

## *An Evaluation of Muslim Dreams & Visions of Isa (Jesus)*

*Dennis McBride ~ July, 2010*

**My Goal:** The goal of this paper is to evaluate the reported phenomenon of Jesus (Isa) appearing to some Muslims in dreams and visions<sup>1</sup>, and to discern if such reports fit the pattern of Scripture as determined through conservative grammatical/historical principles of interpretation (hermeneutics).

**My Concerns:** I first became aware of the Muslim dreams phenomenon through a Christian brother who spoke with great excitement about a special moving of the Lord within Muslim communities. I wanted to share his excitement because I knew something of the difficulties of Muslim evangelism, and the great joy missionaries experience over even one Muslim coming to faith in Christ. However, over the course of our conversations my questions and concerns started to mount.

In short, I questioned if it was really Jesus appearing to these people, and if so, why? What special circumstances at this point in redemptive history would necessitate Him personally intervening, when He said it would be the Holy Spirit's role to convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment through the preaching of the gospel by human preachers (John 16:8; Rom. 10:14-15; 1 Cor. 1:21)?

I had no desire to resist or even question what God might be doing, but I feared these dreams of Isa might be little more than extra-biblical psychological or spiritual encounters that could supplant God's Word and potentially lead their participants away from biblical authority rather than into it. And I was greatly concerned to hear the supposedly biblical rationale some of my fellow conservative Bible teachers were offering in defense of this movement. Some former defenders of the centrality and sufficiency of God's Word in evangelism seemed suddenly to be sacrificing that doctrine on the altar of subjective mystical encounters. I needed to understand why, and to evaluate their rationale by God's Word. I also needed to examine Isa's communication to determine if it was consistent with Christ's communication while He was on earth.

**My Prayer:** I rejoice that many Muslims are coming to faith in Christ, and I pray the Lord will send many more laborers into those fields. However, as Christians we have a mandate to guard God's Word with all diligence and to test all claims of divine communication (1 Thess. 5:20-21; Acts 17:11). This study is an attempt to do that.

Throughout this study I raise a number of questions about various aspects of this phenomenon, and I welcome the reader's responses, whether they agree or disagree with my conclusions. I also welcome input on aspects I may have overlooked but need to consider.

**My Conclusion:** This study concludes that the biblical support offered for the Muslim dreams phenomenon, when evaluated within the context of Scripture, does not, in fact, support the

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of brevity, I will hereafter refer to the phenomenon simply as "Muslim dreams".

phenomenon. Therefore, I conclude that these dreams and visions lack biblical authority and must therefore be viewed as extra-biblical experiences generated from sources other than the Holy Spirit.

#### **Four Representative Descriptions of the Muslim Dreams Phenomenon:**

The following quotes are taken from the sources footnoted and reflect the primary views in support of this phenomenon.

**Description #1** – We are now hearing many stories of people coming to faith in Christ as the result of a dream or vision where He appears to them, inviting them to trust in Him. This is particularly happening in the Muslim world. Many people instantly know it's the Lord Jesus when He appears to them, but some do not. In some dreams and visions, He tells them who He is, and in others He does not—He just loves them and calls them to come to Him. After the dream/vision, the Lord provides someone to identify Him as they continue to seek Him. (We see something similar in the story of Cornelius in Acts 10.)

So, from what I understand, people are putting their trust in Christ, but some don't know anything more about Him than that He is God, He loves them and He invites them to trust in Him. Two recurrent invitations continue to appear in the dreams and visions we are hearing about: 1) "I am the way, the truth and the life," and 2) "You belong to Me." As people are then able to get a copy of the Bible or talk to a Christian, their knowledge of Christ, the Cross, and the Christian life grows, as well as their faith and their understanding of who Jesus is and what He did.

For years, I have heard that God's only plan for evangelism is for us to share the gospel. But these stories show that sometimes, Jesus goes directly to a person. And, in Revelation 14:6, there is an angel who takes the gospel to men.

So what that means is that if a person has never heard of Jesus through the preaching of the gospel, that is no obstacle for God. He can, and testimony shows that He does, appear directly to—and call a person to—have faith in Him. We still need to diligently pursue the Great Commission and take the gospel to all nations, since evangelism through the changed lives of Christ-followers is still God's main plan. But God's hands are not tied by our inability (or laziness, or selfishness, or disobedience) to get the gospel to everyone He has chosen for eternal life.<sup>2</sup>

**Description #2** – There are many ways that people who have grown up and lived their lives in the Western part of the world will differ from the person who has grown up in the Eastern part of the world. Their foods differ. Their clothing differs. These things are mostly accepted and understood, but that same sort of understanding must continue to be brought to the forefront with regard to views on the supernatural.

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<sup>2</sup> Sue Bohlin, *What About the Person Who Never Heard of Jesus?*, Probe Ministries, [www.probe.org](http://www.probe.org).

Dreams and visions have been a known reality especially within the region we now know as the Middle East dating back to the days of Joseph. Both the Bible and the Qur'an document the stories of Joseph and his interpretation of dreams, not to mention the vision he was given. God was moving through dreams and visions then and He continues to speak through them today. Likewise, there is no reason not to believe that he will speak through them in the future. Instead, the words of Joel once again serve as a reminder that old men will “dream dreams” and young men will “see visions.”

