

**Ghost-Busted:
Do Ghosts Have a Place in the Biblical Worldview?**

(Excerpt from *The Ephesians Hypothesis*)

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*“There's more of gravy than of grave about you,
whatever you are!”* Ebenezer Scrooge

“...People are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.” Hebrews 9:27

Poltergeist, phantom, shade, wraith, spook, bhut, yurei, specter, banshee. The names reflect the diversity of cultures that have entertained the idea that some spark of life continues after death. From Gilgamesh’s encounter with his dead friend, Enkidu, to A&E’s *Ghost Hunter* series, belief in the spirit world intrudes into our world. According to a 2009 survey of U.S. adults, 18% claim to have personally experienced a ghost. About a third say they have felt in contact with someone who has died.¹

The media abounds with entertaining depictions of ghosts and realms beyond. We get fascinated—they get rich. The latest *Ghostbusters* movie speaks confidently of the afterlife. Like many other spooky tales, it’s amusing as fiction. The tragedy, however, is that the art portrays the real-life worldview of most people.

According to the general storyline, at death there is a lighted tunnel through which a spirit is compelled to pass, otherwise, a popular modern psychic explains...

A ghost is created when, at death, the spirit either sees the tunnel and turns away or refuses to acknowledge the tunnel in the first place, with the result that it gets caught, outside of its body, between our dimension and the dimension of The Other Side.²

This ghost recipe is essentially a throwback to some very ancient ideas. By the Middle Ages, some in the church had compromised a hefty portion of the pagan folklore of earthly spirits. This doctrine of purgatory did much to shape our western ghostly traditions. As the doctrine was refined over the next few centuries, a “Christianized” explanation for those restless spirits was popular...

Because if they die truly repentant in charity before they have made satisfaction by worthy fruits of penance for sins committed and omitted, their souls are cleansed after death by purgatorial or purifying punishments...³

¹ Pew Research Center for the People & the Press and the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2009.

² Sylvia Browne, *Life on the Other Side*, Penguin Books, Ltd. 2000

³ Second Council of Lyons, 1274.

Since few were likely to achieve these “worthy fruits,” multitudes of suffering souls could now be imagined, moving in and out of the earthly realm, striving to purge their sins and gain entrance into heaven. Soon, any person dying with unfinished business was believed to be doomed to haunt their former habitation, obsessed with some desire for “closure.” Proponents of this view attempt to provide a coherent theory of how all of this works—a pop-culture pantheism in which the deceased person (soul) never quite has a clear idea of what’s happening. Sadly, the view is only a fuzzy apparition of what the Bible teaches about the afterlife.

What Does a Ghost Look Like?

The title may beg the question, yet it seems that many people are perceiving something. In his early book on the paranormal, G.N.M. Tyrrell explains...

“Do you believe in ghosts?” is one of the most ambiguous [questions] which could be asked... “Do you believe that people sometimes experience apparitions?” the answer is that they certainly do.⁴

The term “apparition” is perhaps more appropriate here since it speaks of an *appearance* or *event*. “Ghost,” however, implies a personality. In some respects, what a person experiences is often more significant than what happens in reality. This is in no way a bow to relativism, but rather the acknowledgment that our perceptions and beliefs about an event are what most affect our worldview.

I’ll suppress the strong temptation here to tell a string of ghost stories. There are plenty of Internet sources for anyone reminiscing campfires and s’mores right about now. Instead, let’s examine the commonalities among ghostly phenomena that people are reporting.

Tyrrell did his research on the paranormal during the first half of the 20th century. With degrees in math and physics, his studies do seem to be well-documented and systematic. He also claims to have included only “reputable” witnesses in his studies. From his large case file, Tyrrell created what he called the “perfect apparition.” This was a theoretical “collage” of the cases he had studied. These features are common, but not necessarily present, in each incident. For Tyrrell, the perfect apparition, “while standing beside a normal human being,” would exhibit the following ...

- Both would appear equally real and solid.
- The apparition could be viewed from any distance or angle chosen.
- The apparition might speak to us or respond, but not at length.
- If a mirror were present, both figures would be reflected.
- Both figures would cast shadows.
- If the apparition was wearing a rose, we might smell it.
- We would hear sounds associated with a real person (shuffling, stomping).
- We might feel its touch, and it would turn its head to follow our movement.

