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Divination by Dreams in Ugaritic Literature and in the Old Testament.

A. Jeffers

Numerous dreams are related in the Old Testament, and great attention is given to them as they are considered to be communications from the divinity¹, as Nb 12:6 shows². Dreams seem to have been a recognized way of consulting the divinity (1 Sam 28:6) and then fell into disrepute along with most of the means used by man to consult God's will (Dt 13:1-5 threatens the death penalty for any spurious "dreamer of visions"). Therefore dreams can be "received" by both ordinary people and by cult specialists, prophets and kings (their passive attitude is thus emphasised in this case) or dreams can be specifically sought in situations of extreme necessity³.

1. SEARCH FOR A TYPOLOGY OF MANTIC DREAMS

Various types of dreams are recorded in the Old Testament giving rise to different typologies. A distinction between "message dreams" including "political divination" and "apocalyptic dreams" has

¹Mendelsohn, "Dream", IDB vol. 1, p. 868; cf. Gen 40:8; 41:6

²J. Gray, Numbers, (ICC: Edinburgh, 1903) p. 124.

³Such is the case for the few real incubation-dreams we have access to in the Northwest Semitic world. For instance, the dream of Keret is sought for after the king's seven sons die leaving no heir to the throne; also in the case of Daniel in the Aqhat tablet, the lack of a son drives him to undergo a complex incubation ritual. 1 Kgs 3 in the Old Testament may not be at first sight a case of emergency but what is asked by Solomon is of prime importance for the survival of the kingdom: the art of government (v.9). May we add also 1 Sam 28:8 which seems to be one of the means of consultation set at the disposal of men.

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been made;⁴ Oppenheim stated that dream experiences were recorded on "three clearly differentiated planes":-

- i) dreams as revelations of the deity;
- ii) dreams which reflect symptomatically, the state of mind, the spiritual and bodily "health" of the dreamer;
- iii) the mantic dreams in which forthcoming events are prognosticated;

Lastly, we will mention Ehrlich's typology which includes:

- i) incubation dreams;
- ii) symbolic dreams;
- iii) commands and directions which God communicates through dreams.

i) The "Simple" Message Dream

In this case "announcements are delivered in plain language" either directly⁸, or by taking elements of everyday life⁹. These dreams are not necessarily mantic, although they might contain threats which would come through if the message is not taken¹⁰. Thus we will take the message dream in its wider sense: mantic is

⁴B.Kilborne, "Dreams", Ency. Rel. vol. 4, p.482.

⁵A.L. Oppenheim, The Interpretation of Dreams in the Ancient Near East, Transactions of the American Philosophical society, vol.46, pt 3 (1956),p. 184ff.

⁶E.Ehrlich, "Der Traum im Alten Testament",BZAW 13 (1953).

⁷Mendelsohn, op.cit. ,p.868

⁸For instance Gen 20:3; 31:11-24.

⁹Gen 37:5ff involving "sheaves".

¹⁰Gen 20:3ff.

that which is is "brought to pass" (Gen 41:32). This type of dream is dreamt by the Israelites and is self-explanatory, i.e., it does not need the help of a professional interpreter to understand it.

ii) Symbolic Dreams

These also contain an insight into the future but they can be solved by professional interpreters only. In the Old Testament, this type of dream is reserved for the "Gentiles"¹¹. Examples are the cases of the dreams of the chief butler and of the chief baker (Gen 40) or of the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 2). In the same category, the dream of the Midianite is found (Jdg 7:13).

iii) Incubation Dreams

These are dreams which are stimulated through the use of a particular ritual¹². The main condition it seems is that the subject spends the night at a "holy" place. We would add that incubation¹³ is a phenomenon which can be experienced spontaneously¹³ or artificially¹⁴. The ritual

¹¹Oppenheim, op.cit., p.207

¹²L.Deubner cited by Ehrlich, op.cit., p.13 gives a definition of incubation: "In deorum templis ad dormiendum se prosternabant, quia certis ritibus atque caere moniis effectis animoque bene praeparato atque prorsus in res divinas converso verisimillimum erat illum per somnium apparituum esse deum in cuius temple incubant". We have to keep in mind that this definition derives from the Greek attitude to uses of incubation. It relates here the rituals connected principally to the shrine of Asklepios in Epidauros.