In lands where people have never seen the words of God in written form and they may not even know how to read at all, God is still speaking to them and revealing Himself to them through dreams and visions. Within the lives of people so entrenched in the rituals and structure of Islam, God is breaking through with dreams and visions. In societies that are already open to the reality of the supernatural, God is showing himself to be a power above all powers, a name above all names. In the still of the night or the calm of a moment, God is using a form of communication that is not new, but instead echoes through generations. It is not the only way for Him to reach them, but case after case shows that it is one way. Missionaries have a choice to either ignore the reality or dare to believe and ask that God would invade their friends' dreams, too, and reveal the truth of Jesus Christ to them as he has done in the lives of countless individuals.<sup>3</sup>

**Description #3** – The visions or dreams we are discussing, and as documented in Muslim countries and elsewhere, come on two occasions. First, they come as heralds of the gospel, to non-believers. . . They open the eyes, point to, or start the search for the gospel message that is to come in its fullness. It is not the gospel itself, which only comes through the word of God, written, or shared by a follower of Jesus either in person or over the radio and such. Think of Cornelius, who received a vision but was presented the gospel by Peter.

Once the gospel is received, the dreams stop. They do not return until and only if there is a great need for spiritual ministering such as under torture or martyrdom. They may, but not always, return under those circumstances as a vision of the waiting glory to come. Think of Steven. This is the pattern that missionaries see and the pattern that is seen in Scripture. . . [The dreams and visions] are not ongoing and indiscriminate in their nature and never add to the canon. They are given to nonbelievers in the first instance and to spiritually needy believers in the second instance.<sup>4</sup>

**Description #4** – Just as God used a vision to convert Paul, in like manner He reveals Himself to Muslims through dreams. Just as God prepared Cornelius to hear the Gospel

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<sup>3</sup> Good News for the Crescent World, *Dreams and Visions in the World of Folk Islam: Could These be a Pathway to Jesus Christ?*, [http://www.gnfcw.com/images/dreams\\_and\\_visions.pdf](http://www.gnfcw.com/images/dreams_and_visions.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Former Missions Chairman of a conservative evangelical church. I cite this unpublished source because it's a concise summary of the supposed biblical support for Muslim dreams.

through a vision, so God is preparing a multitude of Muslims to respond to His good news.<sup>5</sup>

**Primary Considerations:** Below are the primary considerations in this issue, most of which are reflected in one or more of the descriptions quoted above. I will address them in question and answer format.

1. Should we question an experience that may help lead someone to faith in Christ?
2. Is this a secondary doctrinal issue?
3. Are we to test the message or the messenger?
4. Does this phenomenon constitute ongoing revelation?
5. Can God communicate the gospel supernaturally?
6. Is this phenomenon consistent with the Holy Spirit's convicting role?
7. Does the church's failure to evangelize Muslims necessitate Jesus' personal intervention?
8. What did Jesus say about His future appearances?
9. Does Scripture encourage expectations of personal visitations from Jesus?
10. Is Isa's message consistent with Scripture?
11. Are New Testament visions a pattern for Muslim dreams?
12. Does Joel 2:28 support the Muslim dreams phenomenon?
13. If Jesus isn't appearing in these dreams, who is?
14. Are there cultural considerations that might shed light on this phenomenon?

1. *Should we question an experience that helps lead someone to faith in Christ?*

Why make an issue of *how* Muslims come to faith in Christ, as long as they come to faith? And doesn't the fact that they come to faith legitimize the means by which they come? Those are fair questions, and the most concise answers are: 1) God commands us to be discerning in all things 2) the end doesn't justify the means if the means fail the test of Scripture, and 3) this isn't merely an experience; it's a significant spiritual movement based on subjective mystical encounters that must have objective biblical support before they can be classified as truly Christian. Testing what claims to be from God is every Christian's responsibility (1 Thess. 5:20-21; 1 John 4:1-3), and exercising caution about claims of Jesus speaking personally to Muslims is as important as exercising caution about *any* reports of divine communication beyond the text of Scripture itself.

In Acts 17:11 God commends the Bereans for putting the gospel itself to the test. But testing Muslim dreams is more difficult by far than testing the gospel because the gospel is a singular, cohesive, objective entity readily affirmed by direct biblical support; whereas these personal dreams are numerous, varied, subjective, and virtually impossible to test fully due to their extra-biblical content.

2. *Is this a secondary doctrinal issue?*

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<sup>5</sup> Rick Love, Muslims, Magic and the Kingdom of God (Pasadena, William Carey Library, 2000), 156.

It has been argued that the *fact* of Muslims coming to Christ is so significant that the *means* by which they come is inconsequential. Therefore, to question the validity of dreams and visions is to miss the point and to nitpick over “secondary doctrines” when we should be rejoicing over God’s grace toward these people.

However, examining claims of Jesus appearing to Muslims does not diminish the value of Muslim converts. Just as God calls us to evangelize the lost and rejoice in their salvation, He also calls us to guard His Word and rejoice in the truth. One is not to be set against the other by improperly juxtaposing salvation and sound doctrine.

Claims that Jesus personally speaks to individuals today under *any* circumstances is not a secondary doctrinal issue by any means. Any time someone claims to have heard the voice of God, and especially if they claim to have seen Jesus, it’s of utmost importance to verify what Jesus reportedly did and said.

### 3. *Are we to test the message or the messenger?*

Discerning rightly between the message and the messenger is a key component in testing this phenomenon. That is to say, we can’t conclude that Isa is who he claims to be, or who his hearers perceive him to be, simply because his message has some biblical content (i.e., Scripture verses), or because God may use those verses to help bring the dreamers to saving faith. God’s Word will accomplish its intended purposes regardless of the messenger. That’s why Paul could rejoice even when men who wanted nothing more than to cause him grief proclaimed Jesus (Phil. 1:15-18). But even in his rejoicing Paul still exposed the sinful motives of those messengers, thereby demonstrating that the message doesn’t necessarily validate the messenger.

