

## Are Ghosts Former Humans or Demons?

Matthew McGuire vs. Daniel McAdams

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Introductory Remarks:

- Please note that the majority of the information I will present is available in the Appendix to my book, [A Magical World: How the Bible Makes Sense of the Supernatural](#).
- The biblical data leaves some ambiguity and there is room for good faith difference of interpretation. I will argue that my case is *probable*, not *obvious*.
- Both views have support from figures in Church history (list below is *not* exhaustive):

Ghosts Are (Sometimes) Real Human Spirits	Ghosts Are Never Real Human Spirits
<u>Antiquity</u>	<u>Antiquity</u>
Justin Martyr	Tertullian
Origen of Alexandria	
Gregory of Nyssa	
Augustine (martyrs/great saints only)	
Gregory the Great	
Thomas Aquinas	
<u>Reformation Era &amp; Beyond</u>	<u>Reformation Era &amp; Beyond</u>
Richard Baxter	Martin Luther
John Flavel	Ludwig Lavater
John Wesley	King James I (yes, <i>that</i> King James)
Johann Blumhardt	Martin Chemnitz
<u>20<sup>th</sup> &amp; 21<sup>st</sup> Century Scholars</u>	<u>20<sup>th</sup> &amp; 21<sup>st</sup> Century Scholars</u>
John Warwick Montgomery	Craig Keener
J.B. Phillips	
Ben Witherington III	
Michael Heiser	

I will approach this subject from using the epistemology of the [Wesleyan Quadrilateral](#):

Scripture	Experience	Reason	Tradition
-The Bible allows for <a href="#">“ghosts” as a legitimate category of the spiritual realm</a> , assuming the majority report of the Ancient World -There are no texts, properly interpreted, that preclude the existence of ghosts	-Universal human experience across time and culture attest to the existence of ghosts as spirits of the deceased -These ghosts exhibit common characteristics and sometimes convey veridical information or are witnessed by multiple people <sup>1</sup>	-The principle of <a href="#">phenomenal conservatism</a> encourages us to take ghostly encounters at face value unless and until we have reason to believe otherwise	-The view that ghosts are real human spirits has solid support in church history <sup>2</sup> -Protestant skepticism of ghosts largely originated as a polemical response against the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Irving Finkel, *The First Ghosts: Most Ancient of Legacies* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2021), 228–232; Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The Resurrection of Jesus: Apologetics, Polemics, History* (New York; London; Oxford; New Delhi; Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2021), 217–221; R. C. Finucane, [Appearances of the Dead: A Cultural History of Ghosts](#) (London: Junction Books, 1982), 4–28.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew C. McGuire, “Ghosts and the Church: A Brief History,” *The Christian Parapsychologist Journal*, New Series Vol. 3, No. 3 (Autumn 2024): 3–25.

<sup>3</sup> See Chapters 3–4 of Finucane, *Appearances of the Dead*, 49–116.

## PART I - SCRIPTURE

Intro:

- Michael Heiser [writes](#): “Christians typically assume . . . ghosts are demons. This is simply not true, and it is demonstrably untrue with respect to the biblical text (both testaments).”

Supporting Scriptures:

