

The Quran and its Message

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Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

HOW DID GOD'S AGENTS (PROPHETS & MESSENGERS) RECEIVE INSPIRATIONS?

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INTRODUCTION

In a related article, the Arabic term 'wahi' (inspiration) was discussed and how God communicates with His Creation. Verse 42:51 was referenced, where it was suggested that God also imparted His communication through God appointed agents such as messengers. **Please see related article [1] below.**

It is widely accepted in popular Muslim thought that the vehicle through which Prophet Muhammad ^(pbuh) received his inspirations was through dreams. Whilst this is an acceptable assertion as will be shown from the Quran's perspective, the article will also attempt to show that the notion of limiting Prophetic revelation exclusively through dreams has no apparent warrant from the Quran.

Some key terms will also be discussed to provide insights from a Quranic perspective.

REVELATIONS THROUGH DREAMS

021.005

"Nay, they say, (these are but) muddled / confused / jumbled (Arabic: aghat) dreams (Arabic: **ahlam**); nay, he has but invented it; nay, he is but a poet. So let him bring us a portent / sign like what was sent to the former (who were sent signs / portents)"

The Arabic word '**ahlam**' is formed from the root HLM and is the plural of the word 'hulm' which means a **vision** or a **dream**.

حلم

1. حَلَمَ, (Ṣ, Mṣb, Ḳ, [in the CḲ, erroneously, حَلَمَ,]) aor. ʔ, inf. n. حُلْمٌ (Mṣb, TA) and حُلْمٌ, of which the former is a contraction, (Mṣb,) [both used also as simple substs.,] He dreamed, or saw a dream or vision (Ṣ, Mṣb, Ḳ) فِي نَوْمِهِ (Ḳ) in his sleep; (Ṣ,* Mṣb, Ḳ;) as also اِحْتَلَمَ,

Source: Edward Lanes Lexicon [1]

Verse 21:5 cited above certainly 'appears' to corroborate the assertion that Prophet Muhammad ^(pbuh) received his revelations through dreams or at least, that is how a segment of his audience understood the claims. Given the nature of the verse and the claims of the Quran's invention coupled with the charge that the Prophet was naught but a poet (both charges which are rebuked elsewhere), this arguably introduces the element of doubt as to whether to accept the first charge of 'ahlam' (dreams) as true. After all as some may argue, the verse simply captures the assertions expressed by the disbelievers and is not to be accepted as fact.

This is countered if the whole remit of the rebuke in the verse is considered, particularly pertaining to the charge of dreams. Firstly, there is no rebuke presented by the Quran to the claim that the Prophet's inspirations were received through dreams. Here dreams stand in contrast to other allegations which have been rebuked in other verses of the Quran such as the charge of invention / forgery and poetry (10:38, 11:13; 11:35; 32:3; 46:8; 52:33; 36:69).

Furthermore, the actual charge is one of 'muddled, confused, jumbled or a hotchpotch of' (adghat) dreams and **not** dreams **per se**. Therefore, the 'ahlam' (dreams) may still remain a viable possibility as the vehicle through which at least some of the Prophetic communications took place, supporting at least in part, the traditional understanding.

It is also to be noted that the Quran lends further support to the notion of Prophetic dreams or visions in which the Prophet received prophecy. This is noted in the following verse.

048.027

"Certainly God did fulfil the vision (ru'ya) for His Messenger in truth. Surely, you shall enter the Sacred Mosque, if God wills, secure, having shaved your heads and (hair) shortened and without fear. For He knew what you knew not and He granted, besides this, a speedy victory"

The fact that the Prophet had a vision / dream pertaining to a future event is clearly indicated in the above verse. The Arabic word 'ru'ya' used in the above verse also means a vision or a dream. Despite carrying its own nuances, the overlap in meaning of both the terms 'ru'ya' and 'ahlam' can be noted in verse 12:43 where a king asked his subjects for an explanation of his visions (ru'ya - 12:43). They

responded by informing the king that they had no recourse to the interpretations of such dreams (ahlam - 12:44).

Therefore, the channel of dreams in which God communicated with his messenger is highly probable.

