

The Dreams and Visions of Aelius Aristides: A Case-Study in the History of Religions - A critical review

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I very much enjoyed reading the 'Dreams and Visions of Aelius Aristides' by John Stephens. It is clearly written and relatively easy to follow. The perspective in this review is as a Transpersonal Psychotherapist who has spent many years focussing on the role of dreams in the study of both psychological distress and human transformation.

Overall, Stephens has made a strong case for taking this ancient text seriously. His analytical focus enables the modern reader to appreciate Aristides' experiences and to therefore reflect more deeply upon the depth and potential capabilities of our human nature.

The dreams and visions of Aristides originally entitled 'Sacred Tales' (S.T.) is a substantial historical document covering thirty-eight years of dreams and waking visions. S.T. is unique in that it is the only dream diary extant from ancient times. It describes a number of remarkable and unusual mystical experiences in dreaming. As such it can be considered as a more basic type of religious experience rooted in feelings and emotions. Indeed, it is not that dissimilar from many other traditional or ancient personal mystical experiences.

Throughout the book Stephens clearly answers the cynicism of previous studies by unpicking the historical criticisms that have dismissed the 'S.T.' as a religious fantasy, a self-promotion exercise, an incoherent, intellectual document, a record of psychological neurosis that lacks any real autobiographical content. Yet Stephens does not deny Aristides' eccentricities or even his neurotic, biological preoccupations (which Aristides freely admits to), rather he portrays our ancient occultist as sincere, seeking to share his experiences rather than to acquire a religious following.

Chapter One presents a definition of religious experience as well as reasons for and the value of studying individual religious experiences rather than simply invalidating them or using them as a proof of a heavenly or super human deity. In showing S.T. as a genuinely pious personal religious document, Stephens dismisses the idea of it being a 'rhetorical fabrication', (Aristides was a well-known Sophist and an accomplished rhetorician). In the past, scholars have reduced S.T. to a few fundamental concepts and more recently, regarded Aristides' piety as a product of certain unconscious psychological conflicts, all of which ignore its religious dimensions.

Chapter Two examines the literary dimensions of the S.T. and emphasises that Aristides' religious experience is authentic by comparing it to similar ancient visionary writers such as Zosimos of Panapolis. This contrasts with historians of classical rhetoric who have explained S.T. purely from the standpoint of literary analysis, focusing on identifying various literary devices and motifs used in the texts.

As a result, we can view dream revelations as an authentic expression of the religious consciousness. In particular, Aristides' dreams involve religious visions, dream oracles, states of ecstasy. Since this coincides with many modern dream and lucid dream reports (ref. IASD Dreams journal), we cannot simply dismiss S.T. as a product of the superstitious beliefs of the time. There is something important here.

Chapter Three demonstrates why Aristides is a 'healthy-minded soul' in contrast to St. Augustine, Marcus Aurelius and others who are 'sick or anxious souls' basing their self-criticisms and beliefs on certain basic moralisms.

Stephens contrasts the text with the more introspective type of religious behaviour and attitudes found in St Augustine's 'confessions' and Marcus Aurelius' 'Meditations' and concludes convincingly, that Aristides is a 'not so anxious soul' as compared to the more 'august' Christian monk or the pessimistic Roman emperor. In fact, Aristides is a happier soul, striving in his devotion to the Gods of Asclepius, Isis and Serapis, to aspire to a healthier life, free of his personal, physical suffering.

Chapter Four discusses the miracles recorded in S.T. as an example of religious aretology i.e. the miracles do not provide 'moral instruction, yet there are distinct parallels with the New Testament miracle stories and with many modern day dream and lucid dream reports – people who have received instructions from guide figures and even religious figures as to how they might heal themselves or obtain healing help from the medical profession (reference 1). Stephens makes a convincing case in saying that Aristides is a homo religiosus i.e. his visions, dreams, the presence of light, his devotion, enthusiasm and faith are a response in the presence of an epiphany of the divine. Asclepius, is in a way, his 'God Ideal'. Before we dismiss such a concept, we should remember the importance and power of the Ideal in the lives of mystics, writers and great people of conscience such as Gandhi. Aristides' faith is such an Ideal, having the power to heal and transform his ailments.

