This book brings together the disparate Freudian and ancient Judaic traditions of dream interpretation. While there is no purely or exclusively Jewish way of interpreting dreams, and no continuous line of influence runs from the biblical Joseph and Daniel to Freud, these shifting patterns of dream interpretation are themselves open to interpretation. The relationship between Freud and his forerunners is not one of direct influence, but of denied influence: Freud’s dream book and later essays are marked by conspicuous gestures of avoidance.

Freud understandably renounced his forebears, since the dream interpreter faced nearly insurmountable prejudices in the late nineteenth century. Almost alone among scientific dream theorists, Freud insisted that dreams have an interpretable meaning; this linked him to ancient beliefs and popular opinion. Although Freud could have drawn from biblical and Talmudic precursors, prevailing biases led him to disavow them.

Freud was not the first authority to feel threatened by ancient dream interpretation. Early rabbis were also threatened by sectarian dream interpreters who claimed to know the meaning of dreams. To the extent that dream interpreters made such claims and exerted influence, they stood in competition with rabbinic interpreters of Scripture. Neither scriptural commentary nor dream interpretation is, as a result, entirely distinct from power struggle. Rabbinic authorities wish to maintain the privileged place of their commentaries and are challenged by the apparent successes of other interpreters. The rivalry between competing interpretive groups is especially obvious in the Midrash to Lamentations, when R. Ishmael ben R. Yose denounces a Samaritan who sets himself up as a dream interpreter.

Biblical and Talmudic traditions show that interpretation is never a neutral act. Much as the interpreter may wish to appear unbiased, his work always furthers or hinders particular interests. In general, the dream interpreter rises to power through his interpretations, even when the dreamer (as in the case of Nebuchadnezzar) does not benefit from them. Biblical and Talmudic dream interpretation also demonstrate that no commentary can be
entirely purged of prophetic effects. Rabbinic traditions suggest that no
dream is intrinsically prophetic; only interpretation, not dreams in them­
selves, can foretell future actions and events. This notion was an anathema
to Freud, who resisted the prophetic dimension of dream interpretation and
sought the meaning of dreams in their relationship to the past.

Freud challenged and was challenged by alternative forms of interpre­
tation. Similar to Joseph and Daniel, he attained power as an interpreter;
whereas his biblical precursors attributed their successes to God’s assis­
tance, Freud claimed to rely on scientific methods. In so doing, he under­
played the prophetic potential of interpretation. While Talmudic opinion
does not uniformly support the idea that dreams or their interpretations pre­
dict the future, tractate Berakhot implies that interpretations, like language
in general, can alter reality. Despite his own recognition of the potency of
language, Freud was obliged to ignore such troubling messages.

Freud’s interpretations reflected a tension between nineteenth-century
philology, with its methods of textual commentary, and the more radical
psychoanalytic approach. Freud began with the dream text—the dreamer’s
narrative report, which is essentially a literary document—and developed a
novel mode of textuality, an associative genre that is as unusual as Kafka’s
dreamy fictions. Nevertheless, in his assumptions about textual meaning,
Freud often relied on the prevailing hermeneutics. He separated the mani­
fest content from the latent content of dream reports, viewing the manifest
level as an external husk that concealed an inner sense, and suggested that
by reading back from manifest dream contents he could arrive at the
thoughts that motivated and explained them. Freud indicated that the mean­
ing of a dream text stands behind it, in the unconscious impulses of the
dreamer; his analytic procedure purportedly returned from the external fa­
cade of expression to the hidden realm of repressed materials, from the
dream disguise to naked truth.

Freud’s theories were more conventional than his practices, and free
association was his most radical interpretive innovation. Rather than simply
provide an interpretation based on the dream report, Freud set up condi­
tions under which the dreamer could generate the interpretation. Yet Freud
did not acknowledge the full consequences of this method: faithful to his
scientific aspirations, he argued that the associations always revealed moti­
vating thoughts. This implied a deterministic view, and turned attention
away from the prospective component of dream analysis.

Freudian techniques were torn between study of the individual past
and efforts to change the future. In his writings, Freud chose to make light
of the latter aspect. He dissociated himself from anything resembling pro­
phetic dream interpretation, although his therapy necessarily went beyond
research into the past. Despite Freud’s rejection of collective Judaic tradi­
tions, in this respect the repressed returned to haunt him. Even the psycho­
analytic dream interpreter modifies the dreamer's future—by means of suggestive guidance.

Whereas nineteenth-century philology sought meaning behind the text, in authorial intentions or ideas, current theorists recognize the innumerable possibilities for meaning beyond the text. Authorial intent no longer has special privilege, in part as a result of Freud's own demonstration of unconscious meanings. Even the notion of unconscious thoughts and wishes is, however, insufficient. Meaning does not lie inside the text or psyche, like wine aging in a bottle. What is supposedly inside depends on what is beyond it.

