Dreams: The True Religion-Science Conflict

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I. Introduction: Overview and Goals

Since the goal of this paper is controversial, I devote this introductory section to a careful defining of the boundaries and parameters of this paper's goal.

The first goal of this paper is to show that the true science-religion controversy lies in the psychological arena, not in the physical-science arena. More specifically, I argue that the goal and raison d'être of organized religion is the development of human dream capacity including human capacity for prophecy, a goal that will be fully realized in the messianic era but can and should be partially realized now. The religious personality should be recognized not only by the religious character of his or her eating and leisure (holidays), but also by his or her spiritual endeavors, which include prayer, learning, and dreams. Dreams as a guiding force of life should not be something therapists use when one seeks counseling, but rather should be an intrinsic part and parcel of our daily activities.

A second component of our main goal is that there are no physical-science religion controversies. I argue that the most famous of these controversies—the apparent contradiction between Genesis 1 and modern cosmology—never really existed. Neither an examination of other Near Eastern cultures nor classical biblical commentaries supports an interpretation of Genesis 1 as dealing with physical creation. Rather, Genesis 1 deals with the creation of prophecy, a theme we find in other Near Eastern cultures.

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The third component of our main goal is that this abstract idea of focusing on dreams and prophecy can be applied clinically in a daily setting. The case history of Joseph skillfully shows how to use non-prophetic dreams to achieve emotional fulfillment, personal joy, and divine service.

Each of the above three components of this paper's goals may appear bizarre and contradicted by obvious textual interpretation. Therefore, I must devote separate sections to each component and to its prerequisites. Accordingly, an outline of this paper is as follows. In section II, I review other Near Eastern cultures, showing that they also were not concerned with the creation of the physical world but rather with the creation of prophecy. Since the interpretation of Genesis 1 requires use of symbolism, in section III, I give a brief overview of symbolism: Under what circumstances are we forced to interpret a biblical passage symbolically, and, if so, how are we required to interpret this symbolism? Then in section IV, I show that Genesis 1 must be interpreted symbolically; it cannot be interpreted literally. In section V, I lightly go over the symbolic meaning of Genesis 1. In section VI, I apply the paper's abstract goals clinically by studying the case history of Joseph. The Bible depicts Joseph as a typical immature teenager. I contrast the modern dream approach to Joseph's dreams with Joseph's prophetic dream approach to his own dreams and offer this as a clinical model for ourselves. Section VII presents the fourth goal of this paper: a response to the three science-religion issues raised in Samuelson's lead essay in this issue.1 To wit:

- 1. Creation: Our response to the creation problem is that there is not and there never was a serious contradiction between religion and physical science. However, there are contradictions between the goals of the psychological sciences and religion. Secular psychology seeks to enable people to satisfy their physical and social needs and maintain a sense of contentment. Religion, we argue, identifies a deep spiritual need in man, the need for prophetic encounter with the Divine; this emotional need must also be met.
- Revelation: Religion isn't philosophy. Religion comes to enable dreams and prophecies. Modern science does not per se deal with dreams on a spiritual level, though it recognizes them and proposes to interpret them psychosocially. I argue that a

primary goal of religion is to facilitate human use of dreams in one's daily activities and to enrich thereby one's personality and feelings.

3. Redemption: Humanity cannot redeem itself if, as modern psychological science claims, humans solely concentrate on physical and social needs. Redemption is only possible when dreams and prophecies flower. And once they are dealt with, redemption automatically follows.

II. Near Eastern Creation Myths

We begin this section with insightful quotes from Tikvah Frymer-Kensky:

In the past two decades, there has been a tremendous change in biblical studies. The scientific philosophy that prevailed for more than a century has given way, in biblical studies as in other humanities, to a more sophisticated understanding of the interaction between the now and then, the reader and the text. Old ideas of history as "what actually happened" and text as having one correct and original meaning have yielded to a current view of the continual interaction of the viewer and what is seen, of the text and its reader. No longer do we believe that there is a truly "value-neutral" way of reading literature or reconstructing history.²

The last three decades have seen an enormous paradigm shift in our perception of reality and history. The old ideas of "objective science" on which many of us were raised, the old conceptions of History as "what actually happened," of Text as having "one correct reading and original meaning," and of Law as "what is legislated" have yielded to a view of complex interactions of the viewer and the viewed, the text and its readers, the law and its adherents.³

These quotes caution against reading the Bible from our own eyes. To critically understand the consequences of this caution, note that, we, that is, modern humans, are interested in where the physical world came from. Even little children know about the Big Bang. Dreams, to modern humans, have a secondary significance. They are the result of biophysical activity in the brain and body. To modern humans the term "creation" means physical creation, the creation of the physical world.

