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# GHOSTS

Robert R. Cook

Although a belief in ghosts is found in every culture, the sense of the close proximity of the dead is particularly vivid in African societies; the ongoing existence of the dead is assumed and the intimacy of the extended family reaches out to them as well as to living relatives. Ancestors are believed to offer advice through dreams, visions, or ghostly visitations. When they are seen, they have the same appearance as when they were living. Such sightings are not uncommon, according to Mbiti, for "A considerable number of people report seeing . . . the living-dead, both alone as individuals and in groups with other men or women".<sup>1</sup> The apparitions are not restricted to human form; for example, there are many stories, particularly among the Akamba, of spectral cattle which are heard lowing in the night. Some ghosts are thought to have sinister origins:

It is believed by Africans that a person whose dead body is not buried, that is, with due and correct rites, will not be admitted to the abode of the blessed departed ones, and therefore will become a wanderer, living an aimless, haunting existence . . . This category of wandering spirits includes also those who had been wicked while on earth and are therefore excluded from the fellowship of the good. The haunts of the ghost-spirits are trees, rocks, rivers and watercourses, or hills.<sup>2</sup>

These malevolent spirits may actually cause physical damage. Idowu goes on to conclude,

Modern sophisticated man may wish . . . to dismiss as puerile stories of experiences of ghosts and of haunted places; but deep down in the minds of thousands of men and women of every level of spiritual or intellectual attainment is the . . . persistent notion, that the deceased still have a part to play, for better or worse, in the lives of the living.<sup>3</sup>

Idowu is right. There is a lingering belief in ghosts in even the most sophisticated cultures. Just as in Africa, there are regular reports in the West of ghostly appearances (sometimes of animals or inanimate objects), haunted places and disruptive spirits known as poltergeists. In fact, John Wesley, the father of Methodism, wrote about a mischievous ghost who used to knock on walls, open doors and draw curtains during his boyhood while living in Epworth parsonage. Within the past hundred years, two questionnaires have been sent out in England inquiring whether the recipient had ever experienced a ghost. In 1890, 9.9% of those contacted claimed they had and in 1948, the number rose to 14.3%.

How are we, as Christians, to understand these strange phenomena? Can the dead really appear to the living? Or is it all trickery and hallucination? Or does the responsibility rest with the demonic? This article will explore these questions in the light of Scripture and current research.

### Ghosts in Scripture

There are two common evangelical assumptions about ghosts, namely that the dead are unable to contact the living and that apparitions are disguised demons. Let us consider whether these beliefs are really substantiated by what is to be discovered in Scripture.

The first assumption is found to be based on very weak exegesis; for example, Job 7:9f and 10:21 are sometimes cited, but all these verses teach is that Job was convinced that his miserable earthly existence would terminate irrevocably in the grave: "So he who goes down to Sheol does not come up". But Job's utterances are not infallible and indeed, at times, they border on blasphemy (e.g. 9:14-35). No doctrine, therefore, can legitimately rest on these texts. II Corinthians 5:8 is also sometimes abused. "Absent from the body . . . at home with the Lord" is taken to imply that return to earth is an impossibility. But clearly the verse does not necessarily entail this conclusion. Then, again, we find J. O. Buswell writing, "From the words of Christ as recorded in Luke 16:19-31, we may clearly infer that the spirits of the departed are not to communicate with the living."<sup>4</sup> Really? Leaving aside the issue of whether parables contain theological information beyond the basic point which they are making (cf. the work of Jülicher and Jeremias), we may observe that actually Abraham does not tell Dives that it is impossible or absolutely forbidden for the dead ever to return, merely that it is spiritually useless.

In fact, a case can be made for the acceptance of the reality of ghosts in the Bible. A spectral simile is used in Isaiah 29:4 when the prophet says of the destroyed Jerusalem, "Your voice shall also be like that of a ghost from the ground, and your speech shall whisper from the dust." Then, of course, the risen Jesus allays the disciples' fears that he is a ghost by pointing out that "a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have" (Lk 24:39).

Indeed, Scripture actually records cases of the dead returning. Samuel comes back in I Samuel 28. Admittedly some have followed Luther and Calvin in assuming that demonic deception was involved and Buswell maintains that the medium of Endor was a fraudulent trickster, but surely the most natural

reading of the passage (e.g. v. 15: "Then Samuel said to Saul") leads one to believe that it was really the dead prophet who appeared. Then again, in the New Testament we find Moses and Elijah returning to converse with Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration. Now these cases may be unique in the history of the world, but nothing in Scripture requires this conclusion.