¹³Samuel (1 Sam 3); Jacob (Gen 28:10ff)

¹⁴Solomon in 1 Kgs 3; also Isaac in Beer-Sheba (Gen 28:24f). Perhaps also the anonymous psalmist in Ps 91;

is performed in order to ask for something¹⁵. In the case of incubation dreams, the mantic element lies in the communication made by the divinity, in the confirmation that what has been asked for will come to pass, as in the wisdom of government required by Solomon, the wife and heir by Keret and the perfect son by Daniel.

2. MANTIC DREAMS IN UGARITIC LITERATURE AND IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

i) The Simple Message Dream

One dream which illustrates this category is to be found in (Gen 37:5ff) in which Joseph dreams that he was binding sheaves with his brothers and that his sheaves "arose and stood upright" while his brothers' sheaves "bowed down" to his (v.7), the dream recurs and this time the "sun, the moon and eleven stars were bowing down" to Joseph (v.9). This passage is from the Elohist's source¹⁶ and the content is fairly clear: Joseph is informed of his own destiny¹⁷. The dream is a prognostication of the future¹⁸. The reaction of Joseph's brothers might suggest, as Pedersen puts it, that "a man is responsible for his dreams.... Dreams are

in Ugaritic literature this seems to be the case in the dreams of Keret and Daniel.

¹⁵Solomon is asking for the wisdom of government, the psalmist for deliverance, in later Greek sources, people sleep in sanctuaries to obtain healing (cf.12 above).

¹⁶J. Skinner, Genesis, (ICC:Edinburgh, 1930) p. 445

¹⁷A. Caquot, "Les songes et leur interpretation", in Sources Orientales, vol.2 (Paris:ed. du Sevil, 1959), p.114

¹⁸Ehrlich, op.cit., p.122

realistic and if they are indeed true and fixed, then the contents must also some day project themselves in outer events....Through his dreams Joseph has become a potential ruler, and some day this potentiality will be fulfilled, unless it is extirpated"¹⁹.

So, this passage shows us that dreams are understood to contain in themselves their own fulfilment.

ii) The symbolic dream. This dream also carries a message but needs an interpreter. It is dreamt by Gentiles. In Gen 40:9ff, two officials of Pharaoh's court who were made destitute through the loss of their respective occupations, tell their dream to Joseph. Although the scene happens in Egypt there is no Egyptian detail. Caquot thinks that, as the narrative is told to an Israelite audience, the rules of interpretation of dreams applied by Joseph are not Egyptian, but reflect the divinatory art of dream interpretation as it was in Israel²⁰. The symbolism of both dreams is quite clear as both the chief baker and the chief butler see themselves acting in their normal function. The chief butler (v.9-11) acts normally, the chief baker is somehow prevented from fulfilling his function (v.16-17). The skill of Joseph consists of finding a meaning for the number three ("three branches"; "three cake baskets"); "the three branches are three days" (v.12) "the three baskets are three days" (v.18) in three days the chief butler will be

¹⁹ J.Pedersen, Israel, its Life and Culture (London: Cumberlege, 1926) Joseph's brothers want him out of the way in order "to prevent the persistence of the dreams or, what comes to the same thing, they prevent his soul from carrying through its claim to unfold itself according to its nature". Against him, see Ehrlich, p.122f., who thinks that the psychic origins of dreams are unknown to the Old Testament.

²⁰ Caquot, op.cit., p.112

re-established in his charge, in three days the chief baker will be put to death.

The same can be said about Gen 41, Pharaoh's double dream. The symbolism is quite obvious, especially for agricultural people: the fat cows symbolise prosperity, the gaunt ones, famine. The number seven gives the key to the interpretation of the dream (seven cows = seven years).

Nebuchadnezzar's dream, interpreted by Daniel (Dan 2) , also contained a prediction for the future. In his analysis of the king's dream, Daniel relates each part of the statue to its symbolic political significance. The different types of metals from which the statue is made provide the clue to the reading of the political future of Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom.²¹

From these three stories several elements emerge - from a purely literary point of view there is a pattern common to dreams (setting of the dream, information about who experiences it, when, under what circumstances,²² the content of the dream itself, its fulfilment).