By contrast, ancient man was not interested in physical creation. The classic creation myths of Babylonia and Egypt deal with the creation of gods, the fight for divine power, and the creation of servants of god. While occasionally creation is mentioned in these myths, it is important not to listen to this word with modern ears. Creation in these myths refers to prophetic creation, not physical creation. To ancient man, dream visions were reality, not something inside man, but something outside him. The gods, visions, and prophetic communications were something real that determined and set reality. To ancient man, the question of where the gods and their prophetic communications came from was very real and meaningful since prophetic visions determined reality.

More importantly, the physical interpretation of Genesis 1, *creatio ex nihilo*, did not bother ancient man because there was no physical law of conservation of mass or conservation of energy that it violated. Indeed, without a well-defined conceptual framework of precise measurement, which ancient man lacked, it would not make sense to speak about conservation laws. And without these conservation laws, a miracle of new matter and new energy had as much believability as a miracle of coincidence.

Although we have not yet defended our view textually, by critically reading Genesis 1 and showing its simple meaning to be the creation of prophecy, it is reasonable that the ancient Jews were no different than other Near Eastern cultures where genesis stories deal with the creation of prophecy and dreams, not with the creation of the physical world.

We also emphasize that Genesis 1 takes place in the context of the Book of Genesis, the book of world-shaping prophecies. Each of the stories in Genesis—Adam, Noah, Abraham, the birth of Isaac, the engagement of Rebekah, the blessings of Isaac, Jacob's escape from Laban and Esau, as well as the Joseph story—are events driven by prayers, dreams, visions, and prophecies that shaped world history. A physical creation story would not fit into such a book; but an account of the prophetic creation of Adam's visions, the first prophecies, would fit into the general book.

III. Symbolism

To clarify the purpose of this section, we point out that merely presenting a symbolic interpretation of Genesis 1 is not sufficient to prove a particular point of view. After all, the simple meaning of the text may be the description of physical creation. Rather, to prove our point, we must follow a precise exegetical methodology that answers the following two important questions:

- *Issue* 1: What criteria must a biblical literary narrative meet to *necessitate* symbolic interpretation?
- Issue 2: Given that a certain literary piece requires a symbolic interpretation, what interpretive methods should be used?

Prior to addressing these two issues we emphasize that for purposes of this essay we use the operational approach to symbolism presented by Hendel,⁴ who summarized Samson Raphael Hirsch's symbolic theories.⁵ Hirsch's theories were selected because they are simple, extremely comprehensive, operationally defined, and include many features of several symbolic theories. In my previously published essays I cited other approaches to symbolic interpretation and show how Hirsch's theories include them. I also note that Hirsch's operational approach avoids a discussion of the fascinating issue of the difference between sign, symbol, parable, and myth as well as the profound symbolic issues of emotion, evocation, and ambiguity raised so beautifully by the symbolist school. However, an operational approach is needed to ensure objectivity.

It is expositionally easier to address issue 2 first. If the Bible requires symbolic interpretation then that interpretation should be accomplished by one of the following four methods:

- 1. Function
- 2. Form
- 3. Linguistic association in the Hebrew culture; for example, the identical Hebrew root for "almonds" and "hastening" skillfully employed in Jeremiah's vision of almonds, symbolically indicates that God is hastening to bring his decree (Jer. 1:11–12)
- Explicitly indicated symbolism; for example, the explicit association between wearing tzitzit and remembering God's commandments (Num. 15:37–41)

We can now fully answer issue 1: The bible *requires* symbolic interpretation in the following three cases:

Case 1: The Bible explicitly declares an object or act as symbolic. For example, Shabbat (Exod. 31:16–17) and rainbow (Gen. 9:8–17) are explicitly declared as symbols.