⁴ G.N.M. Tyrrell, *Apparitions*, (New York: Collier, 1953, e-book 2018).

- In addition to clothing, other accessories might be present, such as a cane, watch, suitcase, or even a pet.
- The apparition might manipulate real objects.
- If we tried to hold on to the apparition, we might feel it, or our hands might pass through it. We might feel a “coldness” near the figure.
- In time (seconds to a half-hour), the apparition would fade, vanish, or pass through a wall.

In my research of ghostly reports, Tyrrell’s insight also seems to coincide with the majority of modern perceptions of the phenomenon. Note, however... *perceptions of a phenomenon may be misleading.*

Bible Ghosts

Those who pursue ghostly experiences often point to the book of 1st Samuel as biblical evidence.⁵ Amid battle with the Philistines, King Saul isn’t getting an immediate response from God, so he decides to take matters into his own hands. Saul goes to the neighborhood medium and convinces her to channel the ghost of the departed prophet Samuel. The Endor medium does her act but seems terrified when the “ghost” of Samuel actually appears. The spirit’s first words are “Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?”

Theologians differ over the interpretation of this incident. Some claim that the spirit was merely a demon impersonator of Samuel. The spirit gives a stern rebuke to Saul which does sound as though he is still prophesying for God. Another view is that in a rare act, God allowed Samuel’s spirit to be brought from Abraham’s bosom⁶ for a special pronouncement to the ungodly king. In either case, Samuel wasn’t hovering around waiting to be summoned. This appears to be a unique situation and in no way a justification for the concept of ghosts, channeling, or necromancy. Scripture expressly forbids any attempts to contact the dead...

There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD (Deuteronomy 18:10-12).

The New Testament references ghostly spirits, but only in the context of colloquial beliefs. When the disciples saw Jesus walking on the water, their mistaken assumption was that it was a ghost.⁷ Also, when Peter was miraculously released from prison, those hiding in Mary’s house mistakenly believed at first that his appearance was his spirit.⁸

⁵ The word for “spirit” in the Bible denotes “wind” or “breath.” Depending on the translation, it may be rendered “ghost” or “spirit”. The KJV uses the term “Holy Ghost” for the Third Person of the Trinity.

⁶ Abraham’s bosom is a term used to designate the place where the spirits of Old Testament saints resided temporarily.

⁷ Matthew 14:26

⁸ Acts 12:15

However, nowhere does Scripture indicate that we remain on earth or connected to this physical realm after death. The consensus of God's Word is that at death we instantaneously enter eternity either with Christ in heaven or separated from him in hell. Taken literally, Jesus's account of the rich man and Lazarus implies that returning to the physical world isn't just rare, it isn't allowed.

Our Dual Nature

Despite the multitude of erroneous beliefs, most of us with a Christian worldview readily accept the idea that there truly is a consciousness that transcends death. The Bible is quite clear about the continuity and destination of human souls. Indeed, that is the hope of Christianity! Our point of contention concerns the *nature* of the afterlife. In one of the clearest descriptions of our supernatural composition, present and future, Paul settles some of our deepest concerns...

For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life... We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord... and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:1-8).

Paul says that I inhabit my body just as I might dwell in a tent. I am not simply a physical machine as Darwinian evolution would predict. Only my "tent" is earthly. Whatever electrochemical mechanisms are at work in my brain, and however they interface with my real, conscious self, that "me" isn't totally equated with my physical body. In other scriptures, that nonmaterial component is identified as a soul or spirit. *I don't have a soul, rather I am a soul who lives in a body.*

Then Paul mixes in an even more intimate metaphor. I am *clothed* with a body. And it's conceivable that I could remove the "clothing" and still be a conscious entity. He quickly adds, though, that that would not be the ideal situation. Although God and his angels may exist as pure spirit, he has made my spirit to best reside in a body.

If it concerns you that your physical body might not have a very long shelf life, not to worry! In the future, our painful, deteriorating "clothing" will one day be replaced with new apparel. Although we can't fully understand the details, our new suits will be of an immortal type, fit for eternity.