- dreams are understood to be a communication from God.
- the content of the dreams represents things which are of personal concern to the dreamers.
- As to the material of the dreams, it originates in the surroundings of the dreamers (even the composite statue of Dan 2)

Jdg 7:13-14, also a symbolic dream received by Gentiles, differs slightly from the above pattern. Here

²¹ J. A Montgomery, The Book of Daniel (ICC, Edinburgh, 1927) p. 185ff. We should note also the dependency of Daniel on Joseph's story.

²² Oppenheim, op. cit., p. 186ff

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neither God nor angel is concerned and the content of the dream is not taken from everyday life. Also this is the only symbolic dream to be found outside the Jospheh tradition.

RSV: "Behold, I dreamed a cake of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian, and came to the tent, and struck it so that it fell, and turned it upside down, so that the tent lay flat". (v.14) And his comrade answered, "this is no other than the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel, into his hand God has given Midian and all the host."

This dream was dreamt by a Midianite soldier, interpreted by an anonymous soldier friend of his. They were both overheard by Gideon who understands the scene as an omen of his future victory over the Midianites²³. Returning to the camp, Gideon prepares for an immediate attack and wins the battle. Whether the dream is understood as a form of cledonancy (Gideon by chance hears this dream when obviously preoccupied by the war against the Midianites) as Guillaume proposes, or as a sign in itself ("the Midianites lack the strength of victory; their soul is inferior, a soul of defeat, and therefore it must create dreams of defeat, whereas victory is created in the soul of Gideon") as suggested by Pedersen²⁴ is debatable. If we see the dream from an Israelite's perspective, the dream was sent by God to the Midianites as a warning.

The dreams reveal several things. The story shows that any dream can be interpreted as an omen. Dreams of political significance are not reserved exclusively for

²³ A. Guillaume, Prophecy and Divination among the Hebrews and Other Semites (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1938) p. 214.

²⁴ Pedersen, op. cit., p. 138

men in power (potential or not). The symbolism again is, after all, quite clear: the cake of barley bread represents the peasants, the tent the nomads. Furthermore, there is possibly a word play on lehem, "bread" and the root lhm, "to do battle", as Caquot suggests²⁵. So we are faced in Jdg 7:13-14 with a unique example of popular interpretation based on wordplay.

Lastly, we will examine the symbolic dream of the Ugaritic god, El, which also suggests a belief in the "truthfulness" of dreams and in their prognostic value for the future.

KTU 1.6 I 4-9: El's dream:

b hlm . ltpn . il . d pid
b drt . bny . bnwt
šmm . šm*n . tmtrn
nhlm . tlk . nbtm
w id' . k hy . aliyn . b*"l*
k it . zbl . b'l . ars

De Moor translates:

"in a dream of the Benevolent, Ilu the good-natured,
in a vision of the Creator of creatures
the heavens will rain oil
the wadis will run with honey
and I will know that Ba'lu the Almighty is alive,
that his Highness, the Lord of earth, exists".²⁶

²⁵Caquot, op.cit., p.112

²⁶J. De Moor, An Anthology of Religious Texts from Ugarit (Leiden: Brill, 1987) 91

The goddess Anat returns to El and announces that Mot is no more. She invites El to have a dream in order to discover whether or not Baal can come back to life. If El sees the heavens raining oil and the wadis running with honey then she will know that Baal is alive. El has his dream and sees the signs that Anat desires him to see: nature is plentiful again and accordingly Baal, god of fertility, is alive²⁷. This poem was probably part of a religious drama setting the rhythm of rainy seasons with dry ones²⁸, and in this case it is a poetic figure of speech. But, on the other hand, this figure of speech would not have been understood by the audience if the idea that dreams can uncover the future was not already accepted. We should also note that as against Jdg 13, the Ugaritic text assumes that not everybody can have mantic dreams, not even goddesses: only El, head of the Ugaritic Pantheon, can dream such dreams. As in the Old Testament, there seems to be a "monopoly" of mantic dreams, with a difference: the Old Testament God, being less accessible than El, more remote, sends mantic dreams to people chosen by him for this purpose. In some ways he is also in control of them.²⁹

iii) Incubation Dreams

This is, as we have already said, a way to become the recipient of a message dream. This can happen spontaneously by spending the night in a holy place for instance, or it can be induced artificially. There are several examples of the induced incubation dream in