Case 2: The Bible associates one object or act as reminding one of other objects, acts, or events. For example, the tzitzit are explicitly associated with remembering the biblical commandments (Num. 15:37–41). Similarly, matzah, shofar, and sukkah are explicitly associated with commemorating specific historic events (Lev. 23).

Case 3: A biblical chapter requires symbolic interpretation if the biblical chapter has

- i. An identified central theme,
- ii. Several verses that appear unrelated to the central theme, but
- iii. The verses symbolically connect to the central theme using the four methods mentioned above in our analysis of issue 2.

Example: A beautiful illustrative example of case 3 is Ecclesiastes 12:

- i. The central theme is declared in the very first verse of Chapter 12: "Remember your Creator in your youth, before the bad days come, [before] years come in which you have no desire."
- ii. This central theme, not waiting for old age, is unrelated to the many verses in chapter 12 describing darkened windows, shattering beams, etc.
- iii. However, if we apply the symbolic methods of *function* and *form* described in our answer to issue 2, we easily symbolically interpret that:
 - a. The function of windows is *sight* implying that darkening windows correspond to the *dimmed vision* of old age.
 - b. Similarly, beams have the *form* and *function* of bones, so that *broken beams* symbolically refer to the heightened *risk* of *fracture* in old age.

It is noteworthy that all the Rishonim without exception interpret this chapter as symbolically describing old age. Therefore, in a certain sense, the symbolic methodology described here is semi-objective in the precise sense that independent commentators arrive at highly similar interpretations. There might be some differences with details but the overall picture is agreed to by everybody.

In summary, we have, in this section, presented three criteria necessitating symbolic interpretation, and four criteria by which to interpret symbolically. In the next two sections we apply these criteria to Genesis 1.

IV. Problems with the Literal Interpretation of Genesis 1

Although there are several conflicts between biblical-Talmudic narrative and science, certainly, Genesis is the Goliath that must be defeated for religion to win the war. In this section, I apply the three criteria enumerated in case 3, presented in the previous section, and show that the biblical Author required a symbolic interpretation of Genesis 1.

Recall from the previous section that case 3 of the cases requiring symbolic interpretation, requires (i) a central chapter theme, (ii) chapter verses unrelated to this central theme, and (iii) key symbolic terms in the chapter verses that do relate to the central theme. Let us now examine the presence of each of these criteria.

Case 3(i)—Central Theme: The central theme of Genesis 1 is the prophecies to Adam blessing him with world conquest. To understand this in context, recall that each of the stories in Genesis deal with a lone person changing human history by virtue of prophecy:

- Noah, inspired by prophetic visions, stood alone against a corrupt world and was saved from the flood.
- Abraham, inspired by prophetic visions, stood alone for marital chastity and against idolatry.
- Abraham, inspired by prophetic vision, sought understanding of good and evil when God destroyed Sedom and Amorah.
- Eliezer, inspired by an oath to a prophet, was confident in finding a religious wife in a corrupt world.
- Isaac, inspired by prophetic insights, instituted division of political powers.
- Jacob, inspired by prophetic blessings, stood alone with a corrupt Laban for twenty years and survived.
- Joseph, inspired by non-prophetic dreams, stood up against hostile family and slave owners to emerge as viceroy of Egypt and saved the world from famine.

None of these people achieved their accomplishments through armies. The sole driving force was prophecy. Consistent with this background, Genesis 1, actually Genesis 1–3, presents Adam, the first prophet, who, inspired by prophetic orders, was to retain control of Eden and the world if he obeyed the moral requirements mentioned in Genesis 2. Thus the central theme of Genesis 1–3 is the prophecies to Adam enabling conquest of Eden and the world if he obeyed moral law.

Case 3(ii)—Unrelated Chapter Verses: But now, the rest of Genesis 1, describing creation of the world, has no, or little, relation with the central theme of Adam's conquest of Eden and the world. True, Rashi (Gen. 1:1) argues that Genesis 1 declares God as creator and owner of the world, implying an Authority who can implement His promises. But this comment of Rashi is stretched. Contrast:

- a. God caused the flood, enabled Abraham to defeat a powerful military alliance with only 318 soldiers, and enabled Jacob to outsmart Esau and Laban.
- b. God created the plants, stars, lights, animals, and birds.