It is also to be appreciated that from a Quranic perspective, dreams indicating future events (prophecies) in truth are certainly not restricted to Prophets. The fact that ordinary people can receive prophecy through dreams is supported by others verses of the Quran. Notwithstanding the verses mentioning the visions of the king as alluded to above (12:43), there were also those in the prison with Prophet Joseph ^(pbuh) (12:36) who also received truthful visions. Furthermore, events may not always be represented accurately in a dream (for many reasons). An example is noted in verse 8:43 which is elucidated with a reason. (...showed in your dream as few and if He had shown them to you as many surely you would have lost courage ...)

POWERFUL INSPIRATIONS THROUGH THE MIND

One other possibility seldom referenced in popular thought is the existence of inspired communications that are channelled directly through the mind. The suggestion that any kind of inspired messages could be grasped or even 'heard' by the mind of enlightened spiritual souls in a wakeful state may be a difficult proposition for some to grasp. However, such a suggestion would not appear alien to the Quran.

With a view to cite an example, in verses 19:2-15 one notes a narrative captured with regards Zakariya. Verses 19:4-7 narrate an incident in which Zakariya prayed to his Lord to be granted a particular request (19:4-6). This request was answered and accepted by God (19:7). A seemingly two-way conversation is then noted between Zakariya and God in verses 19:8-9. There is no indication in the verses that Zakariya was in a state of sleep, but rather given the context, in a state of prayer / spiritual contemplation.

The narrative becomes even more insightful when Zakariya is further noted to ask for a sign in verse 19:10. This request seems almost superfluous in need especially since a two-way conversation was already in situ. It rather seems expressive of certain doubts that Zakariya may have had with regards interpreting his inspirations at that moment. Was the inspiration really what he thought was from God? If Zakariya had clearly heard voices or had been visited by a physical manifestation whilst praying, he would arguably not be asking for further signs. His experience would have been certain.

Therefore, it seems that the communication was in part inspired in the mind, almost as strong suggestions which Zakariya interpreted as possible speech from a heavenly source. There does not appear to be any physical presence that manifested such as in the case of Mary (19:17), or Lot (11:77). Hence, the possible request for further proof.

One also notes such discussions which appear to be inspired in the mind in which an almost two-way conversation is captured with God. One notes this with the narratives concerning Prophet Abraham ^(pbuh) with regards to the incident involving birds (2:260) and conversations with Prophet Moses ^(pbuh) (7:143).

Therefore given the above narratives, one feels inclined to present the suggestion that enlightened agents of God could arguably possess the capacity to interpret inspired Divine messages directly through their minds possibly appearing to them as 'voices' which could be 'sensed / perceived' or even 'heard'.

HOW DO INSPIRATIONS TAKE PLACE?

The Quran makes use of interesting terminology to depict the ability of dark forces to inspire humankind by inferring the communication method as 'waswasa (vb) / waswas (n)' or evil inclined 'whispers'. This almost alludes to the ability of one to sense such a communication. After all, one would question the mention of such inclinations if one did not retain the ability to be able to comprehend when such an inspiration manifested.

The Quran expects believers to remain vigilant of such whisperings which alludes to the ability of perception to be able to understand such inspirations. This begs the question, if such an evil inspiration can be determined and deciphered by innate perception, can positive inspirations possibly from a Divine source also be comprehensible to the human mind? The answer from a Quran's perspective would seem to suggest an affirmative answer.

The Quran appeals to an innate ability of the soul to discern between right and wrong. Not to be confused with the Arabic term 'AHLAM' (dream / vision) as discussed above, the term 'aLHAM' is used to indicate an inspiration or a suggestion that instinctively directs the soul to act as a criterion.

091:007-8

"And a soul and Him Who perfected / proportioned it. And inspired it (Arabic: alhama) (with conscience of) what is wrong for it and (what is) right for it."

له

4. أَلْهَمَهُ اللَّهُ لِلْخَيْرِ [God directed him by inspiration to that which was good, or to prosperity]. (TA, art. وقف) — أَلْهَمَهُ آيَاهُ He suggested it to him; (in the order of the words, he suggested to him it;) he put it into his mind.

This innate discerning power to make choices with righteous intentions increases with those who choose to strive with a view to purify themselves of mind and spirit.

