

## A Study on Macrobius s Dream Theory and Features of Apocalypse

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# A Study on Macrobius's Dream Theory and Features of Apocalypse

Masahiro Mibu

## Introduction

This essay is part of a study focusing primarily on visionary stories in the field of research about the other world. The historical details of the depiction of paradise in the medieval visionary narrative group prove a strong connection with apocalyptic writings. Also, in this group, the world of dreams and visions, very different from the real world, is depicted. Apocalypse, of course, strongly reflects religiousness, and the interpretation of its dreams and visions will require specialized knowledge of Judeo-Christian theology. However, we would like to point out that the essay treats apocalyptic books as materials for literary research, and not for the purpose of exploring religious principles. First, after briefly outlining the features of Macrobius's dream theory, which had a profound impact on the interpretation of dreams and visions in medieval Western Europe, and then overviewing the features of apocalypse, we would like to describe our personal views on their similarities and differences. By comparing and examining both, it is expected that the features and characteristics of the visionary narrative group of the Middle Ages will be made clearer.

## I. On Macrobius's Theory of Dreams

Various interpretations of dreams, or attempts to systematize dreams, have been revisited since ancient times. Jacques Le Goff, for example, refers to dream theory in the Greek and Roman worlds of Homer, Hesiod, Pythagoras, Plato, Virgil, Cicero, and others, while making a detailed study of how these ancient ideas were accepted and systematized as doctrines, mainly in Christian society, from the second century to the seventh century.<sup>1)</sup> The description of particularly notable dreams in ancient society is the vision of Er in the tenth book of the *Republic* by Plato, and the description of this dream was succeeded by Scipio's dream in the

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<sup>1)</sup> Jacques Le Goff, *The Medieval Imagination*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), pp. 196-203.

sixth book of *De re publica* by Cicero.<sup>2)</sup> Also, Macrobius, a new Platonist writer around the fourth century, wrote *Commentarius in Somnium Scipionis* about the trueness of Scipio's dream. Macrobius's dream theory is extremely important in that it greatly influenced the dream theory of twelfth-century Western society.<sup>3)</sup> First, we would like to present the plot of Scipio's dream.

Whenever Roman consul general Scipio (Africanus the Younger) visited Africa, he was entertained by the old king Masinissa, a close friend of his family, and the old king acclaimed the honors played by Scipio's foster grandfather, Africanus the Elder. On that night, Scipio had a dream in which Africanus, although he had passed away, appeared and predicted that Scipio would ruin the city of Carthage in northern Africa within two years, and would continue to make achievements as a martial artist thereafter. Scipio asked if the dead were still alive, to which Africanus replied that they were, and then Paulus, the father of Scipio, who had also passed away, appeared in the dream. Scipio felt glad on seeing his father and shed tears. After this, the foster grandfather talked about the place of the soul after death, planets other than the earth, and the music of the celestial body, among other things, and urged Scipio not to pay attention to the fame and glory of the small earth. Finally, Africanus retailed descriptions of the "eternal home and resting place,"<sup>4)</sup> which human beings should really seek, and insisted that only the sublime soul who contributed to the motherland can reach this place. He persuaded Scipio to improve his own eternal spirit.<sup>5)</sup>

The above is an outline of Scipio's dream. It is intriguing that spiritual training gives life the greatest significance. Macrobius classified dreams into five categories, based on the nature of dreams. Furthermore, these categories are roughly divided into three kinds of worthy dreams and two of worthless dreams.<sup>6)</sup> Worthy dreams have the following characteristics.

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<sup>2)</sup> Le Goff, p. 201. Russel states that *Sominium Scipionis* of Cicero is the first dream vision in Western literature. Cf. J. Stephen Russell, *The English Dream Vision* (Ohio State University Press, 1988), p. 7.

<sup>3)</sup> Le Goff, p. 201.