Clearly (a), rather than (b), portrays God as a being of power who ean implement His A124uthority. Thus the comment of Rashi arguing that Genesis 1 portrays God's ownership and power is a bit stretched. Primae faciae the chapter verses of Genesis 1 are not, or weakly, related, to the central theme of Genesis 1–3, Adam's empowerment through prophecy.

Case 3(iii)—Symbolic Terms in the Chapter Link to the Main Theme: Every key term in Genesis 1 is clearly biblically used to indicate prophecy. The keywords of Genesis 1—heaven, light, stars, animals, beasts, spirit of God, etc.—have clear prophetic meaning throughout the Bible.

Thus Genesis 1 meets the three criteria of case 3 presented in the previous section; hence, we perceive this chapter as requiring symbolic interpretation by the biblical Author. Previously, I presented further *supportive* criteria against the literal interpretation of Genesis 1 and for the symbolic interpretation. For example:

- A proper translation of Genesis 1:2 is "The earth had been formless and void. . . ." The past conjugation (היתה) versus the future conjugation with a preceding vav (ייהי) indicates the past perfect—had been—implying an existence prior to creation.
- Similarly, the snake is not a talking animal but a slimy human who attempts to seduce Eve, implying the existence of other humans prior to Adam.
- Also, Cain building a city indicates the presence of other people.

The previous essay concludes as follows:

Genesis 1 is not describing the creation of the *physical* world; rather Genesis 1 describes the creation of the *prophetic* world. What happened 6000 years ago is not the creation of anything physical since indeed all physical objects already existed, but rather 6000 years ago was the first moment in human history when a human attained prophetic revelation. That human is Adam and that prophetic revelation is recorded in Genesis 1 and 2.7

Furthermore, this interpretation of Genesis 1 is not something modern that we are *reading into* the text. The classic commentators treat Genesis 1 this way. For example, Ramban (Rabbi Moses ben Nahman, Nahmanides) does not regard Adam as the first human but rather as the first human with a special soul. We have identified this specialness with prophetic capacity. The Talmud itself sees Genesis 1 not as science but as mystical, the "Works of creation," an esoteric doctrine dealing with prophetic spiritual matters which only the spiritually worthy could study.

V. Genesis 1: The Creation of Prophecy

In the previous two sections I have laid the foundation for rejecting a literal interpretation of Genesis 1 and requiring a symbolic interpretation consistent with the central theme of the chapter, the creation of the first prophet and first prophecy, empowering Adam to control Eden and the world if he observes moral law. In this section we lightly go over the details of this symbolic interpretation.

Genesis 1 describes seven epochs (the seven days) needed in the creation of prophecy. Very roughly the seven training epochs for becoming a prophet are:

1. The study of dreams (light—seeing at night)

2. Separation of the physical and the spiritual (e.g., the religious separation of temple/synagogue versus the home)

3. Knowledge of psychology, that is, the awareness of the variety of human approaches to a minimal plant-like existence (i.e., consumption and reproduction)

4. Importance of periodic holidays and commemorations

5. Awareness of the herd nations ("beasts") and the power of flight (birds) (e.g., Egypt and escape)

6. Prophetic animal visions (e.g., Ezekiel 1), human prophecy

7. Shabbat—consolidation and development

These ideas filter into our heritage. Jewish holidays are an example of "Wednesday." The belt worn during prayer separating the lower part of the body from the upper part of the body is an example of "Monday." Although more can be said, we give "clinical advice" useful in daily activities in the next section.

I conclude this very brief section with a word-by-word translation of Genesis 1:1–5. Literal terms (such as "heaven") that have been interpreted symbolically (e.g., "heaven" = "spiritual") have been italicized for the readers' convenience.

For the sake of the choicest [in man] God created the *spiritual* and *physical* worlds. For [before this creation of the spiritual] the *physical* world was formless and astonishing with the darkness [of no dreams] on the brim of man's unconscious, but the spirit of prophecy hovered over man's emotions. And God said let there be the light [of dreams] and there were dreams. And God saw that dreams were good and God differentiated between dreams [light] and no dreams [darkness—nothing seen at night]. And God called dreams day and lack of dreams night.

