In Graeco-Roman religious texts, “salvation” designated the desire for, or experience of, a resting place, a place in which to dwell safely. As a religious concept, sōtēria, salvation, carried the general sense of delivery, preservation, safe return. Particular understandings of what might constitute such a “safe” “return,” however, varied widely. Pouring a libation of wine to Zeus Sōtēr in thanks for a safe voyage obviously situates the concept of salvation differently than, say, the Pauline vision of the victory of the imperishable over the perishable signified by the cosmic sōtēr Christ. In the one case, the “return” is to the earthly reality of everyday life at home, while in the other, “return” is ethereal, out of this world and into some other where the physical threat of death carries no “sting.”

Between these extremes lies a third understanding of salvation, one in which the “safe return” is understood as a conscious awareness of dwelling in an invisible “safe place” in the midst of everyday earthly reality. This conception of salvation was a psychological understanding, and the consciousness it provoked was mediated by dreams.

Late antique culture understood dream-speech as a kind of divine logic. Emblematic of that culture’s understanding of dreams is the remark of Tertullian’s that “just about the majority of people get their knowledge of God from dreams.” For a whole tradition of dreamers and dream-interpreters, from Homer to St. Augustine, dreams were not subjective fantasies of the psyche but rather autonomous messengers speaking divine words directly to the soul of the dreamer. Dreams were not a “royal road to the unconscious” but pictures, however phantasmal, of a more profound consciousness. In religious contexts, the consciousness offered by dreams provided a resting place, a safe return from various kinds of spiritual (and physical) malaise.
The particular case of salvation by dreams that I propose to explore forms part of an early Christian text, the *Shepherd of Hermas.* The first section of this work is a series of five “visions” (*horaseis*) that come to Hermas “when he gets sleepy,” while “sitting on [his] bed,” and so on. They are elaborate dreams which provoke a profound metamorphosis in the psyche of the author, whose understanding both of himself and of the divine world is considerably deepened as he moves through one dream after another. By the final dream in his text, Hermas has become an enthusiastic and sophisticated interpreter of his dreams, and he receives a dream-figure who will dwell with him permanently and whose task is to show Hermas again all of his dreams, for they constitute “the main points which are helpful to you.” This permanent, indwelling dream-figure, the shepherd of the text’s title, is called an “angel of repentance” (*angelos tēs metanōias*), literally a “messenger of a change of mind.” Through dreams, Hermas experiences a “safe return” and is given a resting place in the form of a changed consciousness. That this changed consciousness represents one of the Graeco-Roman perspectives on “salvation” is the thesis that this essay will explore.

In his discussion of the significance of dreams for religion in the second century C. E., Peter Brown remarks that the dream “was the paradigm of the open frontier: when a man was asleep and his bodily senses were stilled, the frontier lay wide open between himself and the gods.” The metaphor of the open frontier serves Brown’s point about the ease of access to the gods that the dream afforded the dreamer since, for late antique dreamers it was pre-eminently divine figures who spoke in dreams. Yet I would argue that this formula can be turned around: there was also an ease of access to people that the dream afforded the gods!

“Open frontier” is a positive metaphor that Brown uses to point to the sense of superiority—of easy congress with divinity—that dreams bestowed on those who received them. This is true especially of such dreamers as Perpetua of Carthage and Aelius Aristides who both, in their separate ways, *asked for* dreams, the one by prayer and the other by incubation. Whether by simple request, by Asclepian ritual, or by even more elaborate rituals such as those prescribed in the magical papyri, one could ask for and receive direct communication with the divine world.