The Bible is primarily concerned with warning people not to attempt communication with the dead rather than with affirming that such intercourse is impossible. Mediums should be put to death according to Levitical law (Lev. 20:27). In Israel there was to be a total ban on any "one who calls up the dead" (Deut. 18:11). Again, from verses like this it appears prima facie that necromancy is a real possibility, but here the second common evangelical assumption is often introduced, namely, that the divine taboo is so severe because God does not want his people to be duped by demons who impersonate the dead. But is this not again unwarranted eisegesis? There is not one clear example in Scripture of a demon disguising itself as a ghost. Now they may indulge in such practices, after all Satan can appear as an angel of light and presumably could imitate a dead person, but it should be clearly recognized that the assumption that demons do so disguise themselves cannot be grounded in the explicit teaching of Scripture. Why then is God so adamantly opposed to any attempt of the living to contact the dead? In the context of Old Testament theology the reason seems clear enough. The common belief was that Sheol removes man from any relationship with God (cf. Is. 38:11, 18f). "Sheol is not identified with any location, but is rather thought of as a kind of existence, which, in the case of the Hebrews, is basically opposed to God. Sheol is the place of bare survival."<sup>5</sup> It is, therefore, a gross insult to the living God to bypass him and seek advice from those who are out of contact with him and in a state of sub-human existence. As the affronted Lord exclaims

through his prophet, "And when they say to you, 'Consult the mediums . . . ', should not a people consult their God? Should they consult the dead on behalf of the living?" (Is. 8:19).

This leads us to consider another reason why evangelicals invoke the demonic to explain medium activity. It is observed that putative messages from deceased non-Christians contain no change of belief from their sceptical earthly views; they still do not believe in Christ or Hell. These theologians suggest that the only way to explain this surprising fact is to assume that the messages are not really coming from the dead at all but rather from evil spirits who are bent on leading the human race into doctrinal error.<sup>6</sup> However, there is a much simpler explanation. As the Old Testament passages just observed imply, death does not necessarily increase knowledge or wisdom; in fact the contrary is suggested. The godless dead still await the Resurrection and the Judgement and there is no reason why they should be any more enlightened now than they were when on earth. As M. Perry observes, "Don't think that because they are departed spirits they are either necessarily demonic . . . or necessarily profound."<sup>7</sup>

We may conclude that the Bible neither affirms that it is impossible for the dead to return nor that ghosts are disguised demons. These two shibboleths are founded on tradition rather than Scripture. In fact, the Bible gives clear examples of the dead returning. It is not impossible, however, that evil spirits may sometimes impersonate the deceased and one should always be alert to that possibility. Nevertheless, bearing in mind that in days gone by 'the God of the gaps' was foolishly invoked to explain phenomena beyond current scientific understanding, we must withstand the temptation of resorting simplistically to 'the demon of the gaps' theory to explain strange paranormal phenomena. There have been apparent cases of dead Christians appearing to the living<sup>8</sup> and there seems to

be no good reason for doubting that they could be veridical. Further, as Stafford Wright observes, the Christian departed " . . . may be told when someone they have loved is about to join them, for there are examples of deathbed visions when the one who is dying speaks of the presence of loved ones who have passed on."<sup>9</sup>

### Ghosts in Current Research

In 1882, the Society for Psychical Research was founded in Britain by some eminent scholars. Its aim was, and still is, to investigate apparently inexplicable phenomena, such as ghosts, scientifically. Throughout the past hundred years, well documented cases have been meticulously filed and analysed. Instances of haunted houses have been investigated with scientific equipment and eye witnesses have been carefully interviewed. Much trickery has been exposed and perfectly natural explanations for many cases have been discovered, but there remain a stubborn residue of cases which baffle the natural mind. Nevertheless, theories have been offered by learned members of the Society to account for these well attested reports of apparitions. Let us look at a few of them.

Now the most straightforward theory might seem to be that ghosts are actual materializations of dead people, but there are insuperable problems with this simple hypothesis. The first is that, astonishingly, about half of the reported apparitions are of people who are still alive! Secondly, must we really believe that the spectral cows heard by the Akamba are in fact the spirits of dead beasts? And what of the ghostly inanimate objects (including the apparition's clothes)? Are we going to have to assign spirits to these objects? And what does the corpse of a kanga or a pair of shoes look like? No, a more sophisticated explanation must be sought.