- **1 Samuel 28** – The episode of Saul and the “ghost-mistress” of Endor makes the most sense in a culture that accepted necromancy as efficacious (and by consequence, interaction with deceased human spirits as possible)
  - Prohibitions in Leviticus 20 & Deuteronomy 18 may tacitly affirm the efficacious nature of necromancy:
    - Michael Heiser writes: “The reason [for the prohibition] was not that it couldn’t be done; it could. Rather, God insisted that he be the lone source of information from the spiritual world for his people.”<sup>4</sup>
  - If one posits demons for necromancy in general, one must either call Samuel’s appearance a demonic imposter, or one must consider Samuel’s appearance a direct miracle of God (thereby casting this as an exceptional episode)
- The **Matthew 17** Transfiguration appearance of Moses at minimum shows that the appearance of a deceased human spirit is not *impossible* in biblical terms, nor is it always evil in nature (although one may argue that this is a “one-off” episode)
- **Mark 6:45–52** and **Matthew 14:22–33**: The Disciples believe Jesus to be a *phantasma*.<sup>5</sup> At this time they seem to have a category for the existence of ghosts.
  - Michael Heiser [writes](#): “In Matt. 14:26 the disciples react in fear when they see Jesus walking on the water. They scream out, ‘It’s a ghost!’ The Greek word for ‘ghost’ here is *phantasma*. Any Greek-English dictionary (lexicon) or Strong’s number search will reveal to you that this isn’t the Greek word for ‘demon’ in the New Testament. The disciples had a category for ‘disembodied spirit of a dead person’ (a ghost). They didn’t just think in demonic terms.”
- **Luke 24:36–43**: After the Resurrection, the Disciples “were startled and frightened and thought they saw a *pneuma*” (v. 37).
  - As many translations (LEB, NRSV, & NET) recognize, the best contextual translation for *pneuma* here is “ghost”
  - There is even a 5<sup>th</sup> century textual variant where *pneuma* has been changed to the more ghost-appropriate term *phantasma* (Codex Bezae)
  - The tenacity of the Disciples’ belief in ghosts in this post-Resurrection narrative suggests that Jesus did *not* correct them after the last instance.

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<sup>4</sup> Michael S. Heiser, *The Bible Unfiltered: Approaching Scripture on Its Own Terms* (Bellingham: Lexham, 2017), 102. Robert Bergen echoes these comments: “the Torah prohibits necromancy not because it is a hoax but because it promotes reliance on supernatural guidance from some source other than the Lord.” *1, 2 Samuel*, vol. 7, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: B&H, 1996), 267.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander P. Thompson “The Risen Christ and Ambiguous Afterlife Language: An Examination of πνεῦμα in Luke 24:36-43,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 138 (2019):811n5: “[A]ncient ghost vocabulary consisted primarily of φάσμα [*phasma*], φάντασμα [*phantasma*], δαίμων [*daimon*], ψυχή [*psyche*], εἰδωλον [*eidolon*], and σκιά [*skia*]. In support of this statement, he references D. Felton, *Haunted Greece and Rome: Ghost Stories from Classical Antiquity* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 23–28.

- Dale Allison: “When the sources protest that Jesus is not a phantom, it is because they know that some people might or do imagine otherwise. **To protest the parallel is to acknowledge it.**”<sup>6</sup>
- **Acts 12:15:** A group of Disciples believe that Peter’s “angel” has appeared, likely best understood as the “ghost” of a recently killed Peter.
  - Dale Allison writes: “Although this could refer to Peter’s guardian angel, it’s equally possible that ‘angel’ here means his departed spirit”<sup>7</sup> [Michael Heiser agrees](#).
  - That we have a *third* likely instance of Jesus-followers believing in a category of ghosts reinforces the idea that Jesus did not contradict this common understanding (an understanding based on universal human experience)
- **John 11** – Jesus waiting 4 days to raise Lazarus appears to accommodate a view that the soul of a deceased human “lingers” for 3 days following death.<sup>8</sup>

#### Relevant Extrabiblical Literature:

- Believed to have been written in the first century AD, both *The Life of Adam and Eve* (43:1–2) and *4 Ezra* (7:100– 101) speak of the soul lingering for a week after the time of death.