With his practice of dream interpretation by free association, Freud was both ahead of his time and behind his time. He never acknowledged the disparity, but went on practicing this novel method. He was ahead of his time when he allowed virtually limitless meanings to emerge through the dreamer's free associations. Yet in other contexts he fell back on nineteenth-century philology, when he tried to validate the method of free association by claiming that it always revealed the repressed thoughts that produced the dream. Following the metaphor of an imaginary journey, Freud's analyses purported to reenter the tunnel of sleep, shedding light on the shadowy realm from above. Nevertheless, like prophetic interpretations in the Bible or Talmud, the patient's associations often pointed toward a future.

Both ahead of and behind his time, Freud anticipated contemporary literary theory and recapitulated some aspects of ancient Jewish dream interpretation. When he interpreted a patient's dream psychoanalytically, attending to wordplays and associations, his interpretations interacted with a possible future. Freud understood, but did not publicize, the risks that are so vividly portrayed in the stories of Bar Hedia and R. Ishmael. He acted as a modern prophet, influencing personal lives and intellectual history, at the same time that he argued against prophecy.

The founder of psychoanalysis opposed other forms of dream interpretation, as did R. Ishmael ben R. Yose when he disparaged a competing interpreter. Another milieu might have encouraged Freud to draw upon biblical and Talmudic models, since his own interpretations easily appeared prophetic to patients experiencing the transference neurosis. Freud sought to ground his interpretations in causal explanations, although every interpretation of the past interacts with the present and projects toward the future.

Freud was not overtly influenced by ancient dream interpretation, but had he allowed himself to submit to such an influence, the most forward-looking aspects of his method might have been in harmony with these repressed, prior models. In any event, Freud treated the dream report "as a holy text" (Td 493/ID 552), and in some respects he was of the rabbis' party without knowing it, or without wishing to let it be known.
Freud repudiated ancient traditions and the most radical implications of interpreting dreams. The two denials are interconnected: had he come to terms with the biblical and Talmudic texts on dreams, Freud might have found an unexpected context for his revolutionary interpretive methods. This was not, however, an affiliation he could accept. He sought the meaning of dreams in conscious, preconscious, and especially in unconscious thoughts, assuming that these existed prior to, and were responsible for, dreams. Yet his theory of secondary revision recognizes an element of dream formation that is analogous to waking mental processes. Associations, if indeed "free," also create new materials. Freud denied both Judaic traditions and the freedom of interpretation by which meaning exceeds the boundaries of an individual psyche.

_The Interpretation of Dreams_ sets out to solve the riddle of dreams, leaving behind a scene of unresolved mysteries. Scrutiny of Freud’s dream of interpretation reopens the dream book, showing that the dream continues: interpretation discovers hidden pathways between texts, adds dream upon dream, and never attains a realm of absolute clarity. Freud, by isolating himself from his precursors, blocked access to forbidden routes that remain obscure. Like Freud—when he explored the "unconscious of the dream"—we may reexamine what remains unresolved in the dream book and take tentative steps forward with the repressed traditions.

Freud’s biblical precursors associated the interpreter of dreams with the prophet; Freud contradicted them when he asserted that dreams express past wishes and do not foretell future events. Freud could not develop a neutral method of interpretation, however, for the patient’s associations link dreams to continuing dramas of life. Every interpretation in terms of the past has implications, and may change the meaning and making of the future. Turning away from such intimations, Freud nevertheless innovated when he substituted a text for a text and a dream for a dream.

In the shadow of nineteenth-century thought, we intuitively favor a philological view of interpretation, whether it seeks meaning as divine or human intentions, or even as an abstract content that subsists in relation to a text. Associations and displacements threaten reason, suggesting an endless re-creation of sense. Dream interpretations that explain determining causes may add little to the individual’s particular self-understanding. Another style of interpretation, discussing possible consequences as revealed by personal associations, reveals a desired future that must be evaluated, sought, or rejected. Prophecy is not limited to prescience; there need be no exact correspondence between a prophetic statement and what later occurs. Prophecy provokes change, just as wishes, promises, projects, ambitions, and requests imply a future. Desire itself, the mythical libido, aims toward future events.
Future-oriented dream interpretation is both more problematic and more significant than diagnostic interpretation. An interpreter who recognizes his power over the future accepts an ethical burden; to the extent that Freud did not take responsibility for the future, he restricted or misrepresented his curative role. In order to ground his science of psychoanalysis, Freud claimed that recollection of the past facilitated a working-through of complexes. In practice, however, Freud exploited the transference relationship toward cure, aiming beyond the dream's manifest content with the help of the dreamer's free associations.

Freudian theory has been divided between its dual orientation toward a formative past and a future to be formed. Freud himself declined to interpret fully his own dreams of Irma and Auf Geseres, which attempted to resolve conflicts that had little connection to repressed childhood wishes. If psychoanalysis does not explain repeatable patterns, it cannot claim to be scientific, and if it does not promise to change the course of an individual life it cannot claim to be useful. Freud sought to determine underlying causes of dreams; on the other hand, he employed free associations and the transference to transform his interpretations into the talking cure.

Meaning is both cognitive and performative. Every dream sets a stage and enacts a play, while every interpretation produces further meanings as the interpreter oversees continuing performances. From the interpretation of dreams and the dream of interpretation there is no escape. The meaning of a dream, like the meaning of a word, depends on its use.

Where the dream was, there interpretation shall be. The interpreter assumes an active role in the creation of sense.