

**Ancient Dream Interpretation:  
The Hebrew Bible and Mesopotamia  
HEB 141**

Harvard University  
Spring 2017, M/W 4:00–5:30  
Sever Hall 201

Instructor: Dr. Maria Metzler  
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Office hours: by appointment

**Course Description**

Where do dreams come from, and what do they mean? In much of the ancient world, dreams were regarded as cryptic messages sent by deities or supernatural dream-figures. This course will investigate the role of dream decipherment in the Hebrew Bible, including the tales of Joseph and Daniel, where the accurate interpretation of dreams is regarded as proof of divine patronage. We'll also read a number of ancient Mesopotamian texts such as the *Assyrian Dream Book* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, in which strange dream scenarios are described and explained. Topics of study include rituals for generating dreams (incubation); recurring dreams; fortune-telling through dreams (oneiromancy); and methods of healing from nightmares. Ancient understandings of dreams will be contrasted with modern psychological and literary views on dreaming. We will also explore the relationship between dreams and writing in ancient and contemporary perspectives.

**Course Requirements**

1. Active participation in class, with regular attendance and completion of reading assignments. No electronic devices may be used in class. Students must bring a paper copy of assigned readings. (15%)
2. Daily dream journal. Students are required to keep a written record of their dreams throughout the course of the semester. These dream books will not be turned in or graded, but are a space for students to write and remember their dreams in an uncensored manner.
3. Monday letter. A weekly letter of 1–2 pages will be due every Monday, starting February 6. Choose a short excerpt from an assigned reading or from your own dream journal to discuss in the format of a letter. The letter need not be addressed to me, but I will read it and write back. (20%)
4. Presentation. Each student will give a 15-minute in-class presentation. A list of suggested topics will be distributed in early February. (10%)
5. Midterm examination on **March 8**, covering readings (primary and secondary texts) and general facts on the Hebrew Bible and ancient Near East. (25%)
6. Final paper (8–10 pages). Propose a topic for approval after the midterm exam. Students are encouraged to submit a draft for feedback in advance of the deadline, **May 4**. (30%)

## Required Texts

1. *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Marc Brettler and Adele Berlin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2014).
2. *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, trans. Andrew George (London: Penguin Classics, 2003).
3. Leo Oppenheim, *The Interpretation of Dreams in the Ancient Near East: With a Translation of an Assyrian Dream-Book* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1956).

## Tentative Schedule

### Week 1

January 23: Introduction to the course

January 25: Introduction to dreams in the Hebrew Bible and ancient Near East

*Jewish Study Bible*: pages 1–11 (on Torah and Genesis); and 2048–62 (Historical and Geographical Background).

Scott Noegel, “Dreams and Dream Interpreters in Mesopotamia and in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament),” pages 45–71 in *Dreams: A Reader on Religious, Cultural, and Psychological Dimensions of Dreaming*, ed. Kelly Bulkeley (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

### Week 2, The Ladder of Dreams

January 30: Jacob’s ladder and other Genesis dreams

February 1: Cixous, “The School of Dreams”

Genesis 15, 20, 26–32

Hélène Cixous, “The School of Dreams,” pages 57–108 in *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

Susan Ackerman, “The Deception of Isaac, Jacob’s Dream at Bethel, and Incubation on Animal Skin,” pages 93–120 in *Priesthood and Cult in Ancient Israel*, ed. Gary A. Anderson and Saul M. Olyan (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991).

### Week 3, Interpreting Symbolic Dreams

February 6: Joseph and Freud

February 8: Daniel and the forgotten dream

Genesis 37–50; Daniel 1–12 (also read intro to Daniel in *JSB*)

Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Avon Books, 1965), 385–439.

S.A.L. Butler, “The Personal Deities and Dreams,” pages 89–95 in *Mesopotamian Conceptions of Dreams and Dream Rituals* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1998).

### Week 4, Dreams on the Way to the Cedar Forest

February 13–15: Gilgamesh

*The Epic of Gilgamesh*, trans. Andrew George (London: Penguin Classics, 2003).