#### Challenging Scriptures:

- Various **Psalms** and statements in **Ecclesiastes** which seem to imply no conscious afterlife
  - Most scholars accept that the nature of the afterlife was progressively revealed in Hebrew/Christian history. Murky images of the afterlife in the Old Testament do not negate the more clear teaching of the intermediate state in the later OT and the NT.<sup>9</sup>
- **Hebrews 9:27–28:** “And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him”
  - This passage *does* teach the general principle that we have one life and that all men die once (although there are biblical exceptions like Enoch & Elijah who never died, or Lazarus who died twice), it does not rule out the possibility of ghostly existence (although it *does* seemingly rule out reincarnation).
  - Matt Arnold [explains](#) the time-lag implicit in this Scripture: “This is a statement comparing the period between the crucifixion and second coming, and between a person dying and facing the judgement. Just as there’s at least a 2,000 year gap between Jesus dying and his second coming, it can be argued that there is a time lapse between a person dying and the judgement. Rather than being an argument against the existence of ghosts, the sentence in its entirety actually opens up the possibility of an intermediate state for those who have died.”
- **Luke 16** – The Rich Man & Lazarus. The rich man (“Dives”) is not permitted to send Lazarus back to earth to warn his loved ones: “If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.”
  - This is a lesson on belief: even miracles are not enough to convince the hard-hearted

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<sup>6</sup> Allison, *Resurrection*, 217.

<sup>7</sup> Dale C. Allison, Jr., *Night Comes: Death, Imagination, and the Last Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 130.

<sup>8</sup> D.A. Carson writes that the later-attested Jewish “belief that the soul hovers over the body of the deceased person for the first three days . . . seems to be presupposed here.” *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester; Grand Rapids: Inter-Varsity Press; Eerdmans, 1991), 411.

<sup>9</sup> John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

- Cf. Matthew 12:38–39: “‘Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.’ But he answered them, ‘An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.’”
  - Just as this account doesn’t rule out the working of miracles, neither does Luke 16 rule out any possibility of the dead ever interacting with the living (even if this story is taken at face value rather than being an illustration)
- **2 Corinthians 5:8** “we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.”
  - First, even if this verse is cited as a proof against the possibility of ghostly existence, it would only rule out “Christian ghosts.” It would make no comment upon the general “unquiet dead” known to universal human history
  - Second, this verse is a true hope for all believers, *but* it does not automatically preclude an interim time between the punctiliar moment of death and reception into the presence of Christ. Even someone as conservative as Billy Graham claims that Christians will go through an “escort” phase before reaching the intermediate state in Heaven.<sup>10</sup>
  - Third, this verse does not preclude the notion that deceased saints may be sent to earth for a particular “holy errand,” in the same way that angels are.
- **Luke 23:43** Jesus to the thief on the cross: “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”
  - This is a promise of hope to the thief on the cross. In his particular case, one could rule out the idea that he lingers very long before heading to Paradise, but it does not rule out that possibility for all human beings. Neither does it preclude the aforementioned “holy errand” possibility.
- **Philippians 1:23** “My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better”
  - This verse should be treated the same as 2 Corinthians 5:8

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<sup>10</sup> Billy Graham, *Angels: God’s Secret Agents* (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1975), 152–153. See also my related article, [“Fly in the Ointment: Why do Bad NDEs Happen to Good People?”](#)

## PART II – EXPERIENCE

- Experience of ghosts (the spirits or “shades” of the deceased) is **universally attested**:<sup>11</sup>
  - Homer (*Odyssey* Book 11)
  - Plato/Socrates (*Phaedo*)
  - Ancient Mesopotamia
  - Ancient Egypt
  - Ancient China
  - Ancient India
  - Today (Cross Culturally)
- Common motifs surrounding these appearances suggest an objective experience. Dale Allison summarizes some of these common motifs, writing, “In many reports, an apparitional figure:
  - Is both seen and heard.
  - Is seen now by one person, later by another or others
  - Is seen by more than one percipient at the same time.
  - Has been a victim of violence.
  - Appears and creates doubt and/or fear in some percipients.
  - Speaks very briefly, often only a sentence or two.
  - Offers reassurance and comfort.
  - Gives guidance, makes requests, or issues imperatives.
  - Seems overwhelmingly real and indeed seemingly solid.
  - Appears and disappears in abrupt and unusual ways, displaying what has been called “fourdimensional mobility.”
  - Is not perceived as unusual or extraordinary at the beginning of the experience
  - Manifests so convincingly that the percipient undergoes changes in belief.
  - Is seen less and less as time moves on; most appearances (although certainly not all) take place within a year of the death of the person represented by the apparition”<sup>12</sup>
- “Veridical” (corroborative) information gained from ghosts points to an objective experience
- Multiple witnesses of ghosts point to an objective experience

