

How did God use dreams and visions in the Bible?

God used dreams and visions (visions are “waking dreams”; see [Numbers 24:4](#)) several times in the Bible to communicate with people. Visions seem to have been common enough that their lack was sorely noted. An absence of visions was due at times to a dearth of prophets ([1 Samuel 3:1](#)) and other times due to the disobedience of God’s people ([1 Samuel 28:6](#)).

Old Testament Dreams and Visions

God used visions in the Old Testament to reveal His plan, to further His plan, and to put His people in places of influence.

Abraham ([Genesis 15:1](#)): God used a vision to restate the [Abrahamic Covenant](#), reminding Abram that he would have a son and be the father of many nations.

Abimelech ([Genesis 20:1-7](#)): Abraham’s wife, Sarah, was beautiful—so beautiful that when Abraham came into a new area he occasionally feared that the local ruler would kill him and take Sarah for himself. Abraham told Abimelech king of Gerar that Sarah was his sister (she was his half-sister). Abimelech took Sarah into his harem, but God sent him a dream telling him not to touch Sarah because she was Abraham’s wife. The king returned Sarah to her husband the next morning; the dream had protected Sarah and safeguarded God’s plan for Sarah to be the mother of His chosen people.

Jacob ([Genesis 28:10-17](#)): Jacob, with his mother’s help, stole Esau’s firstborn inheritance. Jacob then fled Esau’s anger, and on his journey he had his famous dream of a ladder reaching to heaven on which angels ascended and descended. In this dream Jacob received God’s promise that Abraham’s blessing would be carried on through him.

Joseph ([Genesis 37:1-11](#)): Joseph is one of the most famous dreamers, and one of the most famous dream-interpreters, in the Bible. His first recorded dreams are found in [Genesis 37](#). They showed through easily deciphered symbols that Joseph’s family would one day bow to him in respect. His brothers didn’t appreciate the dream and in their hatred sold Joseph into slavery. Eventually, Joseph ended up in prison in Egypt.

Pharaoh’s cupbearer and baker ([Genesis 40](#)): While in prison Joseph interpreted some dreams of Pharaoh’s cupbearer and baker. With God’s guidance, he explained that the cupbearer would return to Pharaoh’s service, but the baker would be killed.

Pharaoh ([Genesis 41](#)): Two years later, Pharaoh himself had a dream which Joseph interpreted. God’s purpose was to raise Joseph to second-in-command over Egypt and to save the Egyptians and the Israelites from a horrible famine.

Samuel ([1 Samuel 3](#)): Samuel had his first vision as a young boy. God told him that judgment was coming upon the sons of Samuel’s mentor, Eli. The young Samuel was faithful to relay the information, and God continued to speak to Samuel through the rest of his life.

The Midianite and Amalekite armies ([Judges 7:12-15](#)): The pagan enemies of Israel had a divinely inspired dream. God told Gideon to sneak into the enemy camp at night, and there in the outposts of the camp, Gideon overheard an enemy soldier relate a dream he had just had. The interpretation, from another enemy soldier, mentioned Gideon by name and predicted that Israel would win the battle. Gideon was greatly encouraged by this revelation.

Solomon ([1 Kings 3:5](#)): It was in a dream that God gave Solomon the famous offer: “Ask what you wish Me to give you.” Solomon chose wisdom.

Daniel ([Daniel 2; 4](#)): As He had done for Joseph, God placed Daniel in a position of power and influence by allowing him to interpret a foreign ruler’s dream. This is consistent with God’s propensity to use miracles to identify His messengers. Daniel himself had many dreams and visions, mostly related to future kingdoms of the world and the nation of Israel.

New Testament Dreams and Visions

Visions in the New Testament also served to provide information that was unavailable elsewhere. Specifically, God used visions and dreams to identify Jesus and to establish His church.

Zacharias ([Luke 1:5-23](#)): God used a vision to tell Zacharias, an old priest, that he would soon have an important son. Not long after, Zacharias and his wife, Elizabeth, had John the Baptist.

Joseph ([Matthew 1:20; 2:13](#)): Joseph would have divorced Mary when he found out she was pregnant, but God sent an angel to him in a dream, convincing him that the pregnancy was of God. Joseph went ahead with the marriage. After Jesus was born, God sent two more dreams, one to tell Joseph to take his family to Egypt so Herod could not kill Jesus and another to tell him Herod was dead and that he could return home.

Pilate’s wife ([Matthew 27:19](#)): During Jesus’ trial, Pilate’s wife sent an urgent message to the governor encouraging him to free Jesus. Her message was prompted by a dream she had—a nightmare, really—that convinced her that Jesus was innocent and that Pilate should have nothing to do with His case.

Ananias ([Acts 9:10](#)): It would have taken nothing less than a vision from God to convince Ananias, a Christian in Damascus, to visit Paul, the persecutor of Christians. But because Ananias was obedient to God’s leading, Paul regained his sight and found the truth about those he was trying to kill.

Cornelius ([Acts 10:1-6](#)): God spoke to an Italian centurion named Cornelius who feared the God of the Jews. In his vision, Cornelius saw an angel who told him where to find Simon Peter and to send for him and listen to his message. Cornelius obeyed the vision, Peter came and preached, and Cornelius and his household full of Gentiles were saved by the grace of God.

Peter ([Acts 10:9-15](#)): While Peter was praying on the rooftop of a house in Joppa, God gave him a vision of animals lowered in something like a sheet. A voice from heaven told Peter to kill the animals (some of which were unclean) and eat them. The vision served to show that Christians are not bound by kosher law and that God had pronounced Gentiles “clean”; that is, heaven is open to all who follow Jesus.

Paul: Paul had several visions in his missionary career. One sent him to preach in Macedonia ([Acts 16:9-10](#)). Another encouraged him to keep preaching in Corinth ([Acts 18:9-11](#)). God also gave him a vision of heaven ([2 Corinthians 12:1-6](#)).

John (Revelation): Nearly the entire book of Revelation is a vision John had while exiled on the island of Patmos. John’s vision explains in more detail some of the events that God had shown Daniel.

Today’s Dreams and Visions

With the completion of the Bible, God does not have to use dreams and visions as much as He did before. That is not to say that He cannot or does not; God can communicate with us however He chooses. But when we have a decision to make, our first stop should always be the Bible, not a dream.