<sup>4)</sup> Clinton W. Keyes, trans., *Cicero: On the Republic on the Laws* (Loeb Classical Library, 2006), p. 279. Stahl translated this place into "eternal goal and abode." Cf. William Harris Stahl, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio by Macrobius*, trans. with an intr. and notes (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 76.

<sup>5)</sup> According to Stahl, "spirit" here was translated into "soul." Cf. Stahl, *Commentary*, p. 77.

<sup>6)</sup> Russell, pp. 60ff.

## **(1) Worthy dreams**

### **(i) Somnium (enigmatic dream)**

This dream is mysterious, and the truth hidden in the dream is wrapped in a veil, as “one that concerns with strange shapes and veils with ambiguity the true meaning of the information being offered, and requires an interpretation for its understanding”<sup>7)</sup>. This is a rare and ambiguous dream that vaguely announces the future, requiring its interpretation.<sup>8)</sup> This dream has five subcategories with the following characteristics:

- ① Personal : as in “when one dreams that one is doing or experiencing something”
- ② Alien : as in “when he dreams this about someone else”
- ③ Social : as in “when his dream involves others and himself”
- ④ Public : as in: “when he dreams that some misfortune or benefit has befallen the city, forum, theater, public walls, or other public enterprise”
- ⑤ Universal : as in: “when he dreams that some change has taken place in the sun, moon, planets, sky, or regions of the earth”<sup>9)</sup>

This means that the “somnium” is a matter of great content not only “personal” but also “universal.”

### **(ii) visio (prophetic vision)**

This dream is prophetic and will be realized in the future due to its nature. As a concrete example of this dream, Macrobius cites the case where the return of a friend, acceptance of receipt of a deposit, etc., are indicated in advance as follows.

For example, a man dreams of the return of a friend who has been staying in a foreign land, thoughts of whom never enter his mind. He goes out and presently meets his friend and embraces him. Or in his dream he agrees to accept a deposit, and early the next day a man runs anxiously to him, charging him with the safekeeping of his money and committing secrets to his trust.<sup>10)</sup>

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<sup>7)</sup> Stahl, p. 90.

<sup>8)</sup> Le Goff, p. 202.

<sup>9)</sup> The list was made by the writer with reference to Stahl (*Commentary*, p. 90).

<sup>10)</sup> Stahl, p. 90.

### (iii) Oraculum (oracular dream)

This oracular dream is “(one) in which a parent, or a pious or revered man, or a priest, or even a God clearly reveals what will or will not transpire, and what action to take or to avoid taking.”<sup>11)</sup> This means the future events or actions to be taken by the relatives, saints, or gods, are revealed.

### (2) The worthless dream.

The worthless dreams are *insomnium* (nightmare) and *visum* (apparition). The former is worthless because it “may be caused by mental or physical distress, or anxiety about the future. A patient experiences in dreams vexations similar to those that disturb him during the day.”<sup>12)</sup> This dream occurs in the early stages of sleeping as follows:

In this drowsy condition he thinks he is still fully awake and imagines he sees specters rushing at him or wandering vaguely about, differing from natural creatures in size and shape, and hosts of diverse things, either delightful or disturbing.<sup>13)</sup>

“Specter” in the quote has the meaning of “spirit of a dead person, ghost,” etc. This is a dream that has an illusionary nature at the initial stage of sleep when awareness is low.

These are the five dream categories classified by Macrobius. He claimed the validity of Scipio’s dream based on these classifications. As stated below, Scipio’s dream contains all the elements of worthy dreams.

It is oracular since the two men who appeared before him revealed his future, Aemilius Paulus and Scipio the Elder, were both his father, both were pious and revered men, and both were affiliated with the priesthood. It is a prophetic vision, since Scipio saw the regions of his abode after death and his future condition. It is an enigmatic dream because the truths revealed to him were

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<sup>11)</sup> Stahl, p. 90.

<sup>12)</sup> Stahl, p. 89.

