in submission to the teachings of Scripture.

²⁴ Jude 8, ESV.

²⁵ Jer. 23:17

²⁶ Col. 2:16-19

²⁷ Jude 8

George Martin rightly maintains that dreams and visions, “must be brought to Scripture and tested in its perfect and authoritative light.”²⁸ Those who claim to have dreams or visions from the Lord should also bring themselves under the authority of the church so that these things may be weighed and analyzed appropriately.

Prophecy

There seems to be somewhat little evidence required to demonstrate that prophecy was a way in which God communicated to His people in the Old Testament – a large portion of the Old Testament literature is dedicated to this method of divine communication. New Testament prophecy, however, has more than one implied function. Wayne Grudem specifies two authority levels apparent in the New Testament: speaking the very words of God and communicating human words that God brings to mind.²⁹ The requirement here is not to necessarily prove that God interacts with humanity through prophecy, but to determine if God continues to employ prophecy today, and if so, to determine the nature of contemporary prophecy.

Biblical Evidence for Prophecy

Perhaps the most debated text on this subject is 1 Corinthians 13:8-10. After Paul’s exposition of the gifts of the Spirit found in chapter twelve, he establishes the distinct value of love over and above the spiritual gifts – justifying the fact that the gifts will eventually be unnecessary. There is no shortage of theologians who believe that the gift of prophecy was only

²⁸ George H. Martin "The God Who Reveals Mysteries: Dreams and World Evangelization", *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 60-74.

²⁹ Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, rev. ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000), 27-69.

necessary during the establishment of the church. Paul Enns sums up this view succinctly:

“Because the foundation of the church has been laid and the canon of Scripture is complete there is no need for the gift of prophecy.”³⁰

But D. A. Carson has offered an exegetically compelling argument contrary to this opinion. Paul’s initial letter to the Corinthian church says, “As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophecy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.”³¹ The primary concern in this passage is determining to what “perfect,” or, in the Greek, *teleios*, refers. Arguments have been made that “perfect” refers to the maturity of the Church as well as the completing of the canon of Scripture.³² However, Carson presents a rather compelling argument which concludes that Paul’s intent here is to point to the end of the age – the second coming of Christ – as the time when prophecy will cease.³³

If this is the case, there remains the issue of authority. As noted above, Grudem has distinguished two types of New Testament prophecy. Conversely, Richard Gaffin denies that the proposed fallible category of prophecy is supported in the overall teaching of the New Testament.³⁴ However, Grudem’s argument seems to be most exegetically persuasive because in Paul’s instructions concerning orderly worship, two things are explicit. First, Paul is communicating to the entirety of the church in this letter and thereby speaking to many who

³⁰ Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), 271.

³¹ 1 Cor. 13:8-10, ESV.

³² D.A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: a Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 68-69.

³³ *Ibid.*, 71-72.

³⁴ Richard B Gaffin, “A Cessationist View,” in *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry and Wayne A. Grudem (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 48-50.

might prophesy and who were, undeniably, not apostles. Secondly, the instructions to the church are to weigh or evaluate what is said. Gordon Fee maintains that prophecy of this type should always be tested under the authority of the church membership.³⁵ If all legitimate prophecy is both exhibited by apostles and infallible, as Gaffin debates, this text is inconsistent and confusing. It is obvious that there is potential for fallibility and thus a marked difference between the use of prophetic gifts in this context and the infallible word of God spoken by Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles.

Cautions Concerning Prophecy

Just as with angels and dreams/visions, this type of prophecy must be tested. In fact, as has been already displayed, Paul is adamant that it be tested. In 1 Corinthians 14:28, Paul's instructions regulating worship include the testing or weighing of prophecy by the congregation. Grudem suggests that the correct approach in interpreting these instructions is to see that the congregation would evaluate the prophecy, and discern what was valuable.³⁶ In the same way, while it has been demonstrated that there are coherent reasons to believe that God is still employing this means of communication, everything must be tested against Scripture and be edifying to the body of Christ.

The Sufficiency of Scripture

In his most recent book, Kevin DeYoung says, "You do not need another special revelation from God outside the Bible. You can listen to the voice of God every day. Christ still

³⁵ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 694.

³⁶ Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy*, 57-62.

speaks because the Spirit has spoken. If you want to hear from God, go to the book that records only what He has said.”³⁷ This is incredibly true. Nonetheless, the operative word in the first sentence is *need*. Scripture *is* sufficient for the Christian life, but Jesus Christ did not leave the Church with Scripture only. The Father sent the Holy Spirit, the Helper, to give supernatural power to the Church for the mission of the Kingdom. The sufficiency of Scripture is the very grounds for the arguments made in this paper. Were it not for the unerring, infallible Word of God clearly revealing the fact that God employs these modes of communication, there would be no grounds for the work at hand. It is precisely *because* of the sufficiency of Scripture that this topic needs to be addressed because denying God’s continual communication with the world challenges Scripture on multiple levels. Surely there is no *need* for God to continue to communicate, but God has not chosen to be silent. To purport that at the ascension of Christ or the moment the canon was closed, all communication from God ceased is absurd precisely because his Word says, as has been shown, that this is not the case. It should certainly be affirmed that the Bible is the primary way in which God has spoken to the world. It should also be concluded that the Word of God needs no testing – it is perfect and helpful from start to finish. It is not, however, the *only* way in which God speaks because God has confirmed that this is so.