A few comments on our approach should be made:

- My interpretation may appear radical. I would alternatively suggest that we modestly interpreted only half a dozen key terms—heaven, earth, light, dark, animals, spirit of God prophetically. Once we do so, the symbolic interpretation naturally flows.
- In my initial research on this topic, I found resistance and hesitance to this interpretation. But there was an equal resistance to interpreting Ecclesiastes 12 as referring to old age or even to the details in interpreting Song of Songs symbolically. I believe this reflects a deficiency in our education, which emphasizes analytic techniques and avoids symbolic holistic techniques. Had we exposed students to symbolic interpretation in day school these interpretations would be more acceptable.

VI. Clinical Guidance, the Joseph Case Study

Genesis, the book of the prophetic titans, Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the book of individuals who stood alone against the masses and won through prophecy, this book, ends by devoting 25 percent of its chapters to non-prophetic fantasies of an immature

teenager, Joseph. Such a contrast must be explored in context: Adam, Noah, and the Patriarchs are titans to look up to, but are not appropriate role models to emulate since we are not on their level. Contrastively, Joseph is extremely human; he has the fears, fantasies, and non-prophetic status similar to most people. We therefore can turn to the Joseph case study for clinical advice and relevance. Joseph is described (Gen. 37:2) as an immature teenager, a tattletale, who hung around with lower classes. Joseph is one of the first recorded instances of teenage immaturity. The Bible describes how Joseph used non-prophetic dreams to "cure" his immaturity.

Joseph had two significant dreams: He dreamt of sheaves bowing to his upright sheaf and dreamt of stars, the sun, and moon bowing to him. Several features are important in these dreams. First, unlike almost all other biblical dreams there is no hint of prophetic encounter. The dreams do not come from God, do not have a deity symbol, and do not have moral orders. They are ordinary dreams, the type the rest of the world has today. Second, both dreams highlight the activity of bowing.

Before presenting Joseph's treatment of his dreams let us present the alternative non-prophetic treatment. It is tempting to cite modern approaches to dream interpretation. However because of the subjectivity in dream interpretation this would require significant amounts of space. We therefore suffice with his brother's treatment of the dreams. This treatment has many characteristics of modern secular approaches.

Bowing in the bible indicates submission to power. Furthermore, upright objects are universal phallic symbols. Consequently, the dreams echo Joseph's immaturity. The only way Joseph can achieve adulthood is by controlling others; after all, who would share with him if he is immature. Joseph quests adult masculinity (upright sheaves). Joseph's preoccupation with looks and masculinity is a theme through Joseph's life; in fact he went to jail because of this (Gen. 39:6–23). Even on his deathbed, his father still saw the immature teenager questing for masculinity and looks and gave him a blessing that "girls should tiptoe over the walls to gaze at him" (Gen. 49:22). Reuben, the eldest brother, who defended Joseph, nevertheless calls him a child (Gen. 42:22). A less confrontational dream interpretation might use a social versus a physical approach to Joseph's dreams—he sought respect which through his lens of immaturity expressed itself as bowing.

Now we come to Joseph's own treatment of his dreams. Although his dreams were non-prophetic, Joseph's genius, and his contribution to prophecy, was to treat ordinary dreams with prophetic methods. Such a treatment yielded results enabling Joseph to save the world from famine. The prophetic treatment of dreams emphasizes four attributes:

- 1. A nonsexual interpretation
- 2. Emphasis on helping the community
- 3. De-emphasis on short-term transparency and emphasis on long-term non-transparency
- 4. Emphasis on a project approach involving stages.

Let us now examine these four attributes in detail:

- 1. *Nonsexual interpretation*: Joseph did not interpret his dreams physically.
- 2. Communal benefit: The word "bow" has four distinct biblical meanings: (i) thanks/gratitude, (ii) submission to power, (iii) greetings, and (iv) worship. Joseph ultimately interpreted "bowing" as indicating "gratitude" for the communal work he intended to do, an interpretation that we see materialize later, when people coming to Joseph for food during the famine bowed (gave thanks) to him (Gen. 42:6).
- 3. Non transparency: Joseph did not impose an interpretation on his dream. Its meaning was non-transparent and enigmatic. He waited. He had no way of knowing that thirteen years later he would be in charge of gathering sheaves and his sheaf gathering would be successful while others would fail.
- 4. Project approach: Joseph did not passively wait for the dream to come true but rather actively participated with the interpretation. While a slave in Potiphar's house and while a prison warden, he acquired managerial experience and leadership capacities. Joseph also continued his dream interpretation while in prison. It is a mistake to see him as passively enduring suffering and suddenly interpreting Pharaoh's dream and becoming viceroy. On the contrary, he prepared for it.

