People who have never taken a college English class frequently misunderstand the focus of literary studies. Too often our families and acquaintances assume that English teachers write novels, and we are not always successful in explaining that literary scholars do not make literature, we study it. It is less well known, however, that there is precedent for this problem in the biblical book of Daniel. While Daniel is best known for the tale of the prophet in the lion’s den and the writing on the wall, it teaches another valuable lesson: you can have dreams, and you can interpret dreams, but you cannot do both simultaneously—you cannot have your dreams and interpret them too.

Daniel opens with the capture of Jerusalem, when Nebuchadnezzar takes four bright little boys back to Babylon, to be educated and taught the Chaldean language:

children in whom was no blemish, but well favoured, and skilful in all wisdom, and cunning in knowledge, and understanding science, and such as had ability in them to stand in the king’s palace, and whom they might teach the learning and the tongue of the Chaldeans. (Dan. 1.4)  

After a little trouble with the food, the boys settle down and become wise men at the court. Nebuchadnezzar has two dreams, both of which are interpreted by Daniel after all of the other astronomers and sages at court are stumped. Nebuchadnezzar, thus persuaded of the supremacy of the Hebrew God, dies and meets his reward.

The episode of the writing on the wall occurs in the reign of Nebuchadnezzar’s son, when Belshazzar insists on drinking from the temple vessels taken from Jerusalem. Daniel, as we know, is called to decipher it; after all, if he can read dreams, he must be able to read writing. After he reads the writing on the wall to the king, Daniel is made the “third ruler in Babylon” and he gives up dream interpretation; from here on, he is the one dreaming. First he dreams of four supernatural beasts and their judgment by the Ancient of Days—

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1 All biblical quotations are from the King James Version.
interpreted by a nearby angel (“one of them that stood by”) as the rise and ultimate defeat of four devouring kings. Then he dreams of a goat defeating a ram and a conversation among saints about the restoration of the sanctuary that the goat has destroyed, which is interpreted by the angel Gabriel. Like Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel has two dreams about world history, and he too requires someone else to interpret them for him.

I have not addressed Daniel’s vision of the apocalypse, which consumes the last two chapters of the book, due to the different types of dreams in the Hebrew Bible. The first main distinction to be made is between dreams (*chalom/helem*) and waking visions (*mareh/mara*). Moreover, most commentaries divide dreams into three types: message dreams, incubation dreams, and symbolic dreams. Message dreams tend to be straightforward—telegraphs from God, telling Abimelech that Sarah is Abraham’s wife, not his sister (Gen. 20.3), and telling Joseph that a visit to Egypt would be a good idea (Mt. 2.13). Incubation dreams are invited—by fasting, or, more commonly, by sleeping in a temple, as in the case of Solomon at Gibeon in I Kings 3. Daniel’s apocalyptic vision, however, is not described as a dream at all, although it does seem to be invited by fasting; it does not occur at night, and Daniel marvels that none of his companions see the awe-some creature with a face like lightning. In essence, dreams are by definition private, experienced during sleep, whereas visions present themselves in the public sphere, regardless of who actually experiences them.

Symbolic dreams, not surprisingly, are the primary locus of the act of interpretation in the Hebrew Bible. This type of dream shows a clear division of labor between having dreams and interpreting dreams, which we should read as a biblical system of checks and balances. Important dreams are dreamt by important men, who, due to their inability to make heads or tails of the experience, must turn to the community for help in putting the divine dictum to use, thereby submitting the royal plan of action for public approval.

God himself makes a distinction early on. Numbers 12 is usually remembered as Miriam and Aaron taking issue with Moses’ Ethiopian wife, after which God afflicts Miriam with leprosy. But their challenge is to Moses’ authority, not to his taste in women: “Hath the lord indeed

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2 The book of Daniel is written in both languages—Aramaic from 2.4b to 7.28, and elsewhere in Hebrew.