In Gal. 1:8, where Paul’s focus is primarily on the message, he also addresses the messengers, and does so in the strongest possible language: “Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed.” That’s a hypothetical scenario involving a false message, but coupled with Phil. 1:15-18 it shows the need to test both message *and* messenger, and to reject the “end justifies the means” approach to the Muslim dreams phenomenon offered by some of its advocates (i.e., “people are getting saved; therefore it must be Jesus appearing to them”).

As important as the messengers are, the power of the gospel to redeem souls is not dependent on their identity or credibility. Therefore one can rejoice in Muslim conversions while still expressing concerns about the messenger, especially since the Isa of Muslim dreams isn’t simply calling Muslim’s to believe in the Jesus of the Bible; he is calling them to believe in *him* (Isa), therefore claiming to be God and worthy of their worship.

That’s one of my primary concerns with this phenomenon. To believe in the Jesus of the Bible is one thing; to believe in the “Jesus” of one’s dreams is quite another. Muslims who

are “coming to Jesus” are equating the two, as are many who minister to Muslims and who pray Isa will appear to more Muslims so more will be “saved.” Therefore, it may be even more important to discern between *this* messenger and his message than in either of Paul’s two examples cited above. Paul’s were messengers with false motives or false messages; Isa is a messenger claiming to be *God!*<sup>6</sup>

#### 4. *Does this phenomenon constitute ongoing revelation?*

Some supporters of Muslim dreams also affirm that divine revelation ceased with the completion of the canon of Scripture. They see no contradiction in those positions because they don’t view these dreams as ongoing revelation. Isa, they say, isn’t adding to Scripture; he’s merely reiterating what has already been revealed (i.e., Scripture verses and biblical principles).

**A Doctrinal Contradiction:** However, the doctrine of no ongoing revelation affirms that Christians have no message from God apart from the *text of Scripture*.<sup>7</sup> In other words, Scripture alone is God’s verbal communication to mankind, which excludes all other supposed communication from Him, including Jesus speaking in contemporary dreams and visions. Therefore, one can’t affirm both cessation of divine revelation and Jesus personally communicating with Muslims (or anyone else). They are mutually exclusive doctrines.

**A Divine Encounter:** Claiming that these dreams aren’t intended to add to Scripture doesn’t change the fact that they are appeals to divine revelation. Content aside, the encounter itself, if true, is revelatory. It is God revealing Himself personally beyond His self-disclosure in Scripture. Therefore, any personal encounter with God is rightly considered ongoing revelation.

**New Messages from Jesus:** Additionally, in Muslim dreams Isa is reportedly communicating not only Bible verses, but also messages of encouragement, instruction, exhortation, prophecies, and other information not included in Scripture. That’s ongoing (or additional) revelation, especially since it reportedly comes from God Himself. Granted, it’s not intended to be canonized, but it is divine revelation nonetheless. When Jesus Himself speaks, how can it be anything *less* than authoritative divine revelation? Fact is, far from being non-revelatory, these hundreds of appearances of Isa suggest a contemporary period of divine revelation rivaling the New Testament era itself.

#### 5. *Can God communicate the gospel supernaturally?*

Does Scripture disallow Jesus (post-ascension) personally communicating to unbelievers

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<sup>6</sup> See #9 below for an examination of Isa’s message.

<sup>7</sup> C.f. *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics*, Article XXV: “We deny that the preacher has any message from God apart from the text of Scripture” in *Explaining Hermeneutics: A Commentary on the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics*. Oakland, California: International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, 1983 (<http://www.bible-researcher.com/chicago2.html>).

to prepare them to receive the gospel? That's a fair question, but I think the more appropriate question is: where does Scripture teach that He *will* do that? And do the biblical accounts of visions serve as parallels or patterns for what is occurring today in some Muslim communities?

**Could God Do It?** Before answering those questions, I want to comment on the hypothetical question of whether God *could* communicate His gospel apart from human instrumentality if He chose to do so. The answer, of course, is yes, He could. However, He has already decreed both the end and the means of salvation, and has revealed His decree in Scripture. The *end* is that all the elect will be saved and none lost (John 6:39-40); the *means* is through faith in Christ in response to the Spirit-empowered gospel proclaimed by human instrumentality (e.g., Matt. 28:19-20; Acts 2:36-40; Rom. 1:16; 10:13-15).

Jesus personally communicating the gospel at this point in redemptive history would be outside His revealed decree, which would be a highly exceptional situation. That raises the questions of what aspects of Muslim evangelism constitute a highly exceptional situation that would require God to work outside His revealed decree, and is there clear Scriptural support for Him doing so? I will answer those questions below as I examine the texts used to support Isa's appearances.

#### 6. *Is this phenomenon consistent with the Holy Spirit's convicting role?*

Toward the end of His earthly ministry, Jesus told His disciples He had to leave so the Holy Spirit could come. And He told them the Spirit would convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgment, and would guide people into all truth. He would also reveal the things of Christ, impart illumination and saving faith, and regenerate human hearts (cf. John 16:5-15; 1 Cor. 1:12-16).

We know from Romans 1:18-20 and 2:14-15 that general revelation (i.e., external creation and internal conscience) is God's self-revelation to everyone; that's why all are without excuse and accountable before Him (Rom. 2:20; 3:9). Also, general revelation is how He pre-conditions His elect to the gospel. Those who by grace respond to general revelation receive additional (special) revelation through God's Word and the Spirit's ministry. Why then is it necessary for Jesus to make personal appearances to prepare someone to receive the gospel when that's the specific role of the Holy Spirit?