<sup>13)</sup> Stahl, p. 89.

couched in words that hid their profound meaning and could not be comprehended without skillful interpretation.<sup>14)</sup> (underlines added)

Scipio was neither a city leader nor a senior official when he dreamed, but his outstanding father and foster grandfather, and his own literary and natural talents, enabled him to dream about the truth of the destruction of Cartago in the future.<sup>15)</sup> The dream that Scipio had can be regarded as a genuine and irrefutable one because of the hierarchy where Scipio is the supreme authority.

We mentioned earlier that Scipio's dream has had the same influence as Plato's vision of Er, but according to Russell, Er's dream is more important in its doctrine than in the literal truth. A tradition of dreams such as this is inherited by *Psychomachia* of Prudentius, *De Nuptiis Mercuriae et Philologiae* of Martianus Capella, *The Consolation of Philosophy* of Boethius, etc., and then in medieval society, by *Roman de la Rose* of Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Parlement of Foules* of Chaucer, etc.<sup>16)</sup> Such a tidal current is a depiction of an ideological dream based on philosophical doctrines, or ideas, rather than the credibility of the dream. Macrobius also interprets Scipio's dream from the philosophical point of view. He notes at the end of *Commentarius in Somnium Scipionis* as follows:

Let us now check our discussion and bring an end to this Commentary with one additional remark, which will afford a fitting conclusion: there are three branches of the whole field of philosophy—moral, physical, and rational. Moral philosophy is a guide to the highest perfection in moral conduct, physical philosophy is concerned with the physical part of the divine order, and rational philosophy discusses incorporealities, matters apprehended only by the mind. Accordingly, Cicero included all three in Scipio's Dream.<sup>17)</sup> (underlines added)

As we can see from this quote, philosophy has three divisions: moral, physical, and rational. From this, Macrobius concludes about Scipio's Dream that "we must declare that there is nothing more complete than this work, which embraces the

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<sup>14)</sup> Stahl, pp. 90-91.

<sup>15)</sup> Le Goff, pp. 201-202.

<sup>16)</sup> Russell, pp. 45-46.

<sup>17)</sup> Stahl, p. 246.

entire body of philosophy.”<sup>18)</sup>

Incidentally, in medieval society, apart from the current of Macrobius’s dream theory mentioned above, there was also an important stream of Judeo-Christian interpretation of dreams. In this regard, A. C. Spearing states:

...beside this classical tradition, there is also an even more powerful Judaeo-Christian stream of influence upon medieval literature, and in this, visionary experience appears still more prominently, and is openly admitted as such, not disguised as heroic adventure. For the Middle Ages, the explicitly visionary element in Scripture must have provided a major justification for a literature of dreams and visions.<sup>19)</sup>

In this quote, “an even more powerful Judaeo-Christian stream” means apocalypse, in which the human spirit leaves the body (*eductus e corpore*) and explores the heavens and the underground world.<sup>20)</sup> This apocalyptic flow is different from the traditional flow from ancient times found in Macrobius’s dream theory mentioned above. The following describes the features of apocalypse.

## II. About Apocalypse

Although apocalypse contains theological thought, it is also treated as one of the literary genres.<sup>21)</sup> The Greek word “apocalupsis” means “revelation” and is derived from *Revelation*, or *Apocalypse of John*, in the New Testament.<sup>22)</sup> Apocalypse is also related to messianism. This Messiah faith is the expectation of the birth of the Savior on Earth, but originally means the resurrection of kingship in Judea.<sup>23)</sup> The point where the reconstruction of New Jerusalem was an

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<sup>18)</sup> Stahl, p. 246.

<sup>19)</sup> A. C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 11-12.

<sup>20)</sup> Le Goff, p. 226. Russell also point out the relationship between medieval dream visions and apocalyptic documents. Cf. Russell, *The English Dream Vision*, Chap. 1.

<sup>21)</sup> Bloomfield points out the two possible answers to the question “Is the apocalypse a literary genre?”; that is, the influence of the genre called the “aretology” from Greek literary forms and of the books of Daniel and Second Esdras. Cf. Morton W. Bloomfield, *Essays and Explorations: Studies and Ideas, Language, and Literature* (Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 168-169.

