Before embarking on a study of the history of interpretation of Acts 16:6–10 and of dream-visions in Luke-Acts, it is important to examine the variety of opinions toward dream-visions in the ancient world. More specifically, since the present study focuses on the relationship between dream-visions and the perception of God’s will in Luke-Acts, the following background discussion will emphasize an issue of some debate in scholarly treatments of dream-visions: How, and to what extent, did Jews and non-Jews regard dream-visions as a reliable medium of revelation from early antiquity through late antiquity? As the evidence will make clear, this question must be qualified even further. The present study is concerned not only with beliefs about the source of dream-visions, but also with opinions as to their veracity. Especially in the non-Jewish Graeco-Roman evidence, one finds that people often viewed dream-visions as “divine” or otherworldly in origin, even if they did not regard the message of these dream-visions as trustworthy. A “reliable medium of revelation,” therefore, must be more narrowly defined as a trustworthy message from a divine or otherworldly source.

There have been a number of studies examining various facets of the dream-vision in the antiquity, many of which have treated this issue of belief in the reliability of dream-vision messages. Some scholars have attempted to draw decisive conclusions on this issue, arguing that dream-visions were almost always trusted as a medium of revelation. They have done so, however, only by ignoring contrary evidence. These conclusions create a particular problem for the interpreter of Luke-Acts, especially because Luke-Acts contains no objective reflection on the nature of dream-visions. If one accepts general conclusions about the universal belief in dream-visions uncritically, one is unable to appreciate the complexity of the dream-visions both in Luke-Acts and in the ancient world. The evidence presented in this chapter will suggest that any attempt to understand dream-visions in the Graeco-Roman world must be based on a sensitive treatment of a broad spectrum of material.

For the purpose of this discussion, non-Jewish Graeco-Roman evidence will be treated separately from Jewish evidence of the same general period (including the OT, OTA, DSS, and OTP). This distinction is not meant to be arbitrary, nor does it suggest that Jewish
texts can be separated from their cultural context. As Martin Hengel has rightly concluded, interpretations of Jewish texts (perhaps especially those written in Greek) from the Hellenistic period cannot, and should not, ignore their Hellenistic milieu. Instead, it is a distinction based on subtle, but significant, differences in the way dream-visions are treated in these respective corpora of literature. Positive evaluations of dream-visions are similar in both groups of evidence. They are distinguished primarily by the singular Jewish view that dreams and visions come from one God. More significant differences arise in the negative evaluations. In non-Jewish sources, dream-visions may be suspect on a number of levels: they may be deceptive by their very nature, they may be sent by a deity whose intention is to deceive the recipient, or they may be viewed as a psychosomatic experience having no broader significance. Jewish texts that describe dream-visions negatively tend to do so in the context of warnings about false prophecy.

In the discussion that follows, evidence from a number of different sources and time periods will be considered. It is necessary, therefore, to make another important methodological caveat: the purpose of this examination is to look broadly at the literary and historical evidence of how the ancients viewed dream-visions. Although a study of the attitude(s) towards dream-visions in a particular time and place would be interesting, it would not serve the purpose of the current investigation. With a few exceptions, one cannot know exactly which texts influenced the writer of Luke-Acts, nor can one know the influence of shifting attitudes towards the revelatory nature of dream-visions at various points in antiquity. Rather, the purpose of this discussion is to observe the variety of attitudes toward dream-visions found in both Jewish and non-Jewish evidence of the Graeco-Roman world.

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2 In his study of religion in Hellenistic Athens, Jon D. Mikalson observes what he regards as a common methodological error in some contemporary studies: “the failure to distinguish religious phenomena and evidence by date and place” (*Religion in Hellenistic Athens* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998], 2). In general, I agree with this methodological criterion. For the present study, I would argue that a wider scope of investigation is in order. In addition to the issue of “influence” discussed below, one may add that the time of Luke’s writing can only be generalized, and the place of writing is completely unknown.

3 In some of the Lukan dream-vision scenes discussed in the chapters below, there are direct verbal allusions to passages in the LXX. In such cases, one can and should assume influence.