All unbelievers are equally lost and can be saved only if the Father grants them faith (John 6:65), draws them (John 6:44), opens their hearts to the truth (Acts 16:14), and teaches them (John 6:45). That's how every former unbeliever comes to faith. There is no unbelief that is beyond the reach of the Holy Spirit's convicting and regenerating power, and which requires personal visitations from Jesus to convince it of the truth of the gospel.

7. *Does the church's failure to evangelize Muslims necessitate Jesus' personal intervention?*

Some say that Jesus has to intervene personally because the church has failed to evangelize Muslims. However, that could be said of any people group in any area at any time in church history, and even of individuals in our own culture who haven't heard the gospel because a Christian friend failed to share it. If that were the case, dreams and visions would be commonplace.

Perhaps the church *has* failed in some measure to evangelize Muslims, and I pray that Christians will be increasingly active in reaching out to them. But the third description of this phenomenon cited above echoes a common assertion that the dreams and visions "open the eyes, point to, or start the search for the gospel message that is to come in its fullness. It is not the gospel itself, which only comes through the word of God, written, or shared by a follower of Jesus either in person or over the radio and such."

That description argues against failure on the part of the church to reach out to Muslims. If Muslims are receiving the gospel that can only come through God's Word, written or shared by a follower of Jesus, then of necessity Christians are involved in the process. So despite any evangelistic deficiencies within the church, it appears God is still linking Muslims with Christians, either directly or indirectly, to help get the job done.

However, my main point here is that failure on the church's part doesn't necessitate Jesus personally intervening through dreams and visions, because it's the Holy Spirit's role to direct the elect to the gospel and the gospel to the elect. Could the Spirit prompt unredeemed elect individuals to dream about Jesus and use those dreams to open their hearts to the gospel? Of course He could. But that's not what's being claimed. To have a dream about Jesus, even a Spirit-directed dream, is different from Jesus revealing Himself in a dream. One is natural; the other is supernatural. One is a natural dream; the other is a divine revelation. Those distinctions must be understood and maintained.

8. *What did Jesus say about His future appearances?*

Immediately after Jesus ascended into heaven, two men (angels) said to the onlookers, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). And when He does come to earth again, it will be "in the glory of His Father with His angels" (Matt. 16:27). Jesus warned about any supposed appearances prior to that time (Matt. 24).

Those passages refer specifically to Christ's physical return to earth at some future point in time, but do they also preclude Him appearing in dreams or visions prior to that time? We can't answer that question conclusively from those texts, but we *can* conclude that the only teaching Jesus gave concerning His future appearances on earth relate to His physical return. Therefore, we mustn't conclude that other appearances are permissible unless Scripture elsewhere permits us to do so. With that in mind, I'll briefly discuss the

relevant New Testament “visions” passages below (see #11) to see if they give a green light to modern-day appearances of Jesus in dreams or visions.

### 9. *Does Scripture encourage expectations of personal visitations from Jesus?*

Faith based on God’s Word (spoken or written), not personal divine visitations, has been the biblical requirement and standard since the birth of the church.<sup>8</sup> In fact, with the exception of Paul on the road to Damascus, there is no biblical record of Jesus appearing to any unbeliever following His ascension. And Scripture nowhere encourages or even suggests praying for divine appearances as an evangelism strategy or a means of comforting persecuted Christians during the church age. That is utterly foreign to Scripture. Yet the challenges to propagate this phenomenon continue: “Missionaries have a choice to either ignore the reality [of Muslim dreams] or *dare to believe and ask that God would invade their friends’ dreams, too*, and reveal the truth of Jesus Christ to them as he has done in the lives of countless individuals” (italics added).<sup>9</sup>

It’s important to note that Jesus Himself commended those who believed without seeing Him (John 20:24-29)<sup>10</sup>, and He corrected the erroneous thinking that a personal appearance of one who has died is more persuasive than hearing God’s Word (Luke 16:19-31).<sup>11</sup> Peter, too, commended believers who loved the Lord without having seen Him (1 Pet. 1:3-9). That’s normal Christian faith. Additionally, there are no instructions or regulating principles in the Pastoral Epistles regarding dreams or visions (with the exception of the Col. 2:18-19 warning about false teachers who take their stand on such experiences), whereas there are numerous and detailed instructions for teaching, preaching, and guarding “the sacred writings which are able to give . . . the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15; see also 1 Tim. 4:13-16; 2 Tim. 4:1-4; Titus 1:9-11).

### 10. *Is Isa’s message consistent with Scripture?*

If Jesus were appearing to unbelieving Muslims, it follows that His message would be consistent with His message to unbelievers while on earth. But that is not the case.

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<sup>8</sup> Cases such as Paul, Cornelius, and Steven are directly related to the unique Apostolic era, as discussed in section #11 below.

<sup>9</sup> Good News for the Crescent World, *Dreams and Visions in the World of Folk Islam: Could These be a Pathway to Jesus Christ?*, [http://www.gnfcw.com/images/dreams\\_and\\_visions.pdf](http://www.gnfcw.com/images/dreams_and_visions.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Jesus said to Thomas, “Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed.”

<sup>11</sup> In Luke 16:19-31, Jesus tells the story of the rich man & Lazarus. While suffering torment in Hades, the rich man begged Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his five brothers so they wouldn’t end up there too. Abraham responded, “They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.” The rich man replied, “No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!” But Abraham said to him, “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.” (vv. 29-31). That text alone should erase any question about the sufficiency of God’s Word in bringing the lost to salvation apart from any miraculous encounter or mystical experience.

**What Isa Reportedly Says:** As I read the various accounts of dreams, I'm struck with the impossibility of testing them according to Scripture because their extra-biblical content is so extensive and varied. Many of the dreams contain a verse or two of Scripture, along with encouragement to seek the Savior spoken of in the verses. In many, Isa either identifies himself as Jesus or is assumed to be Jesus by the dreamers.