See below excerpt on veridical and multiply-witnessed After-Death Communications (ADCs) from the \$20,000-prize-winning essay: “[There is No Death: Near-death Experience Evidence for Survival After Permanent Bodily Death](#)” by Robert G. Mays and Suzanne B. Mays:

### 12A. What is spontaneous after-death communication?

After-death communication (ADC) is the experience of spontaneous direct communication from a deceased family member or friend with a living person. In spontaneous cases, the deceased loved one always initiates the communication.

- The communication may be by sensing a presence, hearing a voice, feeling a touch, smelling a fragrance, or seeing the deceased person in partial or full appearance. The deceased person may appear completely solid or somewhat hazy, and is usually wearing their customary clothing.
- ADCs are commonplace and occur in normal, healthy people. The communication may occur while the witness is completely awake, while asleep, or while falling asleep or waking up. Even during sleep, the witness experiences the encounter as more real than everyday reality (compare with Section 3C-2).
- The deceased person may provide **veridical information** about a lost insurance policy or hidden valuables.<sup>13</sup> They may warn the witness to avoid an airplane crash. In other cases, the deceased person is not known to the witness but is later revealed to be a relative.
- ADCs generally start within one year of the deceased person’s death but may occur many years later. They occur to both the bereaved and the non-bereaved. The witness may continue to sense the deceased person’s presence throughout their life.
- Researchers estimate that one-third of the worldwide population has had one or more ADCs<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Finkel, *The First Ghosts*, 228-232.

<sup>12</sup> Allison, *Resurrection*, 217–221.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Augustine, *De Cura Pro Mortuis* 11.13–13.16.

<sup>14</sup> J. Streit-Horn, *A Systematic Review of Research on After-death Communication (ADC)* (University of North Texas, 2001).

➤ ADCs provide objective evidence that the deceased person continues to exist after physical death.

### **12B. The case of Lucille’s biological grandfather**

Lucille was a 39-year-old hotel housekeeper in Florida. She had been adopted after birth. Her birth name was Mary but her adoptive parents had changed it to Lucille.

“A man came to the foot of my bed one night. I was scared because I didn’t recognize him. He said, ‘Mary, your mother loves you. . . . Your mother is looking for you. Start looking for her. Find your mother! I love you.’ I remember asking him who he was just before I couldn’t see him anymore. And he said, ‘You’ll find out.’ The next thing I knew, he was gone. I was still scared, yet I had tears of happiness. I was glad to know that my birth mother was looking for me. This gave me the incentive to find my biological mother. I was always dreaming about finding her, but I didn’t want to hurt my adoptive parents. Then I went to a club for adoptees, and I found my mother with just one phone call! She asked, ‘How did you find me?’ I told her an elderly man came to the foot of my bed. I described what he looked like, and she said, ‘That’s your grandfather!’ I learned when Grandpa was dying, he told my mother, ‘Find your daughter. Find your baby.’ He wanted to rest in peace knowing we would be together again. . . . When we met [the next day], [my mother] showed me a picture of my grandfather, and that was the man who had been standing at the foot of my bed. Grandpa had the same suit on in the photograph that he wore when he came to me. Then I knew my experience was real!” (22:286–287).

In this case, Lucille sees an unknown deceased man who gives her a message about her birth mother, addressing her with her birth name. Lucille confirms that the person she saw was her deceased biological grandfather from the photograph of him her mother showed her. This case is similar to the NDEr seeing an unknown deceased man and later finding out he was his biological father (Section 10B-1). **Lucille’s perception of her deceased grandfather was accurate, that is, veridical.** The information her father told her, that her mother was looking for her, was **also veridical.**

### **12C. The case of Blair’s father**

In another example, the deceased person can be seen by two or more people independently and their individual accounts corroborate each other.

