

Interpreting Dreams and Visions, Van Niekerk, Hennie

Emmanuel Christian School, Louis Trichard: 1994. Vol. 1. 149 pp.

ISBN 978-0-620-73090-7

Reviewed by Marius Nel

North-West University

Research Chair, Ecumenism: Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism

Unit for Reformed Theology

nel.marius1@gmail.com

Hennie van Niekerk was a pastor of a church in Louis Trichard/Makhado in Limpopo and is known as “Dream Daddy” because of his “ability” to interpret dreams and visions of those who consulted him. He teaches believers how to interpret their dreams and he is the author of four books on the theme, of which this is the first volume. He is a part of the neo-Pentecostalist movement of independent congregations who emphasise the prophetic ministry, sometimes at the expense of biblical guidance. These churches function independently of mainline churches and do not have structures that oversee the life and doctrine of its pastors or prophets. Van Niekerk, as a prophet of dream interpretation, stands next to other infamous prophets who spray insecticide to heal people or test believers’ faith by offering them petrol to drink.

Van Niekerk distinguishes between dreams that occur during the REM phase of sleep and visions that occur when one is awake. Dreams are for him signs of the Lord’s grace that allows an anti-ageing process for older people that brings about rejuvenation because during such dreams, he explains, the pineal gland is stimulated to produce more melatonin. His explanation is served by what he perceives to be the meaning of the Hebrew word for “dream,” which is “to recover”; referring to the removal of some past experiences that hinder one’s vision for the future. These dreams occur when one’s meditations are inspired by scripture and prayer. The Hebrew word for “vision” refers to a revelation where one mentally perceives and thinks and which can occur in the form of a picture, plan, strategy or motivation. The book is riddled with psychological and other scientific “explanations” as well as the “real meaning” of Hebrew words. No resources are quoted to back up these opinions and no bibliography is provided.

Van Niekerk's premise is that believers have the ability to interpret their own dreams and visions by listening to the Spirit leading them to the relevant passage in the Bible which is applicable to and provides the exact interpretation of the dream. In practice, however, what the author does is that he consults a concordance to look for passages where the theme of the dream—e.g. a journey on a ship or reckless driving—occurs in the Bible. These passages are then read and interpreted without any reference to the historical, social and theological context in which they occur. In a historicist way their “direct” or “literal” meaning is utilised to provide the answer to the meaning of the dream, as though the passage was written for a person living in the twenty-first century, who has a specific dream or vision. For instance, the dream about reckless driving is interpreted in terms of Proverbs 16:25, that there is a way that looks right to a man. The vehicle is interpreted as the tongue, gifting, ministry or faith of the believer. The interpretation of the dream is a warning that while one's ministry or faith should be an instrument of honour, it can easily become an instrument of dishonour if it is driven recklessly and hastily.

An integral part of the book presents the interpretation of different colours and stones, as well as animals and other symbols that may occur in dreams and visions. Again, the Bible is used/abused to provide the interpretation. Golden-brown, for instance, is associated with the topaz stone, which is the “gemstone of the tribe of Simeon” and refers to someone who works hard because such a person is regularly sunburned. The colour is associated with true faith that comes by hearing (Rom 10:17), that impels the listener to action. Frogs refer to pride because the Hebrew word for “pride” means “swelling” and frogs inflate or swell up their bodies in order to appear bigger to the advantage of the frog's self-image. A dinosaur in a dream refers to fear of something in the past that is no longer relevant because it no longer exists. A triangle is to be associated with strength of authority and agreement. It is symbolic of the confession of sin that leads to forgiveness and cleansing.

I have provided a few examples to illustrate the ridiculous way in which the Bible is abused. The occurrence of a train in a vision refers to the authority of a pre-established doctrine, a train crash refers to a situation where strict fundamental rules and precautions have been ignored, and train tracks refer to the church constitution of pre-set rules and requirements. The interpretation is based on Ezekiel 37:10, where an exceedingly great army stand on their feet. The Hebrew word for “army” refers to a company of soldiers or a camel train!

Van Niekerk boasts that he has an advantage over others who interpret the meaning of dreams and visions because he builds “on the reliable foundation of the Bible.” He presents his book as an introductory guide, observing that every dream and vision will have different meanings, even if the images are similar or the same. However, for many dream elements he presents the “biblical” interpretation.

That this book is still printed after 13 years (fourth printing, and not fourth edition as the title page states) implies that there are gullible believers who read and believe such nonsense. Through the ages people have looked for guidance to navigate the future and dream interpretation was always seen as a way to unlock its mysteries; this is true for today as well.

A documentary about Van Niekerk's ministry, undertaken by journalist Anna-Maria Lombard and filmed by Byron Taylor, was televised by Special Assignment on 11 May 2004, showing how Van Niekerk abused the power he acquired through his "prophetic ministry" whereby he perceived secrets from the lives of those who attended his services. The documentary shows how—in his presence and guided by his prayers—people say they saw magnificent visions and communed with God. Van Niekerk then interpreted their visions and dreams for them, in the process gaining almost absolute power over every aspect of the lives of those disciples most committed to serving his ministry. He instilled fear and his behaviour was characterised by constant threats and outbursts of wrath. He did not allow anyone to question his status as a prophet and preacher, even though his sermons were incoherent and incomprehensible, as demonstrated in the documentary. He often used his power to intimate and manipulate people through mind control and brainwashing. Some former disciples came forward to explain how their prophet used the tools of confession and submission to break them down emotionally, physically and spiritually. He undermined their understanding of reality and everything they ever believed about Christianity, demonstrating the power of religion to destroy people. He designated himself as "the Prophet."

This book serves to illustrate how the Bible can be abused to say anything one wants it to say and what dangers lurk in such hermeneutical practices.