Reportedly, some of the dreamers had no prior exposure to the Bible or the gospel, but most of the accounts I've read indicate the dreamers had some prior exposure to the Bible and/or Christians. Other accounts don't comment on that aspect of the story.

Most of the content of the dreams relate generally to the circumstances of the various dreamers (e.g., encouragement in trials or rescue from danger, which are common themes). That kind of content can't be tested by Scripture except by broad measurements such as "does it encourage faith in Christ?" or "is it generally consistent with biblical principles?" But those are vague and inadequate tests for determining the divine origin of a dream or vision, as I will explain below.

**What Isa Doesn't Say:** I'm most struck by what Isa *doesn't* say in the accounts I've read. Although the encounters are said to prepare the dreamers for the gospel, there is little or no mention of sin, repentance, confession, righteousness, or forgiveness; and no presentation of God's holiness or justice. Simply put, the *need* for salvation isn't clarified (or in some cases even mentioned), yet that was at the heart of Christ's communication with unbelievers when He was on earth. But Isa's "gospel" is minimalistic and void of any clear and concise call to repentance. Gospel clarity and precision would be especially important for those Muslims who don't have a biblical background to draw from and who would therefore need to understand what God requires of them.

**Does Isa Pass the Test?** Jesus used a variety of approaches when speaking with unbelievers, depending on the individual or group (e.g., Nicodemus, Rich Young Ruler, Woman at the Well), but typically He identified who He was, confronted their sin, called them to repentance, called them to believe in Him, cautioned them to count the cost of discipleship, and then to take up their crosses daily and follow Him. He didn't state all those elements in every case, but collectively they constituted the thrust of His message.

By way of contrast, Isa typically identifies who he is (or the dreamer instinctively knows who he is), and tells the dreamer he loves him and wants him (the dreamer) to follow him (Isa). Sometimes the dreamer is overwhelmed with a sense of love and peace just by being in Isa's presence (which was *never* the case with unbelievers in the presence of Jesus). So the message that emerges is one of believing in Isa and following him apparently apart from the Holy Spirit convicting of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8).

That's the pattern I see throughout the accounts I've read. Consequently I question the substance of the message Isa is delivering, and the substance of the gospel some of these Muslims are affirming. That's not to say their conversions aren't genuine, especially given

the fuller gospel presentation that some receive subsequent to their initial dreams. But it *is* to say that the message Isa is giving falls short of the message Jesus typically gave to unbelievers while on earth. That shortcoming is a major point of consideration in discerning if this really is Jesus speaking to these people.

Again, I understand the assertion that Isa isn't sharing the gospel but is merely preparing dreamers for the gospel that is to come in greater fullness via a human evangelist. But I still question the inconsistencies between Jesus' preparation of unbelievers while on earth and Isa's preparation via dreams. Also, in some of the accounts I've read, Isa does, in fact, call on the dreamers to believe in him. So the claim that he merely prepares them to receive the gospel isn't always consistent with the testimony record.

Additionally, I have to wonder why Jesus *wouldn't* share the gospel with Muslims if He were appearing to them. He's the most capable and powerful evangelist the world has ever known. Yes, Rom. 10:13-15 says salvation comes by hearing the gospel preached by a human, and that is part of the divine decree I mentioned above. But those who affirm that Jesus is appearing to Muslims also affirm by implication that God isn't confined to His own decree in these instances, so why would the human evangelist be necessary at all except in a follow-up capacity?

#### 11. *Are New Testament visions a pattern for Muslim dreams?*

**Descriptive or Prescriptive?** One task of an interpreter of Scripture is to determine if a passage is *descriptive* or *prescriptive*. In other words, does the passage *describe* what occurred in the past, or does it *prescribe* what will or should occur in the future, or both? For example, determining if the Acts chapter two account of the Day of Pentecost only *describes* what *did occur* as a unique event in the history of the church, or whether it also *prescribes* a pattern for what *should occur* in each believer's life, will determine one's position on Pentecostalism. Determining whether Paul's teachings on the role of women were *descriptive* of the culture of his day or *prescriptive* for every culture will determine one's position on the role of women in the church today.

Similarly, determining if the accounts of biblical visions describe what *did occur* during a unique time in revelatory and/or redemptive history, or whether they also prescribe a pattern for what *should occur* today will, in large part, determine one's position on the current Muslim phenomenon. So with that in mind, I'll briefly examine the New Testament accounts used in support of the Muslim dreams phenomenon.

**Consider the Context:** I should first mention that in support of Muslim dreams, their advocates often cite the occurrences of similar phenomenon in Scripture. And without question God did use dreams and visions on occasion in both the Old and New Testaments when they served His purposes. But we must consider not only the *fact* of their use in Scripture, but also the *reasons* for their use and the *historical and redemptive contexts* in which they were used. If those considerations have contemporary parallels in the Muslim phenomenon, then it may have biblical support. If they don't have parallels,

the phenomenon isn't "just as" or "in like manner" as the biblical accounts (to quote Rick Love), and therefore lacks direct biblical support.

I'll confine my examination to the New Testament visions that have been appealed to in support of the Muslim dreams phenomenon, or that help us evaluate that phenomenon. Those passages are:

- a. Acts 7:55-56 – Stephen's vision of heaven
- b. Acts 9:1-10 – God's visions to Paul and Ananias
- c. Acts 10:3 – The vision to Cornelius to send for Peter in Joppa
- d. Acts 10:9 – Peter's visions of the "sheet" and animals
- e. Acts 10:19 – Peter is "thinking about the vision" and the Spirit interrupts him
- f. Acts 16:6 – Paul's vision of the man of Macedonia beckoning him to come there
- g. Acts 18:9 – Jesus speaks to Paul in a vision to encourage him to keep preaching
- h. 2 Corinthians 12:1 – Paul says he had momentous visions
- i. Revelation 1:9-17 – John's vision of the ascended and glorified Christ

#### **A Brief Examination of Those Visions:**

- a. **Acts 7:55-56** – Stephen – "Being full of the Holy Spirit, [Stephen] gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and he said, 'Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.'"