Some theories have sought to avoid the need to

postulate a conscious, incorporeal afterlife. One such hypothesis maintains that all ghosts are, in fact, subjective hallucinations caused by, for example, mental fatigue or an over active imagination. But this theory fails to account for cases where more than one person sees the same spectre, or where the apparition conveys factual information unknown to the recipient, or is of a person unknown to the observer but later correctly identified, for instance, from a photograph of the dead person. Another such hypothesis focuses on the many sightings where the apparitions mindlessly repeat the same gestures. This is typical of ghosts which haunt places and are seen over a period by different people. Each time they repeat the same pantomime. The theory explains this by postulating a sort of 'photograph' which has been impregnated into the atmosphere by the mind of the subject (perhaps since deceased), often while undergoing an emotional crisis. This 'etheric image' can be revitalized by another unwary mind that visits the same spot. In fact, the deceased person is no more present than is an actor in the cinema that is showing the film in which he is the star. However, while focusing on an important characteristic of some apparitions, this theory fails to take account of those ghosts that do act intelligently by relating to the recipient in giving information and so on. There are also well-documented cases of 'crisis apparitions' where, at the moment of death, a figure of the dead person appears to a geographically distant loved one. This theory cannot accommodate crisis apparitions.

The ESP theory has also attracted some. This view assumes the reality of ESP (Extra Sensory Perception), particularly that of telepathy (mind reading). This is another interest of the Psychical Research Society as well as other international scientific bodies. Some apparently impressive results have emerged which seem to suggest that some people sometimes are able to receive impressions from the minds of others without the mediation of the five senses. It is argued by some



that ghostly hallucinations are the result of telepathy. If I see the ghost of an unknown dead person, it is because I am receiving a mental impression from someone who did know that person, including what she looked like and how she spoke. Alternatively, if one accepts the reality of the afterlife, one might argue that it is the dead spirit that is actually telepathically communicating. The major problem with this hypothesis is the fact that the evidence for ESP is ambivalent and at best it is a faculty which is very weak and intermittent in even the best subjects. Yet ghostly images are strong and coherent and sometimes identically observed by a group of people. Is it really credible, Dr. A. Gauld asks in a recent study, "... that persons hitherto not known to be psychically gifted can suddenly develop powers of ESP comparable to, if not exceeding, the most remarkable that have ever been experimentally demonstrated"?<sup>10</sup>

Gauld's own preferred theory is a modification of F.W.H. Myers', a founder member of the Society. At the end of the nineteenth century, the period when Myers was writing, there were numerous reported cases of individuals consciously projecting an image of themselves, an image which was sometimes observed by others. Other cases, it seems, involved an image of a living person who was not consciously projecting. This, according to Myers, was an unconscious or subconscious projection. The former type of image, being the result of a conscious act, exhibited an apparent intelligence and intentionality, while the latter kind was marked by a zombie-like automatism. Myers speculated that apparitions of the dead may be caused either by conscious projections by the dead spirits, in which case the apparitional image would exhibit intentionality, or by unconscious projections (dreams of the dead perhaps) which would be marked by the mindless pantomimes mentioned earlier. He was convinced that the projected images actually modified the space where they were observed.

Gauld alters Myers' theory in the following way. The projection, he argues, need not be in the likeness of the subject; it might be of cattle, or a dead ancestor, or even of a monstrous shape. Nevertheless, it might be caused by a dead spirit (theoretically a deceased person might project an image of a live person). He emphasizes that the image itself is not a vehicle of consciousness, nor is it perceived by simple telepathy, ". . . certain persons in certain circumstances are able so to modify a certain region of space that other persons, visiting that region, may see that figure corresponding to some latent conception in the agent's mind."<sup>11</sup> Those people are not reading the projector's mind but are perceiving a product of that mind. Gauld is only too aware of the vulnerability of this theory and its inadequacy to explain, for example, the nature of the modification in space or the nature of 'non-optical' perception (ghosts cannot, it seems, be photographed) by which one observes the image. The theory contains too many unknowns and yet, for Gauld, it is the most satisfactory so far. As already indicated, it may be adopted and adapted on the one hand by those who wish to deny the ongoing existence of the dead, or deny their ability to communicate with the living, or on the other hand by those who want to affirm that the dead can cause appearances of themselves.

So after a hundred years of intensive research by the finest minds available, ghosts remain an enigma. Gauld himself admits, "It seems to me that at the moment we know about as much of these matters as the Greeks did of electricity when they discovered that if you rub pieces of amber on your sleeve they will pick up straws."<sup>12</sup> That pioneer investigator F.W.H. Myers was probably correct when he wrote, "Whatever else indeed a 'ghost' may be, it is probably one of the most complex phenomena in nature."<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

After this all too brief a survey of the relevant material, both biblical and extra-biblical, let five concluding points suffice:

1. Scripture leaves open the possibility that the dead may communicate with the living. After reviewing a century's work of the Psychical Research Society, Gauld comments, "For myself I can only say that it seems to me that there is . . . a sprinkling of cases which rather forcefully suggest some form of survival."<sup>14</sup> If this is so, one may wonder why apparitions are not more common or why they appear to some people and not to others. Undoubtedly God's permissive will is primary, but perhaps also there are some natural laws involved. Just as some living people are better image transmitters and receivers than others, so perhaps the dead also vary in their ESP abilities to project images (we have already discovered the naivety of the view that ghosts are actual materialized visitations of the dead).