²⁷ cf. Gibson, Canaanite Myths and Legends (Edinburgh: T&T Clarke, 1978), p.17; see also C.H.Gordon, "The Poetic Literature of Ugarit", Or 12 (1943), p.38

²⁸ Caquot, op.cit., p.104

²⁹ F.Schmidtke, "Träume, Orakel, und Totengeister als Kunder der Zukunft in Israel und Babylonien" BZ 11 (1967) p.242

both Ugaritic literature and the Old Testament and we will now analyse them in order to find a possible recognisable pattern. The mantic element is contained in the message transmitted by the divinity to the dreamer.

KTU 1.14, I, 26ff: The dream of Keret:

(1.26) "He (Krt) entered his bedroom, he wept,
repeating his angry cries, shedding tears.
His tears poured forth
like shekels to the ground
like pieces of one fifth on his bed.
While he was weeping, he fell asleep,
while he was shedding, slumber (came),
sleep overpowered him and he lay down,
slumber (came) and he curled up.
And in his dream Ilu descended,
in his vision the Father of Man,
and he approached the questioning Kirtu".³⁰

Keret has lost his seven sons and there is no heir left to the throne. In what appears to be an incubation dream³¹, Keret asks El for descendants. El gives him precise instructions: Keret must wash and sacrifice, and then prepare an expedition in order to ask the king for Pabil's daughter, Huray, in marriage. Keret should tell Pabil that Huray was given to him and that she bears him offspring in the dream (III, 46-51).

In this passage we are faced with two problems:

³⁰ Translation by de Moor, p.193

³¹ I. Engnell, Studies in Divine Kingship in the Ancient Near East (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1967) p.151: cf. also Caquot, p.105. Against them see Ottosson, הַלָּאִם, חַלְלָה, TWAT, vol.2, col.987f. who does not think incubation took place (Keret is in his room, not in a temple).

whether or not it is an incubation scene and what the relationship is between what happens in the dream and its future development. We do not think that incubation has to be taken too strictly, in that the dream must take place necessarily at a sanctuary. In any case we do not know for sure where the scene is happening but we would consider a king's dwelling to be an appropriate place. The weeping of Keret may have been induced and remind us of ritual weeping in times of crisis for the community³². In this case it is provoked and may be part of an incubation ritual³³. As to the relationship between what happens in the dream and the future events, it seems that the desire for an heir is rooted by the dream, is part of him and so is brought about in future events.

A much clearer Ugaritic text about incubation rituals is to be found in KTU 1.17, I, 1ff, the "dream" of Daniel in the Aqhat text³⁴. Daniel, a chief or patriarch, undergoes a seven day rite of incubation in the hope of obtaining a son: Daniel after offering drink³⁵ and food³⁶ to "the gods" (l.3 and 4) "besprinkles

³²J.Gray, The KRT Text in the Literature of Ras Shamra: a Social Myth of Ancient Canaan, (Leiden: Brill, 1964)

p.34

³³The rites to be accomplished after the dream (washing and sacrificing) may also be post-incubation rituals. G.Obermann "How Daniel was blessed with a son" JAOS, suppl. 6 (1946) p. 10, n.13.

³⁴We should note here that the word hlm does not appear in the text.

³⁵cf.Obermann, op.cit., p. 8-9.

³⁶ibid.

his cubicle", "his clothes"³⁷ (1.5-6) and goes to sleep³⁸. The ritual also involves a prayer³⁵ "supplication". This was performed during the offering and repeated for six days. Daniel asks for a perfect son and requests the gods to intercede in his favour. El gives him a favourable response (1.48-71): Daniel's sterility will be cured (1.48-57) and a model son will be given to him (1.58-71).