Stephen was a man "full of grace and power", who "was performing great wonders and signs among the people" (Acts 6:8). His vision of heaven, while facing martyrdom, followed his powerfully and confrontive sermon to the Jewish Council, and is often offered as a pattern for the dreams and visions some Muslims experience during similar trials. But to my knowledge Stephen was the only New Testament saint to have a vision of Christ or heaven just prior to his death. So Stephen serves as an example of how God *can* comfort His children during martyrdom, but doesn't establish a pattern for Him doing so either then or now.

**Unique Apostolic Period:** More importantly, although Stephen was not an apostle *per se*, he ministered in the power of the Holy Spirit during the apostolic period, which was a unique transitional period in which God was giving new revelation through His messengers, and confirming the messengers and the message by miraculous signs and wonders (Acts 6:8; Heb. 2:3-4; 2 Cor. 12:12). Those signs and wonders, as well as the personal revelations, were directly linked to the birth of the church, to apostolic preaching, and to inspiration of the New Testament Scriptures.

Those events and that period of time have no parallel in church history, so their context can't be duplicated. Therefore, the experiences of Steven and his apostolic companions must be viewed as descriptive unless Scripture indicates otherwise. That's a point I'll return to repeatedly in the considerations that follow because the

contexts that reveal God communicating one-on-one to His messengers also reveal His reasons for doing so. And those reasons were directly linked to non-repeatable historical and revelatory events. So it isn't exegetically permissible to pull an experience like Steven's vision out of its context and place it into a context of contemporary Muslim dreams without a more definitive biblical rationale.

**New Testament Pattern for Persecution:** I praise the Lord for encouraging and undergirding His children during times of persecution or martyrdom, and I certainly don't question His ability to do that. Although Stephen's vision was unique and therefore doesn't serve as a pattern or norm, Scripture does give us a pattern for undergoing persecution:

In this [your eternal inheritance] you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; *and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls* (1 Pet. 1:6-9, italics added. See also Rom. 5:1-5; James 1:2-4).

In that passage Peter makes clear that "the revelation of Jesus Christ" was yet future for those believers, and that the fiery testing of their faith, apart from any visions or appearances of Jesus, was what produced faith like pure gold, which would result in praise, glory and honor to Christ.

That's the New Testament pattern for discerning God's will in persecution, which doesn't eliminate the possibility of Jesus appearing to persecuted Christians today, but it does raise the question of what it is about today's persecutions that would prompt Jesus to appear when He didn't do so even in Peter's time when the church was relatively young and Christians were being severely persecuted and definitely in need of encouragement?

- b. **Acts 9:1-10** – God's visions to Paul and Ananias concerning Ananias' healing ministry to the newly converted Paul.

Paul described this experience as "a heavenly vision" (Acts 26:19) even though it included time-space manifestations, some of which were also witnessed by his companions (Acts 9:7). Apparently Paul did not see Jesus Himself, but saw "a light brighter than the sun" (Acts 26:13) and heard Jesus' voice (Acts 9:3-4ff; 26:14ff).

This was an encounter wherein Jesus personally called an unbeliever to faith. But this, of course, was no ordinary unbeliever, and the unique apostolic ministry to which Paul was being called makes this encounter utterly unique and directly related

to the canonical revelation that was to follow. Does Paul's vision establish a pattern for contemporary Muslim dreams as Rick Love and others assert? The *fact* that Paul had a "vision" is similar, but the *reason* for that vision has no modern parallel because it was linked inextricably to Paul's apostolic calling, divine revelation, and the future disclosure of God's Word.

The same is true of Ananias' vision, which apparently involved hearing the Lord's voice but not seeing Him. His vision was directly linked to Paul's, and therefore it, too, has no direct modern parallel. Both of those accounts are *descriptive* of what happened in the past, but not *prescriptive* of what should happen in the future.

- c. **Acts 10:3** – The vision to Cornelius to send for Peter in Joppa. (See notes under Acts 10:19 below.)
- d. **Acts 10:9** – As the messengers arrive from Cornelius, Peter falls into a trance and has the three visions of a "sheet" of animals coming down from heaven; this is the divine lesson that teaches him to accept the gentiles as co-participants in the Abrahamic covenant blessings. (See notes under Acts 10:19 below.)
- e. **Acts 10:19** – Peter is "thinking about the vision" and the Spirit interrupts him.

The visions Peter and Cornelius experienced are often cited as patterns for Isa preparing unbelieving Muslims to receive the gospel from Christian evangelists. But Peter and Cornelius aren't a pattern even for New Testament evangelism, much less modern-day evangelism. Theirs was a unique situation in which the Lord drew them together supernaturally for a specific purpose that has no parallel today or in any other period of church history.

Further, there is no correlation between Cornelius' experience and Muslim unbelievers whom Isa is reportedly preparing to receive the gospel. Cornelius was not an unbeliever, but "a devout man, and one who feared God with all his household, and gave many alms to the Jewish people, and prayed to God continually" (Acts 10:1-2). He did not see Jesus, but an angel (Acts 10:3, 7, 30-31) and was then directed by the Holy Spirit to send for Peter (Acts 10:20). Cornelius' vision was clearly revelatory and intended to be included in the canon of Scripture (as were Peter's).