Angels, Dreams, and Prophecy in Global Missions

It has been argued that there is coherent evidence that God used angels, dreams, and prophecy to communicate with believers through the biblical account and that He is, likewise, communicating via these methods today. While experience should never be the primary indicator

³⁷ Kevin DeYoung, *Taking God at His Word: Why the Bible Is Knowable, Necessary, and Enough, and What That Means for You and Me* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 42.

of authenticity, it is, nonetheless, helpful in seeing the benefit of holding to the above beliefs concerning these manifestations. It is true that these gifts and phenomena have been sorely abused. Abuses, nonetheless, must not be grounds for dismissal of sound doctrine. If doctrines were downplayed due to the tendency towards worldly distortion, little would be left in the corpus of theology. However, God is revealing himself and still calling people to himself all over the world using these methods.

John D. Robb, in his essay *Strategic Prayer*, catalogues the oppression of a powerful drug cartel in Cali, Columbia. After thirty thousand pastors gathered for prayer one evening in 1995, several of those in attendance reported having dreams where they saw angels arresting the leaders of the drug cartel. Robb concludes, “Within six weeks of these visions, the Colombian government declared an all-out war on the drug cartel bosses. By August of that year – only three months after God’s revelation to the intercessors – Colombian authorities had captured all seven cartel leaders.”³⁸ Nowhere does this story diminish Scripture, but it gave confirmation to the pastors that their prayers were being heard and encouragement that the Lord was at work in their city.

Robertson McQuilkin, a missionary to Japan, validates a dream he once had about being on an island where there were many sheep in need of getting across the narrow bridge to the mainland. This dream fanned the flame in his heart for the lost to be pointed to the sole way of salvation – Jesus Christ.³⁹ In his book *Any 3: Anyone, Anywhere, Anytime*, Mike Shipman shares the story of an assignment to evangelize a Muslim given to students in a seminary course he was

³⁸ John D. Robb “Strategic Prayer” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*. 4 ed. ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena: William Carey Library), Kindle Location 5599.

³⁹ Robertson McQuilkin “Lost” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*. 4 ed. ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena: William Carey Library), Kindle Location 5832-5853.

teaching. Clarifying his evangelization story, a young student named Juan said, “The Muslim man to whom I witnessed did not seem surprised that I was sharing the gospel with him. The previous week, he had had a dream about Jesus.”⁴⁰ In the preface to his book on the subject of dreams and visions, Tom Doyle clarifies the scope of these prophetic encounters:

The phenomenon is not limited to a few isolated locations. It’s not happening in just one or two African nations. There’s not just one of several hundred people groups affected in India. He’s not simply visiting some lucky town in the Middle East. What we see is Jesus presenting Himself to Muslims everywhere. Dozens of Islamic countries and countless cultures have been invaded by Jesus’ love.⁴¹

As the Kingdom of God continues to advance on the world, missionaries continue to pray that God would interrupt the lives of those who do not yet know Him in order for them to be open to the presentation of the Gospel.

Conclusion

God has established angels, visions, and prophecy as three of the approaches He employs to communicate with people throughout history. Some of the most significant moments in Christian history are highlighted by these supernatural occurrences. These revelations of God’s plan and will are compatible with Scripture. However, some evangelicals are decidedly unable to celebrate the way in which God is revealing himself through these mediums today because of perceived exegetical concerns or fear of abuses. Surely, the flock must be guarded against false prophets - the wolves in sheep’s clothing. Nevertheless, the best means of protection is not to conclude that involvement in these supernatural experiences is unbiblical and dangerous –

⁴⁰ Mike Shipman, *Any 3: Anyone, Anywhere, Anytime*. (Monument: WIGTake Resources, 2013), Kindle Locations 1104-1115.

⁴¹ Tom Doyle, *Dreams and Visions: Is Jesus Awakening the Muslim World?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012), xiii-xiv.

especially when churches are being strengthened, missionaries being encouraged, and lost people brought to saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Alternatively, let the Church proceed forward in boldness – zealously defending the inerrancy of Scripture and its sufficiency for the life of the Christian, but also advocating the truth that God continues to speak to the world for the edification of the saints and for the sake of His sheep that have yet to be gathered into the sheepfold.

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