091:009

"He is indeed successful who causes it to grow (purifies it)"

Those that corrupt their souls and allow their perversions and transgressions to take over their affairs only become desensitised to transgression or committing evil.

091:009

"And he is indeed a failure who corrupts it (buries it)"

Therefore, it is quite plausible to conclude that God's appointed agents such as mighty Prophets and messengers were extremely adept at understanding such positive inspirations due to their heightened state of spirituality and purified state of mind and heart.

038.045-47

"And remember Our slaves, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, possessors of power and vision / insights (sense of seeing) (Arabic: absar). Indeed, We purified them by a pure quality / thought, remembrance of the Home (of the Hereafter). And indeed! in Our sight / to us they are from the chosen ones / the elect, the best / excellent"

Such an understanding certainly widens the scope of understanding how God's agents possibly received inspirations.

PROPHETIC DOUBTS AND THE ABILITY TO DISCERN

We noted above that God's agents at times sought Divine reassurances whilst interpreting their inspirations. It is important to appreciate that from a Quran's perspective, Satan and his minions have always had a vested interest in causing interference, disharmony and confusion.

022.052

"And We did not send a messenger or a prophet before you, but, when he desired, Satan threw (proposed / suggested) something into his desire: but God abolishes what Satan throws (proposes / suggests) and God will confirm (and establish) His signs / verses. And God is All-Knower, All-Wise"

A messenger, who only intends to accurately communicate his inspirations to his people whilst remaining cognizant of such sentiments as expressed in the above verse, would only seek reassurances and often question the legitimacy of his thoughts.

Even Prophet Muhammad^(pbuh) is often noted in the Quran to harbour doubts (7:2; 32:23, 10:94-95; 16:43; 21:7) to which God responds with consolatory verses and words of solace.

As noted by an Islamic scholar:

“There are several passages in which the Prophet receives words of solace. These include 52.29; 68.2-7 and 48-50; 70.5-7; 79.42-46; 88.21-26; 93.3-8; 94.1-6; and 108.1 and 3.

They comprise reassurances that hurtful statement made by opponents are untrue (52.29; 68:2 and 4; 93.3, 108.3), promises (68.3; 93.4-5; 94.5-6), reminders of God's favours (93.6-8; 94.1-4; 108.1), assurances that his sole responsibility is to deliver the message (79.42-46; 88.21-26), and exhortations to be patient (68.48-50; 70.5-7) and watch how God deals with unbelievers (68.5-7; 96.8).” [3]

This also speaks volumes of the Quran's authenticity which portrays the Prophet at times in a vulnerable state. It is a difficult proposition to accept that dialogues such as these would be captured by a false Prophet writing a false scripture.

Therefore despite remaining vigilant of Satan's guile, God's agents had a heightened state of awareness as to the inspirations they received and how to discern from them. If messengers remained unsure, further reassurances were at times sought by them.

FINAL THOUGHTS

There is support from the Quran that Prophetic inspirations took place through dreams. However from a Quran's perspective, a state of quiescence or sleep is not necessarily a prerequisite to receive Divine inspirations.

It was suggested on the strength of Quranic evidence, that inspirations were also possible in a state of wakefulness and via suggestions through the mind widening the scope of how appointed God's agents could possibly receive God's communications.

Related Articles:

- (1) [Understanding Verse 42:51 - Who can Receive 'Wahi'?](#)
- (2) [Were all the Prophet's Utterances a 'Wahi' from God? \(Divinely inspired\)](#)

REFERENCES

[1] LANE. E.W, Edward Lanes Lexicon, Williams and Norgate 1863; Librairie du Liban Beirut-Lebanon 1968, Volume 2, Page 631

Highlights marked in red on the lexicon excerpt are my own insertions. They have no bearing on the original text other than they emphasise relevance to the topic at hand. These are merely illustrations and have solely been utilised for educational and explanatory purposes.

[2] Ibid., Volume 8, Supplement Page 3014

[3] ROBINSON, N, *Discovering the Quran, A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text, Second Edition*, SCM Press, Part Three: Morphology, Structure and Coherence, 6: The Formal Elements of the 'Early Meccan' Surahs, 6.10 Messenger sections, Page 121

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