But beyond those dissimilarities is the unique role their visions played in redemptive and revelatory history. Peter's visions were intended to teach him that God was including gentiles in His covenant promises. Peter represented Jewish believers to whom the gospel was entrusted, and through whom it was first proclaimed following Christ's Ascension. He also represented apostolic authority. Cornelius represented gentiles, who were previously outside the covenant (cf. Eph. 2:11-12) but who were now to be included.

Given the animosity between Jews and gentiles, and the other Jew/gentile dynamics present at that time, Peter and his apostolic companions needed to know that God was including gentiles in the covenant promises (Acts 10:28-29), and that the Holy Spirit had been given to them *just as He had been given to the Jews at Pentecost* (Acts 10:44-48; 11:1-18). Similarly, Cornelius and his fellow gentile believers needed to know that the Apostles were God's authoritative ambassadors of the gospel. Those mutual understandings were critical for the foundation and unity of the early church, and that's why Peter and Cornelius had to meet face to face.

My assumption is that most Muslims are gentiles, and therefore would already be included in the covenant promises upon exercising faith in Christ. So there would be no need for God to move among them as a people group in a parallel fashion as He did with Peter and Cornelius. So there is no apparent pattern that Peter and Cornelius set for the current Muslim phenomenon. Yes, they had visions, but those visions were set in a unique and non-repeatable redemptive context.

- f. **Acts 16:6** – Paul's vision of the man of Macedonia beckoning him to come there.

I've already commented on the unique nature and context of Paul's visions, so I needn't repeat myself here or in "g." and "h." below, except to emphasize once again that they were directly linked to apostolic authority, the birth of the church, and biblical revelation, which means they have no contemporary parallels.

- g. **Acts 18:9** – Jesus speaks to Paul in a vision to encourage him to keep preaching.

- h. **2 Corinthians 12:1** – Paul says he had momentous visions.

- i. **Revelation 1:9-17** – John has a vision of the ascended and glorified Christ. It's interesting to note that John's reaction was to "fall at His feet as a dead man" (v. 17). John knew Jesus well, and even described himself as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 21:20). But when he saw Christ in His ascended glory, he fell down as if dead. That's a far cry from the reactions of Muslims who reportedly have seen Jesus in dreams and visions in which He is typically described simply as a man in a white robe who made them feel an overwhelming sense of love.

**Conclusion:** In light of their unique contexts I must conclude that the New Testament vision passages do not lend biblical support to contemporary Muslim dreams.

## 12. *Does Joel 2:28 support the Muslim dreams phenomenon?*

Joel 2:28 is a favorite verse for supporters of Muslim dreams because it speaks of a time when dreams and visions will be common: "And it will come about after this that I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind; and your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions." There's no doubt Joel prophesied that such a time would come, but are Muslim dreams part of its fulfillment?

Joel's prophecy has elements that are difficult to interpret, but its key elements are clear and identify a time that is yet future as the time of its fulfillment. A full exegesis of that passage is beyond the scope of this paper<sup>12</sup>, but note that verse 28 begins, "and it will come about *after this*" (italics added), which refers back to verses 2-27. Those verses speak of events that have not yet occurred, and of a time when God will bless Israel and she will know that He is her God. Then verse 28 will occur.

Many advocates of Muslim dreams reference Pentecost and Peter's description of the phenomenon accompanying the coming of the Holy Spirit on that occasion as initiating the era of dreams and visions prophesied by Joel – an era, they say, that will continue throughout the church age. In Acts 2:16 Peter does describe the phenomenon onlookers were witnessing at Pentecost as "what was spoken of through the prophet Joel." He then quotes Joel 2:28-32:

"And it shall be in the last days," God says, "That I will pour forth of My Spirit upon all mankind; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even upon My bondslaves, both men and women, I will in those days pour forth of My Spirit and they shall prophesy. And I will grant wonders in the sky above, and signs on the earth beneath, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and glorious day of the Lord shall come. And it shall be, that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2:17-21).

It's clear from the description of the cosmic signs in Joel's prophecy that Pentecost was only a partial fulfillment of that prophecy, with its complete fulfillment yet to come. Dr. Irvin Busenitz comments:

The cosmic signs of Joel 2:30-31 [3:3-4] are significantly absent in Luke's account of Pentecost. The sun was not darkened; the moon did not turn to blood. There is no blood, fire, or columns of smoke. Joel mentions nothing of speaking supernaturally generated foreign languages nor does Acts give evidence of supernatural dreams.<sup>13</sup>

Nathan Busenitz adds, "If the continuationist [those who believe that the signs and wonders of the Apostolic age continue throughout the church age] is going to apply the prophecy and dreams of Joel 2 to the entire church age, he must explain why the cosmic signs of Joel 2/Acts 2 are not also a continuing part of the church age."<sup>14</sup> That's the challenge for those who appeal to Joel 2:28 in support of Muslim dreams as well.

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<sup>12</sup> For a full treatment of Joel's prophecy, I recommend Dr. Irvin Busenitz's commentary, *Joel and Obadiah: A Mentor Commentary*, Christian Focus, or Charles L. Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets*, Moody Press.

<sup>13</sup> Irvin Busenitz, *Joel and Obadiah: A Mentor Commentary*, Christian Focus, p. 193.

<sup>14</sup> Nathan Busenitz, *Now that's the Spirit - Assessing and Addressing Evangelical Charismatics*, Notes from 2006 Grace Community Church Shepherds' Conference, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Irvin Busenitz, *Joel and Obadiah: A Mentor Commentary*, Christian Focus, p. 194.