Blair was a business executive, age 45. Her father had died from a series of strokes. She and her five-year-old son were together in a hotel room the night before the funeral. Blair was sitting in a chair and her son was in bed. As she was praying for her father:

“The lights in the room seemed to grow dim, and all of a sudden, there was my father! He seemed very, very solid. Though he was in his eighties when he died, now he appeared to be more like a man in his sixties. . . . He stood there and told me, ‘Be strong and take care of your mother. Remember, I love you. Good-bye.’ Dad’s facial expression softened considerably when he said, ‘Remember, I love you.’ It lasted only a few seconds, and then he left. My little boy, who was in bed, got up. I thought he had been asleep. He ran to me and said, ‘My granddaddy! My granddaddy!’ I said, ‘Your granddaddy is gone.’ And he said, ‘No! My granddaddy was right here!’ So my son saw him too!” (22:329).

In this case, the agreement of **two living people simultaneously witnessing the same ADC event** provides objective corroboration of the event.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Case files are from B. Guggenheim, & J. Guggenheim, *Hello from Heaven!: A New Field of Research, After-death Communication Confirms That Life and Love are Eternal* (New York: Bantam, 1997), 286–287, 329.

### PART III – REASON

- White Crow Advantage:
  - “If you wish to upset the law that all crows are black, you mustn't seek to show that no crows are; it is enough if you prove one single crow to be white.” — William James
  - All I must demonstrate is that *one* ghost is the spirit of a deceased human. My opponent has the difficult task of ruling out *all* ghostly experiences without remainder.
- Genuinely paranormal apparitions and ADCs (i.e., experiences not explained by fraud or misperception) may be interpreted in one of the following ways:
  1. Face value (i.e., a real communication/appearance of a deceased human)
  2. Demonic or Angelic action
  3. A direct miracle of God
  4. Psychic functioning (e.g., telepathic or clairvoyance insights, combined with psychic projection of a figure or voice)
- The principle of [phenomenal conservatism](#) leads me to believe that these paranormal encounters should be taken at face value, rather than positing a demonic imposter or psychic theory.
  - With that said, demonic or psychic theories may be explanatory of certain individual cases, as with some poltergeist situations (unconscious psychic functioning of an emotionally disturbed subject) or false apparitions of Jesus (as reported in the life of St. Martin of Tours)
  - However, the demonic imposter theory seems to be read into the experiences rather than naturally arising from the evidence
  - Analogy: In the same way that *some* temptations may come from demonic spirits, we should allow that *some* apparitions come from demonic spirits. To attribute *all* apparitions to this category, however, would be as irresponsible as blaming *all* temptations on demons.
- It stands to reason that we should view the Bible as *assuming* the universal experience of ghosts unless it explicitly teaches otherwise. It would have been the “default” viewpoint, as it were.

### PART IV – TRADITION

- The belief in ghosts as a real category of the spiritual world enjoys wide precedent from Church history. Although the subject has been hotly debated throughout the ages, it is by no means a fringe view (except in contemporary Evangelical circles).<sup>16</sup>
- Deliverance ministers who have dealt with *both* demons *and* ghosts report distinctions between them and the best means of dealing with them. (e.g., the Lutheran Johann Blumhardt and the Anglican *Deliverance* handbook<sup>17</sup>)
- As a matter of historical awareness, it should be kept in mind that much of the Protestant resistance to belief in ghosts was motivated by polemics against the Roman Catholic doctrine of Purgatory.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Note the ADC [reported by Witherington](#) & the apparition of C.S. Lewis [reported by Phillips](#).

<sup>17</sup> Michael Perry, ed., *Deliverance: Psychic Disturbances and Occult Involvement*, SPCK Classics, 2nd edition (London: SPCK, 1996).

<sup>18</sup> Second generation Lutheran Reformer Martin Chemnitz writes: “On the basis of these specters, and not on the basis of Scripture, the papalists have established the whole structure of their purgatory.” *Examination of the Council of Trent*, 4 vols., translated by Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia, 1971), 3:301. Finucane, *Appearances of the Dead*, 49–116.