And so, the immature teenager of seventeen blossomed into the mature leader of thirty. This transformation happened because of Joseph's prophetic treatment of non-prophetic dreams. This case study is certainly worthy of our own study and emulation.

VII. Conclusion

To use modern terminology, if religion is to survive in today's competition with science it must market itself properly. The proper approach to marketing is to advertise something unique that you do best. If you try to imitate your competitors you are bound to failure.

The problem with the science-religion dialogue today is religion's passivity; religion defends itself against possible misinter-pretation, but I advocate an active, aggressive approach.

Religion is offering something. It is offering dreams and prophecy. Everyone from the immature teenager to the mature prophet can benefit.

Furthermore, dreams should be an intrinsic part of the religious person's life. The religious person eats in a religious manner, has leisure in a religious manner, and does several religious activities such as prayer and learning. Dream interpretation should not be something you do when you have problems and are seeing a therapist. Dreams should be part and parcel of your daily activities and daily approach to life. We should study dreams separately and apply known interpretations to our own problems. I believe such an approach can place religion on an equal or superior footing with science.

I close with my response to the three issues in the Samuelson paper.

- 1. Creation: Religion is marketing prophecy and dreams. Religion (whether Jewish or other Near Eastern religions) doesn't care where the world came from. There never was a contradiction between science and religion on the creation of the physical world. On the other hand, there is a contradiction between science and religion on the creation of dreams. Science believes dreams are psycho-physical. Religion believes all dreams come from God and can enhance the God-man relationship. It is not worth fighting with science over the creation of the world; it is worth fighting with science on the creation and source of dreams.
- 2. Revelation: Religion is marketing revelation. Science does not even acknowledge its existence. The best way to prove revelation is to experience it, to emulate Joseph, to make ones dreams a part of one's life. A person whose life is

- transformed by dreams has an adequate basis to believe in revelation.
- 3. Redemption: Science has not redeemed man. Joseph's dreams did redeem him. Had he gone to a modern therapist, taken some drugs, and been taught to live with other people without dominating them ("bowing" = "power"), Joseph would never have been cured or redeemed; rather his symptoms would have been controlled. But Joseph transformed his personality, redeemed himself, and saved the entire world through his prophetic approach to dreams. To achieve redemption we must reactivate our religion's interest in dreams.

Notes

- 1. Norbert M. Samuelson, "The Challenges of the Modern Sciences for the Jewish Faith," CCAR Journal (Winter 2012): 16–18.
- 2. Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, Studies in Bible and Feminist Criticism (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2006), 159.
- 3. Ibid., 255.
- 4. Russell Jay Hendel, "Genesis 1 Speaks about the Creation of Prophecy, Not the Creation of the World," B'Or Ha-Torah 13 (English section) (2002): 71-87; Russell Jay Hendel, "Sacrifice Categories and Personality Types," Jewish Bible Quarterly 38, no. 1 (2010):
- 5. Samson Raphael Hirsch, Grundlinien Einer Judischen Symbolik, first appeared in German, in his Gesammelte Schriften, ed. J. Kauffmann (Frankfurt on Maine, 1902). For an English translation see Jacob Breuer, "Groundlines for a Jewish Symbolism," in Timeless Torah, An Anthology of the Writings of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (New York: Samson Raphael Hirsch Publication Society, Feldheim, 1957). The complete collected works have also been translated into English in Collected Writings of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (New York: Samson Raphael Hirsch Publication Society, Feldheim, 1984).
- 6. See Hendel, "Genesis 1 Speaks about the Creation of Prophecy, Not the Creation of the World," vol. 3, 3–61. 7. Ibid., 87
- 8. The material for this section comes from Russell Jay Hendel, "Joseph: A Biblical Approach to Dream Interpretation," Jewish Bible Quarterly 39, no. 4 (2011): 231-238.
- 9. See J. Bigner, T. Grayson, and A. Milevsky, Understanding Foundations in Human Development, 2nd ed. (Reeding, CA: Horizon Text-