<sup>22)</sup> “Apocalyptic Literature,” *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology*, ed. by Jean-Yves Lacoste (New York: Routledge, 2005), vol. 1, pp. 64-67.

<sup>23)</sup> “Apocalypse,” *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed. (New York: Thomson Gale, 2005), vol. 1, p. 410.

“apocalyptic dream”<sup>24)</sup> would also be a source of interpretation of apocalypse. For example, Isaiah (26:19) describes the resurrection thought for the Jewish people after Babylonian imperialism in terms of new heaven and earth themes, among others. In addition, the New Testament gospels and the apostle Paul’s letters also show the basic features of apocalypse: for example, the judgment by heaven, the resurrection and the judgment of the dead.<sup>25)</sup>

In general, apocalyptic documents are classified into two categories in terms of typology: one with a historical viewpoint and the other with the otherworldly journey.<sup>26)</sup> A representative document in a historical perspective is *Daniel*, which symbolically reveals future events through a vision.<sup>27)</sup> And the vision is often interpreted by an angel. For example, Daniel had a dream (vision) while sleeping, during the first year of King Belshazzar’s reign in Babylon. It was a dream of four beasts coming from the sea (Dan. 7).<sup>28)</sup> The first beast looks like a lion with the wings of an eagle and the second beast looks like a bear with three ribs in its mouth. The third beast looks like a leopard with four wings on its back and four heads. The fourth beast was terrifying and powerful. And this beast “had large iron teeth; it crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left. It was different from all the former beasts, and it had ten horns” (Dan. 7:7). In this way, its ferocity is emphasized. Daniel, confused by these mysterious visions, asks the angel to interpret them. Then the angel says that the four beasts are the kings of the earth coming out of this. Daniel asked the angel again to find out the meaning of the terrible fourth beast. The following is its interpretation.

The fourth beast is a fourth kingdom that will appear on earth. It will be different from all the other kingdoms and will devour the whole earth, trampling it down and crushing it. The ten horns are ten kings who will come from this kingdom. After them another king will arise, different from the earlier ones; he will subdue three kings. He will speak against the Most High and oppress his holy people and try to change the set times and the laws. (Dan. 7:23-25)

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<sup>24)</sup> John M. Court, *Dictionary of the Bible* (Penguin Reference Library, 2007), p. 166.

<sup>25)</sup> *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 1, p. 410.

<sup>26)</sup> *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 1, p. 410.

<sup>27)</sup> *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology*, vol. 1, pp. 64-67.

<sup>28)</sup> The Bible cited here is *Holy Bible, New International Version Containing the Old Testament and the New Testament* (Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988).



This fourth beast is a powerful country that shakes the world, but the beast (the king) is judged, and its authority is deprived, and in the end it will be destroyed. Then the angel says that the age of the Most High will last forever. Thus, Daniel is able to unravel the historical meaning of his dream by the angel.

Another type of apocalypse is represented by the Enoch text of the Old Testament, which was created from the second century BC to the fall of Jerusalem at the hands of the Roman army,<sup>29)</sup> and through the dreams and visions the underground world and the heavens are explored. The most representative of Enoch documents is *1 Enoch*.<sup>30)</sup> It is characterized by the following elements:

The second type of apocalypse is characterized by the motif of ascent to heaven. Enoch is the prototypical apocalyptic visionary of this kind. In these apocalypses, the revelation takes the form of a trip to heaven with the angel serving as a guide. The emphasis is on the geography of the heavens; the classical model typically includes the realm of the dead, the place of judgment, and a vision of the divine throne. There may be also the prediction of the world's destruction, and at times a trip across history as in the historical apocalypse. The eschatological expectation deals primarily with the afterlife of individuals.<sup>31)</sup>

In this type of apocalypse, the flight to the heavens is the main subject, and in addition, the world after death, the place of the Last Judgment, the throne of God, and eschatology are central to the description. The whole structure of *1 Enoch* is divided into seven sections and consists of 108 chapters in total, but it would be as follows when summarized in terms of subject matter:

Chaps. 1–5: Enoch saw a vision in which God prepared the doomsday for bad angels fallen down from heaven and prepared peace and joy for the elect and righteous.

