God's Voice in My Dreams | BY JAMES J. LONDIS

During a Sabbath camp meeting service many years ago, I heard a widely respected Adventist preacher claim that God had told him in a dream that Jesus would come before a specific date (which has since passed). His comment startled me. Why would he accept that dream as an authentic communiqué from God? Why would he not doubt its content (and therefore its source) given the biblical warnings about such speculation? Did he not understand the implicit arrogance behind his prediction; namely, that of all the people in the world, God had chosen *him* to be the one who would *know* the year Jesus would return?

English philosopher Thomas Hobbes once asked: "What is the difference between saying 'God spoke to me in a dream,' and 'I dreamed God spoke to me'?" This pointed question makes clear that, experientially, there is no difference. "God spoke to me in a dream" claims that God gave the dreamer—through an immediate experience—direct (and by implication), error-free knowledge, whereas "I dreamed God spoke to me" claims that the subconscious provided a vivid experience of the divine that may or may not be a vehicle for knowledge *of* God. Hobbes's question is an epistemological challenge to believers: If God spoke to you in such a dream, how would you *know* it? How could you prove it, even to yourself?

Your inner states and dreamworld are incontrovertible events you cannot deny or ignore. If you had the experience, you had the experience. No one can prove you did not (nor can you prove you did—we take your word for it). In your subjective world, you always know *that* you had the experience. What you may not be certain of is *what* you experienced. Do your private events yield knowledge of realities outside of yourself?

Epistemology, like many philosophical terms, comes from two Greek words; *episteme* for "know" and *logos* for "science of," and is one of the most vexing subjects in philosophy. Christian epistemology is particularly contentious since believers make claims about knowing the transcendent, infinite, and invisible God who can only be known if and when he chooses to reveal himself.[1] Religious experiences are varied.

Some people allege that religious experiences bring a unity with the divine (mysticism, for example), whereas others insist they provide a powerful sense of separation (God is "other") or a profound feeling of dependence on God. Some philosophers will argue that one cannot have a direct encounter with the external world (or God); we can only experience our representations and images of that world.

Without going into the details of this debate, let me say that I believe we can directly experience the world (and God), but that the experience is always mediated through our senses and our minds. This makes error possible, but it also means that we are experiencing the world and not simply our own impressions or feelings. For this reason,

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we usually trust that what we experience really exists. Our experience of the tree means a tree is there (even though hallucinations are possible).

Epistemology in My Personal Journey

My passion for religious epistemology developed long before I knew what it was. My paternal grandfather was born in Anavryte, Greece, a peasant village high in the mountains overlooking the plain of Sparta. Orphaned in his early teens, he found his way to the United States and settled in a Greek community in Brooklyn, New York. At some point, he abandoned his Greek Orthodox heritage, joined the Pentecostal church downstairs from his Coney Island apartment, and eventually became a lay minister who easily read New Testament Greek.

His son—my father—was (and still is) something of an agnostic, and an uncle on my mother's side was also an agnostic (with an engineering degree) committed to evolution as a theory of origins. My mother, however, had no interest whatsoever in religion. Out of this mixed soil, I decided—along with my maternal grandparents and younger brother—to become a Seventh-day Adventist when I was fourteen years old. Within months of my baptism, I felt drawn to the ministry.

Family reaction was swift.

Uncle: "How do you *know* the world was created six thousand years ago when all the scientific evidence suggests otherwise? How do you *know* the Bible is God's revelation to humankind?" He tried to bribe me, in a way: If I would give up my belief in creation and go to the University of New Mexico (his alma mater) to pursue engineering, he would pay for it (a tempting offer to a boy raised on welfare).

Grandfather ("Papou"): "How do you *know* that Colossians 2:14–17 is not talking about the weekly Sabbath? How do you *know* that Ellen White received the prophetic gift?" Papou also argued that Adventists misinterpreted the New Testament doctrine of righteousness by grace through faith (most notably in their insistence on the seventh-day Sabbath).

Mother: She breathed a sigh of relief that I was not going to get into trouble with the police. My father—living elsewhere by this time—said nothing, though I cannot imagine him being very enthusiastic. Years later, he would say, "I wish I could believe as you do, but I can't." Nonetheless, he never questioned my decision and always took pride in what I accomplished.

Desperately wanting to convince the skeptical family members that I did "know," I spent hours reading anything I could get my hands on that would buttress the Adventist case. I peppered the local pastors and Bible workers with questions. Years later, I realized my epistemological passion was leading me to apologetics, a subset of the philosophy of religion that musters evidence and arguments for the Christian faith.

