

RBL 10/2007



Noegel, Scott

***Nocturnal Ciphers: The Allusive Language of
Dreams in the Ancient Near East***

American Oriental Series, 89

New Haven, Conn.: American Oriental Society,
2007. Pp. xvi + 346. Cloth. \$49.50. ISBN
094049020x.

Robert Gnuse
Loyola University
New Orleans, Louisiana 70118

Scott Noegel has crafted a brilliant monograph on the phenomena of enigmatic dreams in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Canaan, Israel, Greece, and the Rabbinic traditions. (“Enigmatic” is his preferred word for what previous scholars have called “symbolic” dreams.) His thesis, which has been explicated by him in many previous articles and papers, is that the key to understanding the value and meaning of enigmatic dreams for the ancients is to realize that the interpretation of dream images was accomplished by wordplays and punning. Both dream reports and their interpretive meanings were recorded with puns in the literary texts. The same is true for the dream books, which were tools for interpretation. Hence, the meaning of any visual dream image was connected to a similar sounding word or expression, which forecast the future for the dreamer. Punning not only unfolded the meaning of dreams, but it gave the interpreter power over them and turned the interpretive experience into a magical performative ritual (thus negating the power or impurity caused by the enigmatic dream). Though Noegel appreciates the form-critical analysis and classification of dream reports undertaken by previous scholars, he suggests that a truly deeper understanding of dreams in the ancient world can be provided by the appreciation of this phenomenon of mantic punning.

His study gives special consideration to selected important enigmatic dream reports: 1) the dreams of Gilgamesh in both the Old Babylonian (second millennium B.C.E.) and Assyrian (first millennium B.C.E.) texts of the Gilgamesh Epic; 2) the dream report of Addu-duri of Amorite Mari in the early second millennium B.C.E.; 3) the Egyptian dream

of Pharaoh Tantamani in the seventh century B.C.E.; 4) the dream of El in the Ugaritic Baal Myth, 5) the four dreams of the butler, baker, and pharaoh in the Joseph narratives of Gen 40–41; 6) the dream of the Midianite in Jud 7; 7) dreams of Nebuchadnezzar in Dan 2 and 4; 8) Daniel’s “vision” in Dan 7 (“dreams” and “visions” ought not be distinguished, says Noegel); and 9) Penelope’s dream about the geese/suitors in Homer’s *Odyssey*. In addition, special attention is paid to the interpretation of omnia found in the famous dream book, *Oneirocritica*, composed by Artemidorus of Daldis in the second century C.E.

Noegel builds upon the work of previous scholars (Oppenheim, Ehrlich, Richter, Gnuse, and Husser) in admirable fashion. He has thought out many of the debated issues very well and subsequently challenges some previous scholarly conclusions with well-articulated arguments. Nor does he fear to criticize strongly scholarly works that appear to have been crafted in sloppy fashion. He is appropriately critical of psycho-analytic evaluations of literary texts. His bibliography (sixty-six pages in length) and footnote documentation is superb; he gathers resources like the Aswan Dam collects water, and he integrates his sources excellently.

Though his primary focus is to document how dream interpretation was predicated upon the principle of word plays and punning by the dream interpreters of that age, he has a number of valuable subsidiary theses to offer us. 1) Dream interpretation was a ritual experience, even reading a narrative containing a dream report and its interpretation was an act of ritual power. 2) Dream interpretation was similar to all other forms of ancient prognostication, especially in Mesopotamia, for all omnia were messages sent from the gods, be they dreams, astral signs, animal livers, or birth deformities. The implication is that other omnia also were interpreted by recourse to word plays and puns. 3) Dream interpretation was a mantic skill of the scribal elite; it was a form of the wider category of mantic wisdom. 4) Mesopotamia ultimately was the source for this mode of dream interpretation. Noegel suggests that the oneirocritical skills in particular were transmitted from Mesopotamia to Egypt during the New Kingdom period and thence from Egypt back to Assyria in the seventh century B.C.E. Ultimately, the use of word plays to interpret dreams is found only in the Near East and Greece, and its origin can be traced to Mesopotamia. Noegel briefly suggest that the nature of cuneiform texts lent itself to this kind of mantic procedure. (Thus, Freud was wrong to declare that punning was a dream interpretive technique universally. Nor is that the only mistake Freud made about dream interpretation.) 5) Dream interpreters in the biblical narratives really undertook the same procedures in unlocking the meanings of dreams as their ancient counterparts, despite their claims to be prophets and not magicians (Joseph and Daniel). Modern scholars have erred in attempting to differentiate biblical texts from ancient Near Eastern dream reports. Puns were used to unlock dream messages by everyone in the ancient Near East.

The only differences in the biblical reports result from the fact that the biblical authors did not revere the Mesopotamian dream gods or have the same ritual practices that were involved in the Mesopotamian interpretive process. Hence, biblical reports are rather truncated with no reference to the ritual praxis. 6) The distinction between message dreams and symbolic or enigmatic dreams, first proposed by Artemidorus, and used by modern scholars, is rather artificial, for a number of dreams blur these categories.

Noegel's work is a *tour de force* argument for the notion of punning as the interpretive tool in handling dreams. His monograph is also an excellent presentation of the entire scholarly discussion of dreams and dream reports of the past half century with his own new insightful observations. The work is to be recommended highly as a scholarly resource.