Chaps. 6–11: These chapters describe the fallen angels and the birth of giants, and

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<sup>29)</sup> *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament, Volume Two*, pp. 170-171.

<sup>30)</sup> The text used here is *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament, Volume Two: Pseudepigrapha*, ed. by R.H. Charles (U.S.A.: Apocryphile Press, 2004), pp. 188-277.

<sup>31)</sup> *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology*, vol. 1, p. 64.

the angels are sentenced to punishment.

Chaps. 12–16: Enoch sentenced the sinners to the same punishment.

Chaps. 17–36: These chapters say that Enoch travels the heaven, the earth and the nether world in his vision. On the way, he visited the places where bad angels were burned, where the righteous and the sinners go, and where Enoch saw the Garden of Eden, the tree of knowledge and the tree of life.

Chaps. 37–71: Enoch talks about the parables, teachings of the Messiah and his ascension to heaven. He played the role of the eschatological judge.

Chaps. 72–82: The book of the courses of the heavenly luminaries. Enoch talks about astronomy and the calendar, accompanied by the angel Uriel.

Chaps. 83–90: Enoch's two visionary stories. He tells about the coming flood and the apocalypse of personified animals.

Chaps. 91–105: Enoch exhorts his offspring to continue doing good.

Chaps. 106–107: These chapters are a fragment of the book of Noah.

Chap. 108: An appendix to the book of Enoch.

From this list, it can be understood that *1 Enoch* contains multiple themes. Therefore, this document does not necessarily have completely different content from *Daniel*; for example, Chapters 83–90 described above form a vision with historical or apocalyptic significance. So, both books can be said to have partially common contents. Also, like *Daniel*, various mysterious revelations are explained and interpreted by a guiding angel. As apocalypses describing the otherworldly journey, there are *3 Baruch*, *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*, and *Apocalypse of Abraham*, in addition to *1 Enoch* and *2 Enoch*. Similar subjects can be seen in the New Testament apocryphal books such as *Apocalypse of Peter* and *Apocalypse of Paul*

<sup>32)</sup> These are noteworthy in that they laid the foundation for the otherworld depiction in the visionary narrative of medieval Western Europe.

So far, we have described Macrobius's dream theory and the features of apocalypse. We can understand that both of them follow completely different trajectories, but seem to have similar points. Here we would like to mention the similarities and differences between the dreams from some apocalyptic documents, including some others from the Bible, and Macrobius's worthy dreams. First of all, the biblical dreams similar to *somnium* requiring its interpretation are the dreams

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<sup>32)</sup> *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology*, vol. 1, pp. 64-67.

of the pharaohs of Egypt (Gen. 41: 1-39), the dreams seen by the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 2, 4), Mordecai's dream (AddEsth. 10: 1-6), etc. What is interesting about this *somnium*, especially from the standpoint of the other world research, is that the universal characteristics of *somnium* are related to the heavens. However, Scipio's dream does not depict the heavenly paradise, but it is astronomical like "the wonders of the heavens, the great celestial circles, and the harmony of the revolving spheres"<sup>33)</sup> Next, for *oraculum*, we can mention the visions described in *Nahum* and *Habakkuk*. And for *visio*, it seems to be related to Joseph's dream (Gen. 37: 7-9), Isaiah's and Ezekiel's visions, Daniel's dreams (Dan. 7: 1-14), the Israeli army's dream in *Wisdom of Solomon* (Wis.18: 17-19), John's vision in Revelation, etc. Also, in the hierarchy of Macrobius, the main characters in apocalypse are the great men described in the Bible: for example, Enoch, Abraham, Peter, Paul, and the like. These saints are the people given the privilege for the true dreams and visions, and by using these saints as protagonists, the credibility of the dreams and visions will be further enhanced. While dreams and visions work as a medium that directly connects God and humans, there is also a possibility that the devil can secretly intervene to mislead humans through dreams and visions that seem to be really true. In this respect, the credibility of each story will become enhanced if it is a dream experienced by a famous saint.