Before we go back to Hobbes and epistemology, let us briefly touch on why epistemology and philosophy are so important to theological reflection.

Epistemology and Philosophy as Unique Disciplines

In Western thought, philosophy is a unique intellectual enterprise because it is less about a specific field of study (though it can be studied as such) than it is about pushing every field of study to examine its assumptions and presuppositions. Are those assumptions supportable by reason (thinking coherently, consistently, and in conformity with the laws of logic), experience (the entire range of experience from sense perception to mysticism), or other relevant evidence (such as the testimony of others)?

People unfamiliar with the philosophy of science are surprised to learn that debates still rage over the nature of the cause-and-effect relationship, one of the conceptual foundations not only of the scientific method, but also of our daily living. We read books, but how many are aware that major disagreements exist about where meaning is to be located: in the text, in the reader, or in some intersection of the two?

Examining questions of this sort deals with the foundation of literature, and therefore comes under what is known as "literary criticism" or the "philosophy" of literature. The philosophy of history examines the adequacy of the historical method for discovering the past (is there any way to know what "really" happened and, furthermore, what does "really happened" mean?). The philosophy of art (or aesthetics) seeks to determine: "What is the nature of beauty and how can we recognize it? What can we learn from it?" And, of course, the philosophy of religion looks at religion's basic assumptions: "How do you know God exists? How do you

know that God's revelation is in your particular sacred Scriptures?"[2]

I took my first philosophy course as a college student from Jean Zurcher (Ph.D. in philosophy, University of Basel) and my first philosophy of religion course from Gerald H. Minchin (M.Div., Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary). While at the seminary, I gravitated toward electives that focused on these issues, though few were available. Once I decided on a doctoral program, for a variety of reasons, I chose to pursue philosophy rather than theology or biblical studies. This afforded me the opportunity to study epistemology in depth. I had hoped to find some answers to the issue of what it means to "know."

One of my early epistemology seminars studied sense perception and the debates concerning how we are able to know the outer world through the visual, auditory, and tactile senses. I was astounded at the complexity of something that we all take for granted—our sensing of the world around us.[3] Seeing an object flying in the air and judging that what we see is a bird is an enormously complex process.

Some of my earlier studies in physics became relevant. We thought about how our sensory stimuli require human interaction to become the experiences we enjoy. When the marching band plays Sousa, it creates sound waves that seem to exist in the physical environment whether or not anyone hears them. If human beings are present, what we hear with our ears only exists for *us*. Our ear drums and brains translate the sound waves into the words, music, and harmonies we hear.

This helps us solve a common, puzzling question: "If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make any noise?" The answer depends on how you define "noise." Are sound waves noise, or does noise require ears and the activity of the brain?

Equally interesting was sight: "How is it that we can see an object and feel that we *know* immediately what it is?" Like sound waves, light waves exist "out there," so to speak, but color can only exist in us or other sentient beings. When light is split by a prism into the colors of the spectrum, we catch a glimpse of how complicated it is for us to see only one color, such as yellow or blue. Color requires a seeing mechanism (the eye) connected to a brain that interprets light waves as color.

Now, once my brain becomes aware of sensory stimuli, it must categorize them and make an instantaneous judgment about their cause (usually, but not always): Was the sound an airplane, a tractor, a falling tree, an ambulance? Was that dark shape in the sky a bird? Is that yellow shape a banana?[4]

Epistemology Deals with Errors as Well as Knowledge

One major reason we are driven to question our knowledge claims is because we have learned that our perceptions may be inaccurate. We make mistakes about what we hear, see, and feel. Who has not had the experience of seeing bananas in a bowl on the kitchen table, only to discover that their shape and color are banana-like, but that they are not bananas? Plastic bananas do not smell or feel like organic ones.

A careful dissection of the sensory process reveals that we were mistaken because we inferred bananas from what we perceived with our eyes; we did not experience bananas, but banana look-alikes. Our direct visual experience was of a yellow, banana-like shape. To make a knowledge claim based on that experience alone is remarkably accurate most of the time, but, on occasion, it can be mistaken. That is because our conclusion that what we see are bananas requires making an inferential judgment. It is that judgment that is mistaken, not the experience.