Kelly Bulkeley, "The Evil Dreams of Gilgamesh: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Dreams in Mythological Texts," pages 159–77 in *The Dream and the Text: Essays on Literature and Language*, ed. Carol S. Rupperecht (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

Jonathan Z. Smith, "Wisdom's Place," pages 3–13 in *Death, Ecstasy, and Other Worldly Journeys*, ed. John J. Collins and Michael Fishbane (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

#### Week 5, The Dangers of Dreaming

February 20: Presidents Day (**no class**)

February 22: Biblical warnings against dreams

Numbers 12; Deuteronomy 13, 18; Jeremiah 23, 27, 29; Joel 3; Zechariah 10; Ecclesiastes 5

Patricia Cox Miller, "Figurations of Dreams," pages 14–38 in *Dreams in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

#### Week 6, Incubation

February 27: Samuel and the *Legend of Sharrumkin* (Sargon of Akkad)

March 1: Royal incubation: Saul, David, Solomon; Lugalbanda

1 Samuel 3, 28; 2 Samuel 11–12; 1 Kings 3; 2 Chronicles 1

Jerrold S. Cooper and Wolfgang Heimpel, "The Sumerian Sargon Legend," *JAOS* 103 (1983): 67–82, esp. 67–68, 76–78.

Butler, "Incubation," pages 217–38 in *Mesopotamian Conceptions of Dreams*.

H. L. J. Vanstiphout, "Reflections on the Dream of Lugalbanda," pages 397–407 in *Intellectual Life of the Ancient Near East* (Prague: Oriental Institute, 1998).

#### Week 7, Dreams and Death

March 6: Gideon and the Midianite soldier; Dumuzi's Dream

March 8: **Midterm examination**

Judges 7

"Dumuzi's Dream," pages 28–46 in Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Harps That Once: Sumerian Poetry in Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

Butler, "A Fright in the Night," pages 67–72 in *Mesopotamian Conceptions of Dreams*.

#### Week 8: Spring break! (no class)

#### Week 9, The Assyrian Dream Book

March 20–22

Leo Oppenheim, *The Interpretation of Dreams in the Ancient Near East*, pages 256–307.

Francesca Rochberg, "Conditionals, Inference, and Possibility in Ancient Mesopotamian Science," pages 373–97 in *In the Path of the Moon: Babylonian Celestial Divination and Its Legacy*, Studies in Ancient Magic and Divination 6 (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

Week 10, Prophetic Dreams

March 27: Balaam the dreamer

March 29: Mari letters; Gudea of Lagash

Numbers 22–24

Jack M. Sasson, "Mari Dreams," *JAOS* 103 (1983): 283–93.

"The Cylinders of Gudea," pages 386–444 in *The Harps That Once...*

Week 11, More Mesopotamian Dream Texts

April 3: Job and the Poem of the Righteous Sufferer

April 5: Erra and Ishum

Job 1–4, 7, 33, 40–42

"The Poem of the Righteous Sufferer," pages 392–409 in Benjamin Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 2005).

"Erra and Ishum," pages 880–911 in *Before the Muses*.

Week 12, Sleep in the Ancient Near East

April 10: Sleeping gods

April 12: Apotropaic dream rituals

Thomas H. McAlpine, *Sleep, Divine and Human, in the Old Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), 79–191.

Tzvi Abusch, "Ascent to the Stars in a Mesopotamian Ritual: Social Metaphor and Religious Experience," pages 15–39 in *Death, Ecstasy*.

Butler, "Sleep Disorders," pages 43–62 in *Mesopotamian Conceptions of Dreams*.

Week 13, Dreams in Ancient Greece

April 17: The Greek cult of Asclepius

April 19: Artemidorus, *Oneirocritica*

Patricia Cox Miller, "Dreams and Therapy," pages 106–23 in *Dreams in Late Antiquity*.

E. R. Dodds, "Dream-Pattern and Culture-Pattern," pages 102–34 in *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951).

Artemidorus, *Oneirocritica*, trans. Robert J. White (Torrance, CA: Original Books, 1990).

Week 14, Rabbinic Dream Interpretation

April 24–26

Rabbi Shelomo Almoli, *Dream Interpretation from Classical Jewish Sources*, trans. Yaakov Elman (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, 1998).