Ghosts in the Machine

Secular psychology attempts to link the belief in ghosts and the afterlife to our psychological denial that this current life must end. I have to admit that thoughts of my death aren't entirely pleasant, even though my faith anticipates a heavenly home. A wise Christian mentor once told me: "I don't fear death, just the painful stuff immediately prior to it."

But like most of my Christian brothers and sisters, I think my belief in the afterlife goes beyond an "animal" fear of finality. We all have a common aversion to nonexistence, in part due to that inner sense of eternity mentioned earlier. Our souls seem to know intuitively that our true selves are even now transcending physical time and space, though our bodies are connected to this physical realm.

As expected, when serious investigators attempt to organize the data on ghostly events, the results are often so skewed and dissimilar that scientific conclusions are difficult. Experience and intuition tell us that many of the phenomena are likely *mistaken identifications*. It doesn't require occult rituals or exotic equipment to see a ghost. As Ebenezer Scrooge observed, his specter was likely "an undigested bit of beef... a fragment of an underdone potato." Would anyone doubt that many ghostly sensations are reported by those who might be under the influence of alcohol, insomnia, a midnight movie, or some other altered mental state? I won't bore you with the list of self-inflicted, Saturday-night apparitions claimed by a guy in my college dorm, but it happens.

It's also possible, if not likely, that another large portion of hauntings is the result of *directed human activity*—or in this case hoaxes. Who doesn't enjoy a good ghost story? And if it brings in tourists and book deals, all the better. Hollywood has shown us that ghostly deceptions aren't only easy, but they are also entertaining. I haven't watched years of *Scooby Doo* for nothing.

Even if these explanations are found to dominate, it doesn't necessarily follow that all the occurrences are of this type. Given that many ghostly encounters are likely mistakes and hoaxes, is it possible that some of the remaining incidents *could* be explained supernaturally (strictly as *biblical supernatural*)?

Are Ghostly Phenomena Consistent with the Ephesians Hypothesis?

Could all unexplainable sensory phenomena associated with spirit encounters fall under the purview of demons? Scripture warns that fallen spirits are able to lead thoughts and alter perceptions. Sights, sounds, and smells are no challenge for an entity able to deceive human senses. Add to this the propensity of humans to embellish and imagine, I wouldn't be surprised if "ghostly haunting" is just an entry-level job for aspiring demons.

It's also important to remember the context of any paranormal phenomenon we witness. The Ephesians Hypothesis operates within a narrative. Consider the general "theme" of ghostly encounters. Does this phenomenon *usually* encourage people? Do ghostly messages facilitate the spread of the gospel? Do the spirits give praise to the God of the Bible? Do you feel more sanctified or less when you think of ghosts?

Tenets of the Ephesians Hypothesis (Based on Ephesians 6:12)...

- There is an unseen realm beyond the one in which we live.
- Spirits from that unseen realm are able to interact with our world.
- Our primary struggle is with fallen spirits from this unseen realm.
- Fallen spirits are evil, scheming, and set on doing us harm.
- We can and should be prepared to recognize and withstand these fallen spirits.

(For an in-depth explanation, see *God and the Paranormal* or *The Ephesians Hypothesis*)

On the contrary, when we look at the unexplained incidents of ghostly encounters, the general mood seems to be fear, foreboding, and malice. There might be a few “innocent” encounters, but even with those, the effect is usually to lead away from the biblical worldview. Also, the messages channeled through spirits seem to have a common thread. Here are some general implications that emerge from reported ghostly communications...

- Ghosts are dead humans.
- Several possible paths might be taken after death.
- Ghosts are not very happy. They are confused or striving.
- The afterlife is a vague, irrational realm.
- Reality is New Age, mystic, occult, or pantheistic.
- Biblical views of the afterlife are wrong.

Undoubtedly, ghosts fail to support the biblical view of the supernatural. We might ask whether demons have anything to gain by deceiving the living. Is there a good reason to impersonate the dead? One possible answer...