Although we cannot be wrong about what we sense or experience (though people can "see" things that are not there, that they "saw" what wasn't there cannot be denied) or about our internal states (dreams, feelings, intuitions), we can be wrong about what we think

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they are telling us. This is the problem of error. It is the flip side of the coin of knowledge.

Over time, we learn to trust our senses so completely that we don't think twice about using them to live our lives, even when engaged in potentially life-threatening activities such as driving a car or flying a plane. We feel certain that when we walk across the street and see a car coming at us, we should avoid it.

Our sensing of the physical world is immediate and powerful because it is "obdurate to our will"; that is, most of the time I cannot control what I hear, see, or touch—it happens, it is there. That is the primary reason why the physical world and our sensing of it are regarded as the paradigm of "true" knowledge. We want everything we claim to know to feel as certain as our knowledge of physical objects. Anything less than that seems not to deserve to be called "knowledge."

The history of epistemology chronicles our need for certainty in knowledge, the kind we feel we have much of the time with sense perception. French philosopher and mathematician René Descartes believed that rationalism could establish the knowledge of God on a foundation as certain as mathematics. If we cannot sense God, we can have knowledge of him in other ways.

Descartes's method was deceptively simple: He doubted everything he could possibly doubt, including sense experience and his own existence. But he could not doubt his own existence without falling into a contradiction: he was the doubter. *Cogito ergo sum* became the three Latin words any college sophomore learns without studying Latin. "I think, therefore I am" became an ironclad fact that Descartes believed would lead with logical rigor not only to the reality of others but also the reality of God. The irony was palpable: the certainty for which he sought emerged out of his doubting everything he possibly could.

Doubt, Faith, and Certainty in the Christian Journey

The Cartesian approach often frightens Christians who believe that we must begin not with doubt but with faith. Although there is some reason for concern, it should be noted that Descartes used doubt methodologically and theoretically to try and prove that God and the outer world exist. It was a method to think through

the problem of God's reality while not at all feeling any personal or existential doubt about it. In contrast, what we might call existential doubt (I emotionally and intellectually doubt God's reality in the depths of my being) spawns a crisis of faith and meaning, the kind we see in Albert Camus's *The Plague* or hinted at in Elie Wiesel's *Night*.

Methodological doubt is used by Christian professors in college and graduate religion classes when they review the historical arguments for and against the existence of God. By summarizing why some thinkers do not believe in God, teachers attempt to deal with their arguments in order to strengthen the faith of their students. They do not teach students to doubt God's existence at the personal level, but to help them understand how to address the doubts of those who lack faith, including more often than we realize, the struggles for faith in the students themselves. As a method, doubt is an essential element in the process of knowledge.

If we accepted all we experienced as self-evidently true, or the testimony of others carte blanche, we would receive the same advice given by the apostle to the early believers; the gifts of the Spirit were to prevent the believers from being "tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine" (Eph. 4:14 RSV). Descartes's attempt to establish the reality of God beyond question is considered a failure in the modern world. Moderns are more likely to turn to experience for their knowledge of the divine.

Back to Thomas Hobbes's observation: "I dreamed God spoke to me" (like seeing the yellow, banana-like shape) is an experience that cannot be denied—I dreamed it. "God spoke to me in a dream" is an inference from that experience that is neither self-evident nor self-authenticating: it may or may not be true. This is why the first thing any believer should do if she dreams God is speaking to her is to ask: "Was that God's voice or my subconscious speaking to me?"

One of my former students once told me why he was giving up his belief in God. He said that he had prayed day and night for an undeniable experience of God (a vision, an apparition, a voice—anything) and nothing had happened. I asked him whether—if such an experience had occurred—he thought he could trust it.

"Why not?" he shot back.

"Because," said I, "an experience you wanted desperately to have might happen simply because you wanted it so badly." I continued: "One of the signs we have encountered a reality outside ourselves is that our will has little or nothing to do with creating what we experience. If God had appeared to you without warning, without being expected, that would be far more credible as a genuine revelation than starving yourself and losing sleep until you had the experience."

Since that conversation, I have thought to myself: the more we do to make a hallucination plausible, the less reason we should have to trust the authenticity of the experience if it comes. Such analysis and reflection takes time and not a little patience. The reason is that although we may directly experience ourselves, others, the outer world, and even God, there is no self-evident, incontrovertible knowledge derivable from those experiences.

Not all Christian thinkers agree with this assertion. Many argue that a direct experience of God provides immediate knowledge that cannot be challenged. I very much doubt that, since it suggests that such knowledge is error-free, a claim that makes discussion about the validity of different kinds of beliefs impossible.