2. In order to 'scratch where it itches', African theologians need to evolve a more subtle theology of the dead than may be discovered in Western textbooks, and this theology will include a doctrine of ghosts. Such scholars should not ignore the important work of the Psychical Research Society. They may find some of the ideas found in the various theories quite suggestive; for example, Africans sometimes report seeing nightmarish forms. Does Gauld's projection hypothesis throw any possible light on this?

3. Scripture is emphatic that any attempt to communicate with the departed is a gross sin against God. All magic and occult practice is totally banned. The Bible thus censures all these aspects of African Traditional Religion. Christians are to have absolutely nothing to do with them. But this is not to

say that the dead are never permitted to communicate with us. It has been suggested by Stafford Wright that there may be a parallel with angels here.<sup>15</sup> They may not be worshipped (Col. 2:18), nor may the ancestors, and neither may prayers (communications) be directed to them, yet on occasions they visit men with information.

4. There is a difference, however. Angels are directly sent by God and their messages are always to be heeded, but even if one is convinced that one has experienced a genuine communication from a dead person, one should not assume that the message is true or wise. There is nothing in Scripture to suggest either that knowledge and wisdom are enhanced by death or, for that matter, that the departed are all around us, aware of everything that we do. Hebrews 12:1 is sometimes misapplied in this context. It does not mean that we are surrounded by a 'crowd of spectators'. The New English Bible clearly brings out the intended meaning by translating 'with all the witnesses to faith around us like a cloud.' Thus we are referred back to the previous chapter where we are challenged by the example of those who remained faithful unto death. We should be ever mindful of the challenge of their dedication, and in this sense they are around us like a cloud.

5. We must avoid being gullible when we hear ghost stories. They may be complete fabrications or, at least, gross exaggerations. The human mind can also play tricks. Put an imaginative, sensitive person into a dark place and he will be convinced he is beholding all sorts of fantastic forms. Striking hallucinations can be induced by fever, frenzied dancing, fumigations, fasting or drugs. Some images may possibly be the creation of demons or could conceivably be the projections of powerful minds, such as those of witchdoctors. Also some cases may be explained with reference to simple trickery. We must finally beware of basing too much on dreams. To paraphrase the seventeenth century philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, "When a

man claims that an ancestor spoke to him in a dream,  
this is no more than to say he dreamed that an  
ancestor spoke to him".

## Notes

1. J. S. Mbiti, **African Religions and Philosophy**, (Heinemann, 1969), p. 86.
2. E. B. Idowu, **African Traditional Religion**, (SCM, 1973), pp. 174-175.
3. **Ibid**, p. 178.
4. J. O. Buswell, **A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion**, Vol. II, (Zondervan, 1962), p. 309.
5. W. Dyrness, **Themes in Old Testament Theology**, (Paternoster, 1979), p. 239.
6. This is the assumption found e.g. in M. Unger's, **The Haunting of Bishop Pike**, (Tyndale, 1971).
7. M. Perry, **Psychic Studies - A Christian View**, (Aquarian, 1984), p. 77.
8. E.g. C. S. Lewis to J. B. Phillips - See J. B. Phillips, **Ring of Truth**, (Hodder & Stoughton, 1967), p. 89.
9. J. Stafford Wright, **Christianity and the Occult**, (Scripture Union, 1971), p. 118. A survey of physicians in America indicated that 1 in 27 dying patients reported seeing apparitions [K. Osis, **Deathbed Observations by Physicians and Nurses**, (New York, Parapsychology Foundation, Inc., 1961)].
10. A. Gauld, **Mediumship and Survival**, (Paladin, 1983), p. 235.
11. **Ibid**, p. 255.
12. **Ibid**, p. 260.
13. Quoted in A. Mackenzie's **Hauntings and Apparitions**, (Paladin, 1982), p. 1.
14. Gauld, **Op. cit.**, p. 261.

15. See J. Stafford Wright, 'The Biblical Assessment of Superstition & the Occult', *Evangelical Review of Theology*, Vol. 4, No. 1, April 1980, pp. 102-113.