As servants of Satan and enemies of God, they would have every reason to cast doubt on God’s Word and its warnings about future judgment. Getting people to believe in ghosts automatically forces them to reject key Bible verses.⁹

Furthermore, ghosts seem to be a diverse species. They might appear to be purposeful, confused, happy, impish, miserable, erratic, angry, scared, scary, friendly, innocent, funny, or violent. If they are supposed to be those once living, how does their apparent afterlife experience line up with the biblical view? If Satan’s purpose is to oppose God, diminish faith in his Word, and deceive believers, what better way is there? Ghosts defy all that Scripture says about Heaven and Hell.

⁹ Rick Barry, “Do You Believe in Ghosts?” July 1, 2010. www.answersingenesis.org

Let's back up a step. If demons *would* present themselves as ghosts, *could* they? Does the Ephesians Hypothesis have explanatory power with regard to what people experience? Incidents involving alleged ghosts are not dissimilar to the Scriptural portrayal of the supernatural. Ron Rhodes notes...

People sometimes genuinely encounter a spirit entity—though not a dead human. Some people encounter demonic spirits who may mimic dead people in order to deceive the living. Many who claim to have encountered such spirit entities have some prior involvement in the occult.¹⁰

Granted, demonic spirits can influence human thoughts and perceptions to some extent. But what about *poltergeists* (literally, “noisy ghosts”)? There seems to be a categorical difference between mental deception and actual interaction with the natural world. As discussed in an earlier chapter, there is scriptural evidence that demons can at times manipulate physical objects. Could poltergeist activity be correlated with demon activity? Apologist John Ankerberg believes it's possible...

...the poltergeist phenomenon and its occult connection offer strong empirical evidence for the demonic nature of these spirits. In fact, we know of no poltergeist case that cannot be accounted for on the basis of this theory. We believe the demonic theory is rejected today simply because mediums, parapsychologists and others don't like it.¹¹

And obviously, physical evidence is more convincing than mere sensory phenomena. “Noisy ghosts” might be more effective deceivers than the ephemeral ones as the evidence isn't simply personal experience.

Given these observations about ghostly encounters, let's compare some common characteristics with scriptural revelations about the spirit world in the Ephesians Hypothesis...

1. Those who witness apparitions experience sensory-rich phenomena that seem to have physical reality. Demons are able to affect human perceptions, and to some extent manipulate physical objects.

2. Apparitions vary in appearance and behavior. Satan works in ways most effective with the individuals being deceived.

3. Ghosts seem to circumvent physical laws. They appear, disappear, and pass through solid objects. Demons reside in another realm but can interact with ours. Their non-physical manifestations would not be subject to physical laws. Nor would they necessarily be detected by cameras or other devices (unless it serves their purpose).

¹⁰ Ron Rhodes, *The Truth Behind Ghosts, Mediums, and Psychic Phenomena*, (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2006).

¹¹ Dr. John Ankerberg and Dr. John Weldon, *Ghosts/Part 1*, 2005, www.jashow.org

4. *Ghostly phenomena tend to lead away from Scripture and deny God's truth and the biblical worldview.* The objective of fallen spirits, as given in Scripture, is to oppose God.

5. *Ghosts seem to possess knowledge about the life of the alleged deceased (from which they're supposedly derived) and about loved ones, associates, etc.* Neither Satan nor demons are omniscient, but they obviously have observed earthly events (possibly in greater detail than humans) and have insight into our affairs.

6. *Apparitions are flirtatious yet elusive.* It's in Satan's best interest for his deceptions to be alluring yet mysterious and generally untestable.

The take-home lesson from ghosts is that *Satan will do whatever it takes* to oppose God's Word and deceive his children. He is serious about his goals regardless of our interpretations. Ghostly phenomena (and many other paranormal phenomena) allow deception to be customized. There is no one-size-fits-all in the Deceiver's repertoire. He will deceive at every opportunity he is given. He will use an individual's beliefs, weaknesses, and situations to maximize his deceptions. Fortunately, an informed biblical worldview and careful attention to God's Word allow us to discern his schemes in whatever disguise they appear.

The good news in the midst of this dark reality is indeed *the* "good news." The most hideous and pervasive demon activity is no match for the truth in the gospel message. Demons can work only where there is ignorance of Christ's work!

Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world (1 John 4:4, ESV)