Once the Enlightenment and modern science (particularly the evolutionary theory) upended the foundations of medieval faith, nineteenth- and twentieth-century Christian theology turned away from reason and revelation (to some extent) and toward a faith based on direct, immediate experiences that yielded knowledge of the divine. Whether it was Friedrich Schleiermacher's "feeling of absolute

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dependence" or Paul Tillich's experience of "ultimate concern," the project was the same: a faith based on a direct experience of God seems impregnable to the assaults of modernity. If you directly experience God's reality, evidence for God and a defense of the historicity of the Bible become unnecessary.

My thesis, therefore, is this: All knowledge claims based on experience must be treated not as self-evident truths, but as judgments about the experiences that are usually accurate but nevertheless subject to error. To be sure, as noted earlier, direct experiences are error free as experiences. If I tell you I dreamed that God spoke to me, my claim is incontrovertible. But if I make the more audacious claim that God spoke to me in that dream, I am inferring something from that experience that may or may not be true.

The Bible and a Knowledge of God Based on Experiences Such as Dreams and Visions

What are the implications of this analysis for the knowledge of God that the Bible writers claimed based on their experiences? Furthermore, what are the implications for us who derive our knowledge of God based on reading the Bible?

I would suggest that the process for "knowing" God employed by the biblical writers was fundamentally no different than the process we follow to know the physical world. Their various experiences of God (or God as revealed in Jesus Christ) required a judgment that in one way or another God was the source of their experiences and some reflection on what those experiences meant.

It makes little (if any) difference whether they were visions, dreams, burning bushes, audible voices, strong impressions, or moments of inspiration, and revelation that might seem "ordinary" to an external observer (think of Saul's companions on the road to Damascus not experiencing what he was). Revelation is an incarnational process that involves both the divine (the source of the experience) and the human (judgments about the meaning of the experience).

Saul's case is a good example of a religious experience that has a prima facie claim to authenticity because it comes unexpectedly. He was not at all seeking an experience of Jesus Christ (he wanted to rid the world of people who claimed to have one that they interpreted to mean the Messiah had come); the fact he had one forced him to reevaluate his entire life. In the years that followed his Damascus road encounter, according to the record, Christ apparently communed with him repeatedly, thus verifying that his original experience was authentic (compare accounts in Acts 9:1–31; and Gal. 1:13–24).

The biblical writer or character familiar with God's presence does not need Paul's level of verification. His was a unique case. This understanding of the epistemological process allows us to treat the biblical writings as authoritative for the church without insisting that they be error free in a way that may jeopardize their authority.

I have never been able to understand those who insist that acknowledging even one mistake jeopardizes all of God's revelatory activity. This is the weakness and dilemma of those who insist on an inerrant Bible, usually based on variations of what has been called the doctrine of "verbal" inspiration, though that designation is too simplistic and probably unfair in a number of cases.

Some biblical examples of individuals who experienced God but wanted assurance that God was the source of their experience might be helpful.

According to Scripture, Yahweh told Gideon (who was busy living his life and doing other things) to prepare Israel for battle against the Midianites (see Judg. 6–8). By all accounts, Gideon was so shocked by this encounter and the command it contained that he asked for a "sign" that Yahweh was with him. The voice was not enough. (I suspect his request was another way of saying: "Is that really you?") God then gave him the sign he stipulated. He requested another sign. God obliged, and then God added an additional sign Gideon had not requested.

The Gideon narrative is quite different from the earlier Abrahamic narrative. Gideon had not had the frequent contact with God's voice and presence that Abraham apparently enjoyed, which is why, I believe, Abraham could unflinchingly obey God's command to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice (Gen. 22). He knew (felt certain) Yahweh was speaking because he knew the divine voice. He "judged" correctly that this was not a hallucination or the onset of senility.

Some might ask: If you are correct that Abraham might have been mistaken (no judgment about an experience, even of God, can claim to be beyond error) about Yah-

weh's command to sacrifice Isaac, or Gideon mistaken about going into battle at Yahweh's command with all the evidence provided to them, how can we contemporary believers trust our experiences of God to help us make life-and-death decisions? If the knowledge of God we need for those decisions is based on inferences and judgments that may be erroneous, don't we need more than that? Don't we need to "know" absolutely?