It is the role of an angel that we are particularly interested in. Unlike Plato's vision of Er and Cicero's dream of Scipio, the presence of an angel adds more fun to apocalypse. Angels guide the protagonist, teach them, or protect them from demons. It should be noted that there is God's intention behind their various activities on the protagonist. The following opening part of *1 Enoch* feels like an acknowledgment to not only God but also to angels.

The words of the blessing of Enoch, wherewith he blessed the elect and righteous, who will be living in the day of tribulation, when all the wicked and godless are to be removed. And he took up his parable and said—Enoch a righteous man, whose eyes were opened by God, saw the vision of the Holy One in the heavens, which the angels showed me, and from them I heard everything, and from them I understood as I saw....<sup>34)</sup> (underlines added)

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<sup>33)</sup> Stahl, p. 90.

<sup>34)</sup> *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament, Volume Two*, p. 188.

Apocalypse describes the heavenly paradise with God as its center. This paradise has an eschatological connection with the Last Judgment. In this respect, it is quite different from Scipio's dream. Apocalyptic documents were spread among Jews and Christians, and were inherited from the Hellenistic period through to the Middle Ages.<sup>35)</sup> The representative works of the Middle Ages include the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great and the *History of the Franks* of the Gregory of Tours in the sixth century, and flourished in the twelfth century. Representative works in the twelfth century are *St. Patrick's Purgatory*, *The Vision of Tundale*, *The Revelation of the Monk of Eynsham*, etc. If we look at the other world depictions of these works, it is more similar to the features of apocalypse, *1 Enoch*, which describes the visit to the heavenly paradise, than that of the Scipio's dream. However, these visionary stories do not seem to be conscious of the ethnic or national revival or eschatology found in apocalypse. They might have shifted their creational intention to the improvement and relief of the soul of individuals as seen in Plato's vision of Er and Cicero's dream of Scipio. Although it is not clear that the descriptions of Plato and Cicero influenced the visionary stories, we should not ignore such similarity between them.

## Conclusion.

Both Macrobius's dream theory and apocalypse share the fact that their dreams and visions are media that describe another world different from the real one. This may be because dreams and visions are inseparable from human life or human existence no matter how retroactive the times are. The interpretation of mysterious dreams and visions is also the history of human wisdom attempting to unravel any messages hidden in them. Therefore, it is natural that there are partial similarities in both Macrobius's dream theory and apocalypse. However, there are differences between them in terms of the methods of dreams and visions. In short, Macrobius's dream seems to have been built on the foundation of philosophical ideas derived from Plato and other philosophers, while apocalyptic stories seem to have been based on religious thought from Judaism and/or Christianity, associated with the absolute being, God. In other words, for apocalyptic writers, God is the only creator of truly revelational dreams and

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<sup>35)</sup> *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology*, vol. 1, pp. 64.

visions. Therefore, it can be said that visionary stories in the Middle Ages were also created based on this creational intention, similar to apocalyptic writers.

Finally, we would like to add the following: Roberta L. Payne points out that Dante's *Divina Commedia* directly inherited the distinctive form of "visio" from Macrobius's categories.<sup>36)</sup> On the other hand, Collins argues that "the influence of the ascent to heaven (and descent to hell) apocalypses can be seen in the great poems of Dante."<sup>37)</sup> Thus, combining these two points, *Divina Commedia* may be said to be the masterpiece of the otherworld depiction created by aggregating the traditions of both Macrobius's dream theory and apocalypse.

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<sup>36)</sup> Roberta L. Payne, *The Influence of Dante on Medieval English Dream Visions* (New York: Peter Lang), 1988, pp. 14-15.

<sup>37)</sup> *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology*, vol. 1, p. 67.