We have here a much more elaborate pattern of:

- i) sacrificial offering;
- ii) purification (?) of the dwelling;
- iii) going to sleep;
- iv) intercession;
- v) fulfilment of the dream.

This pattern is to be found in 1 Kgs 3 (Solomon at Gideon). This text, according to Ehrlich⁴⁰ is the only case of incubation in the Old Testament. Although we would not completely agree with that statement (other texts contain elements which can be identified as incubation rituals)⁴¹, the narrative of 1 Kgs 3 certainly

³⁷ Sprinkling of blood, of oil, of water, was used in the rituals of the Hebrews for a variety of purposes (expiation, purification, promotion of cultic person...)

³⁸ Of the four verbs involved, three are clear and common: y'l, "he goes up"; (v.3) to his bed; y'skb, "he lies down, he sleeps", yln, "he retires for the night". cf. Obermann, op.cit., p.9

³⁹ ibid. p.10; on the idea that Daniel uses a magical ritual see H.P.Muller, "Magisch-Mantisch Weisheit und die Gestalt Daniels", UF 1 (1969) pp 90-94 in particular.

⁴⁰ Ehrlich, op.cit., p.55

⁴¹ Gen 46:1-5 deals with a night vision; Gen 15:1-6, Abraham receives a divine word but no sacrifice has

exhibits the complete pattern put forward in KTU 1.17. RSV (v.4): "And the king went to Gideon to sacrifice there, for that was the great high place; Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt offerings upon that altar (v.5). At Gideon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night, and God said "Ask what I shall give you". To God then Solomon asked for an "understanding mind to govern the people" (v.9) and that was granted to him.

(v.5): And Solomon awoke, and behold, it was a dream. Then he came to Jerusalem, and stood before the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and offered up burnt offerings and peace offerings, and made a feast for all his servants."

We have got:

- (i) the sacrificial element - (v.4)
- (ii) the emphasis on the setting of the scene at night time - (v.5);
- (iii) the apparition of the divinity followed by an intercession - (v.5,9)
- (iv) the fulfilment - (v.12)
- (v) conclusion of the dream ("behold it was a dream") - (v.15)

In fact, biblical dreams located at sanctuaries (Beersheba, Bethel, Shiloh) "doubtless had connexion

been performed in Hebrew. Ehrlich dismisses the fact that Psalms may contain allusions to incubation, in particular Ps 3:6;4:9;63:3. Although we agree in these cases, we think it possible that Ps 91 contains an allusion to it. In fact, yitloman can be translated by "spending the night in order to obtain something". That is the opinion of Caquot, Le Psaume XCI, Semitica 8 (1958), p.25, whose opinion we share: "le fidèle passe la nuit pour provoquer le songe, c'est le procédé bien connu de l'incubation."

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with a ritual praxis that induced such phenomena"⁴². This last dream story to be recorded is very clear; no interpreter is needed, it is a direct communication from the deity.

From the three preceding cases we can infer a number of facts about incubation.

The precondition for the incubation is the belief in the reality of the dream. Dreaming at a holy place is necessary for the incubation, (or in a special place like the palace of a king). Incubation is therefore a dream revelation which the person attains at a holy place. This person is not thus expected to wait passively for the transcendent world to connect with him; he can actively seek contact with it. through incubation, the person looks for concrete assistance through the powerful being or the godhead, particularly for healing, teaching or prophecy⁴³. Spending some time in the holy shrine which is seen as the dwelling place of God or of an empowered being was appropriate for contact with the power whose assistance the person wanted to secure, especially since he accepted that the workings of this power were linked to certain shrines. The necessary incubation rituals had as their objective impelling the divinity to appear.

The introduction rites and the subsequent ceremonies, as well as the manner in which the divinity appeared, and the form and content of the oracles could all be most diverse. Purification rituals, fasting..., various forms of sacrifice, special preparation of a sleeping place, use of special vestments, prayer, self-mortification and ritual weeping were used as preparations. Where the preparatory rites are clearly

⁴²J. Montgomery, The Books of Kings (ICC: Edinburgh, 1951) p.105.