Others might point out that Jesus' disciples did not leave their fishing nets to follow an obscure carpenter from Nazareth based on a probability or a good guess. People don't do that kind of thing unless they are sure.

These are important questions and they deserve a response.

As I see it, believers can feel certain that God is real and the gospel is true (*existential* certainty, the converse of existential doubt) while at the same time admitting that *theoretically* they could be wrong. Thoughtful believers are well aware that God might not exist, that the gospel story might be a fabrication, and that there might be no such thing as eternal life.

We cannot—with integrity—deny this possibility. We are like the man who plead with Jesus: "Lord I believe; please help my unbelief." Our convictions about our beliefs are not certain beyond all doubt. If they were, faith would have no role to play. Nevertheless, at the same time we admit we might be wrong, we can believe with all our beings that the gospel claims are worth dying for ("existential certainty").

The next step is to ask whether the knowledge of God we gain from the Bible and Ellen White's writings follows the same inferential process. When we study these writings, we must recognize that we are reading and interpreting their interpretations (believed to be trustworthy) and making judgments about their judgments under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the spirit-led community of believers.

In relation to the Abraham and Isaac narrative, we ultimately learn that God's purpose in commanding the sacrifice was really to teach Abraham something about the plan of salvation Yahweh had crafted. Abraham knew Yahweh had spoken to him, but he could not understand how the command to sacrifice Isaac was consistent with Yahweh's earlier promise that he would be the father of a "great nation." But he went ahead by faith, believing Yahweh could not, ultimately, do anything wrong.

When the Corinthian believers doubted that Jesus had risen from the dead, Paul responded with a rational argument: "Hundreds are still alive who saw him! Ask them" (1 Cor. 15:5–8). They could have doubted the testimony of the people Paul identified, but at what point would their doubts become silly and absurd? Just as Jesus did not criticize Thomas for his doubts, Paul did not criticize the Corinthians for theirs, but he would have been deeply disappointed if the testimony of Christians willing to die for their proclamation of the risen Christ had been dismissed as unreliable.

To doubt the word of so many people who risked martyrdom is possible, but not very sensible. Faith is based on evidence, even if it is not absolutely coercive (if it were, would it be "faith"?). To refuse to take such evidence seriously results in the crippling, existential doubt that will not allow even the seed of faith to take root.

In contrast, as already suggested, methodological doubt does not imply a lack of faith. It can even be employed because the believer has a desire to buttress what she is inclined to believe by challenging it from every perspective that might indicate weakness. One achieves through this process not rational certainty (though evidence is very relevant)—but what we are calling existential certainty, the certainty we have that our spouses love us, that our friends can be relied on, or that the accused in the docket is guilty or innocent of the crime. It's the kind of certainty that can lead believers to sacrifice their lives for each other or for the Lord Jesus Christ.

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Such believers might indeed dream that God was speaking to them and question whether it was so, but that would not necessarily mean they were spiritually weak, only careful. If after testing their dreams they decide that it was God speaking to them, they should then take the knowledge they believe God shared with them to the Church for further testing through prayer and spirit-filled discussion.

It is irresponsible to jump to the conclusion that God is speaking to an individual, especially in our modern period, without a rigorous process of verification. This process may not eliminate error, but it can certainly minimize it significantly.

In conclusion: Joel prophesied that at the time of the end, men and women, old and young, would dream dreams, and see visions (Joel 2:28ff). What a glorious experience that will be, but the Bible also warns that at the time of the end there will be false prophets and, presumably, false dreamers and visionaries. For that reason alone, we must not forget the power of Thomas Hobbes's statement: If we "dream God spoke to us," let us be as sure as we can be that "God has indeed spoken to us in a dream" before we suggest that we are speaking for God. ■

Notes and References

1. I regret using the male pronoun for the divine since I have no wish to perpetuate the patriarchal/hierarchical baggage that accompanies it. But felicitous language leaves few choices if one wishes to keep the "personal" dimension in discussions about God.

2. When people study philosophy at the graduate level, they study many of these other disciplines, as well. Courses can be taken in aesthetics, ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of history, social philosophy, philosophy of religion, and so on.

3. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *The Primacy of Perception* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

4. If the reader wishes to pursue this subject more fully, two helpful books are C. I. Lewis's *Mind and the World Order* (New York: Dover, 1929), esp. Chap. 5, and Ernest Nagel and Richard B. Brandt's collection of essays titled *Meaning and Knowledge: Systematic Readings in Epistemology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1965).

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