Chapter Five examines the general religious climate of the Greco-Roman world, situating the piety of Aristides against the background of the general religious environment in the Hellenistic World. Stephens presents Aristides not as a Holy man but as a recipient and benefactor of the blessings of Asclepius. As we find today, there was a scepticism and a naiveté towards supernatural phenomena. Similarly there

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was (and still is) a quest for God for many people, despite the rationality of science (then and now) and technology (now). Fifty years ago, as in Aristides' time, many Westerners turned in great eagerness to the new cults and philosophies, especially esoteric knowledge.

Chapter Six analyses the contents of Aristides' dreams using a cross-cultural quantitative method that identifies patterns and themes in the dreams. It is here that some questions arise about Stephens' use of modern anthropological studies. Not all dream contents can be explained by the continuity hypothesis (reference 2). Some of the contents have been found in many cases not to be related to, or be a reflection of, the dreamer's waking life. Indeed the dream imagery typically uses figures/people in the dreamer's life that have symbolic meaning to the dreamer. These appear in the dream narrative, to help the dreamer understand and experience what is happening to them in their inner life. Aristides' effusive salutations to the presence of Asclepius is testament to the imagaic power of his inner experience – how else would Aristides recognise the importance of this in the dream? Chinese people dream of Chinese looking angels, Europeans see European looking angels, but the impact of meeting angels in their dreams is the most important point, rather than their cultural familiarity with such images in daily life. The emotional content of Aristides' dreams is overtly positive, including religious happiness, wonder and joy. Relatively few of Aristides' anxiety dreams involve distress, being chased and attacked or persecuted by hostile forces. These latter factors seem to point to a personality that fears death and suffering i.e. the basis of this anxiety is more likely to be existential. Neither his biological father or mother appear, nor do his fore fathers appear in his dreams. Instead foster fathers appear six times (rather than one father appearing six times). Thus it is unlikely that the latent contents of Aristides' dreams could be satisfactorily explained psychoanalytically. Rather, Aristides' concern for his life, life force, health and physical well-being together with his devotional attitude to Asclepius and his religious/spiritual experiences are better understood through a transpersonal/existential lens.

Chapter Seven looks at Aristides' conversion to Asclepius using Erikson's psycho-social model. The psychological function of Aristides' adherence to the cult of Asclepius is examined to enable the reader to understand the psychological reasons for Aristides performing a variety of painful divine prescriptions. Stephens argues that Aristides' adherence to the cult of Asclepius had a positive psychological effect. What is useful here is that Stephens also looks at Aristides' behaviour from a relativistic perspective, that is, what is perceived as 'normal' in one culture is 'abnormal' in another culture.

Chapters Eight and Nine examine the latent content of Aristides' dreams, using the cross-cultural application of psychoanalysis. Whilst one would naturally expect that Aristides' separation from his parents in early life had a significant impact upon his development, this is not evidenced in his dreams.

Instead, his religious affection and bonding are successfully projected upon Asclepius producing a remarkably positive effect upon Aristides and his health. Indeed, this transformative process between the spiritual teacher and their pupils is precisely what Marie-Louise von Franz, a Jungian analyst, has explained, by examining the role of Eros in the mystical path and comparing it to psychotherapy. Eros is

used creatively by the mystic to help in the transformative process of the neophyte (reference 3). Thus Aristides' trust and devotion to Asclepius, his God Ideal, could be seen as the crucial factor in his healing. Indeed, from a transpersonal perspective, his spiritual experience through the dream state may well be authentic, and beyond psychological explanation. Instead Stephens chooses to employ a Freudian interpretation to explain Aristides' psychological attitudes.

In spite of this, Stephens' study represents an important contribution to the study of dreams and their relevance in our modern age. There is so much more for us to discover and respect in this field.

References

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