⁴³Ehrlich, op.cit., p.13f

for the purpose of cleansing the soul of the body's impurities, as well as the establishment of good relations between the divinity and the individual, the closing ceremonies represent a thanksgiving for the appearance of the god who showed himself to be sympathetic. Perhaps also, the person wished to show the god, through the closing ceremonies, that he would adhere to the oracle which had been announced in the dream.

However, the person can also behave passively during the incubation as the two following texts will show:

Gen 28: The dream of Jacob at Bethel.

On his way to Haran, Jacob spends the night at a shrine which he came upon by chance. The sacredness of the place is revealed to him⁴⁴ by a dream of a ladder leading from earth to heaven. So in this case we are not to look for a preparatory phase. But the other elements of the incubation are present:

i) the insistence on the night setting ("when he had reached a certain place he passed the night there, since the sun had set" (v11a));

ii) the location in a sacred place ("taking one of the stones to be found at that place, he made it his pillow and lay down where he was" (v11b)); according to

⁴⁴Skinner, Genesis, p.375 This section consists of a complete Elohist narrative, with a Yahwistic insertion (v 13-16). therefore the structure of this dream is more complex: the oral communication of God to Jacob is accompanied by the perception of a different picture, cf. E. Otto, "Jacob in Bethel", ZAW 88 (1976) p. 165-190

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Skinner the stone itself is the abode of the deity⁴⁵;

iii) the dream oracle ("I will give to you and to your descendants the land in which you are lying" (v14));

iv) the post-incubation ritual ("pouring oil over the top of the monument"(v18), "I will pay a tenth part of all you gave me" (v22)0.

1 Sam 3: A dream oracle or a dream theophany?

Samuel, while sleeping in the sanctuary at Shiloh, hears a voice calling him. the voice proves to be the voice of Yahweh who reveals his determination to destroy the house of Eli⁴⁶. Although the word dream is not to be found in the passage, it seems that the setting is that of a dream. The elements composing the narrative are those of a spontaneous "auditory message dream"⁴⁷ but the setting suggests an incubation in a shrine: (v 2); and a dream oracle is given (v 11-14). Sleeping regularly in a shrine probably enabled Samuel to participate unconsciously in the holiness of the place. Being a child and therefore more open to influences, he is the perfect recipient of a dream-oracle.

Finally, Daniel, the "wise interpreter of dreams"⁴⁸, has to be mentioned, (Dan 2) but as Collins remarked⁴⁸, "the emphasis falls on the wisdom of Daniel and his God; the actual content of the dream-interpretation is

⁴⁵ ibid., p. 376

⁴⁶ H. Smith, Samuel, (ICC:Edinburgh, 1899) p. 25ff.

⁴⁷ R. Gnuse, "A Reconsideration of the Form-Critical Structure in 1 Samuel 3: An Ancient Near Eastern Dream Theophany", ZAW (1982) p. 388.

⁴⁸ J. J. Collins, "The Court-Tales in Daniel and the Development of Apocalyptic", JBL 94 (1975) p. 220.

relatively disregarded". In fact the dream is unimportant; what is, is the form in which Daniel's apocalyptic message is cast.

3. CONCLUSION

All of the different categories of dreams we have examined have a number of common features: the underlying belief is that dreams are a reality, and that communication with the deity can be established artificially or spontaneously through them. In any case there seems to be a monopoly of dream-sending by only one god (spirits...do not send dreams). The dreams thus sent are mostly of a divinatory character. The last dream narrated in the Old Testament, 1 Kgs 3, is an incubation dream and we already mentioned that incubation is linked with holy places. With the Deuteronomic reform many of the local traditions linked with the shrines were suppressed and lost. Thus it happens that in the period after Dt, the dream loses its revelatory character⁴⁹ and moreover becomes contrasted to true prophecy⁴⁹. Incubation was finally regarded as a heathen ritual belonging to alien gods and cults,⁵⁰ against which the Old Testament makes such a firm stand⁵⁰. According to the view of those groups which oppose this heathen element in Judah and Israel, there is no definite time and form for divine manifestation. Nor has man the opportunity of calling forth God, through whatever procedure, be it prayer, sacrifice or special technique.

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⁴⁹ Jer 23:25-32; 27:9; cf. also Dt 13:1-6

⁵⁰ Isa 65:4