Dr. Irvin Busenitz continues:

Only two points of contact are found [between Joel's prophecy and Pentecost]: God's Spirit was poured out, and those who called upon the name of the Lord were saved. But it is these two elements of Joel's prophecy – the Spirit poured out and salvation for those who call on the Lord – that provide the connecting link to Pentecost. They lead logically to the central focus of Peter's sermon. Consequently, it appears best to view Joel's prophecy as fulfilled in a preliminary fashion at the time of Pentecost, with a complete fulfillment reserved for the time surrounding the Second Advent.

There were no dreams or visions at Pentecost, nor did Joel indicate that Jesus would appear in dreams and visions when His Prophecy *was* fulfilled. He speaks only of the *fact* of dreams and visions, not of their content. Therefore, it's incumbent upon those who defend Muslim dreams on the basis of Joel 2:28 to demonstrate more convincingly how Joel's prophecy supports this phenomenon.

### 13. *If Jesus isn't appearing in these dreams, who is?*

If the Isa of Muslim dreams is not the Jesus of the Bible, who is he? One option is a false Christ appearing as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:4, 13-15). But what could the enemy of our souls hope to gain from doing that? Consider this: we've already seen that people with sinful motives have preached Christ for selfish gain (Phil. 1:15-18), so it's reasonable to envision the author of pride and selfishness doing the same and in the process potentially:

- Diverting worship from Christ to himself, which has been his goal from the beginning (Isa. 14:12-14; Matt. 4:9).
- Deceiving Muslims into thinking they're worshiping the true Jesus when, in fact, they're worshiping the person in their dreams. All the accounts I've read unquestioningly equate Isa with Jesus.
- Diluting the primacy, centrality and authority of God's Word by establishing faith based on subjective revelations and experiences (John 20:24-29).
- Creating expectations of evangelism linked to visitations from Jesus. (Some Muslim outreach strategies now include praying that Isa will appear to even more Muslims so more will be saved.)
- Creating expectations of additional visitations from Jesus, such as during times of persecution, and the inevitable disillusionment and confusion that result when those expectations aren't met.
- Causing division within the Body of Christ over this issue.

I mention those to illustrate how the enemy could benefit from a phenomenon that on the surface may seem like a kingdom divided. I haven't concluded that visions of Isa are necessarily demonic, nor do I believe Muslims are not being genuinely saved. But

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Muslims who come to Christ do so in the same way everyone else throughout church history has: the Holy Spirit opens their hearts to the truth (Acts 16:14). But the spiritual harm that can result from connecting their faith to subjective mystical experiences can be great, as certain parallel revelatory claims of the Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements (as well as various cultic groups) have demonstrated over the years.

When it comes to personal revelations from God, the difference between the Muslim phenomenon and other revelatory claims is simply one of degree, not kind. Consequently, an experiential and mystical foundation has already been laid for the communities of former Muslims who have seen Isa and now profess faith in Christ.

**14. *Are there cultural considerations that might shed light on this phenomenon?***

Another option to the question of who is appearing to these Muslims has to do with cultural considerations. In my research I sought the counsel of Dr. William Barrick, Professor of Old Testament at The Master's Seminary. Dr. Barrick ministered among Muslims in Bangladesh for 15 years and offered these observations about reported appearances of Jesus to Muslim converts there:

- (1) Most turned out to be pure imagination upon close questioning and examination. None had really seen him while awake—almost every single one had had some sort of dream.
- (2) Muslims can be extremely susceptible to charismatic doctrine and practices, because much of folk Islam is infused with the same things seen in charismatic circles (speaking in tongues, healings, miracles, extreme emotionalism).
- (3) Muslims revere special experiences and make them up in order to provide (a) a viable [in their opinion] response to those who accuse them of abandoning Islam, (b) a means of identifying with the testimony and life of persecution lived by the Apostle Paul, and (c) dreams are taken very, very seriously—about anything.
- (4) Those who had dreams about Jesus seem to have all had some prior contact with Christians, the Gospel, or with the Scriptures that left an indelible impression. What was revealed in the dream had first been revealed to them in real life experience. The dreams merely replicated those experiences. The appearance of Jesus in their dreams matched exactly the appearance of Him they had seen as a child in a Christian flannel graph lesson or in some Christian literature. The verses of Scripture (John 3:16 being a favorite) in their dreams was one they had been taught or heard.<sup>15</sup>

Dr. Barrick adds, "Paul's Epistle to the Colossians deals with those who claim special

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<sup>15</sup> The Arabic translation of the Christian Scriptures dates back to about 867 AD (the Mt. Sinai Arabic Codex 151, and includes the Biblical text, marginal comments, lectionary notes, and glosses). Therefore, many Muslims have had the Bible in their language for more than 1,000 years. (c.f. [http://www.arabicbible.com/bible/codex\\_151.htm](http://www.arabicbible.com/bible/codex_151.htm)).

experiences (such as visions) and counters their error with the realities of the work and Person of Christ.”

**Conclusion:** If Muslims were having dreams about Jesus, which resulted in opening their hearts to the gospel, I’d say, “Praise the Lord”, because I believe the Holy Spirit can use natural dreams to convict people of their need for salvation and direct them to the gospel if He so chooses. However, the reports I’m hearing and reading claim that Jesus Himself, in the person of Isa, is appearing to Muslims in dreams. I must reject the accuracy of those claims for all the reasons outlined above, and conclude that such dreams and visions lack biblical authority and must therefore be viewed as extra-biblical experiences generated from sources other than the Holy Spirit. I must also continue to pray that the gospel of Jesus Christ, not dreams and visions of Isa, will permeate Muslim communities throughout the world for the glory of our Lord and the salvation of many precious souls.