WHERE HAVE ALL THE GHOSTS GONE?  
EVOLUTION OF A CONCEPT IN BIBLICAL LITERATURE

Sze-kar Wan

What is puzzling about ghosts in biblical literature is why there are so few of them. Like all ancient religious texts, the Bible is of course suffused with what moderns call the paranormal, the preternatural, the supernatural, the magical, or what some would call the numinous. Its pages are populated with goblins and gods, sprites and spirits, demons and deities, beings that made up an irreducible part of every biblical writer’s mental map of reality. As for the spirits of the dead, though, it says hardly anything substantial at all. The majority of references to ghosts in the Hebrew Bible are found in prohibitions and maledictions. None save one—that of Saul summoning Samuel’s ghost for one last, postmortem prophecy (I Samuel 28)—describes any significant interaction with human beings. All ghosts, if they are mentioned at all—with again the exception of Samuel’s—are seen as weak, powerless, otherwise confined and contained. There are no reports of malevolent ghosts terrorizing the living, no wandering spirits looking to avenge their bitter death, no hungry ghosts suing for offering and comfort. By the time of the New Testament, ghosts have all but vanished. One made it into the Gospels, but it turns out to be Jesus walking on water (Mark 6.49 and parallels).¹ Even conceding the final triumph of monotheistic Yahwism in biblical Israel that eliminated all competing religious and numinous expressions, and even taking into account of the apocalypticism of New Testament writers who habitually believed the dead would repose in God until the general resurrection, the disappearance of ghosts from the biblical records is more than a little disconcerting—unique, really, from a cross-cultural perspective.

The silence of the Bible on ghostly matters is even more surprising if we compare it to its Umwelt.² The Egyptians had an optimistic view of

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¹ Many English translations of Luke 24.27 have the disciples mistaking the resurrected Christ as “ghost.” The Greek is in fact πνεῦμα (“spirit”) not φάντασμα, the usual word for “ghost.”
² For survey of Ancient Near East beliefs on the dead, see Theodore J. Lewis, “Dead,”
the afterlife in which the dead had the same need of hunger and thirst as the living but could also grant favors in exchange for the right offerings. Thus, communication with the dead was not only thought possible but in fact encouraged through letters written to them. The dead were mostly benevolent, but some letters do refer to their malevolence. By contrast, the Mesopotamians were much more pessimistic about death. Death was thought to be the appointed lot of all human beings, according to the *Gilgamesh Epic*, and the dead traveled to a land of no return where they lived and consumed their own filth. Evil ghosts were everywhere and must be appeased with proper offerings or exorcized with proper incantations. The Canaanites also had a rich ghost culture, first fueled by their fallen great kings of old and the great funeral feasts celebrated in their honor, then continued as they became popular among the people. The dead were not thought to be cut off from the living but exist in the underworld. Their ghosts could be invoked and, given the right incentives, even grant favors to the living. The Greeks thought it a reality that the dead would become ghosts and continue to participate in the affairs of the living. Hesiod thought what he called “good demons” were ghosts of long-dead heroes. Clothed in mist, they were said to roam the earth to keep justice and maintain order. Plato democratized the idea and applied it to all good humans who would turn into good demons upon death. The Greeks also believed in evil ghosts: they were humans who became “bad demons” after a violent death. In this milieu, the Bible stood alone in its slim documentation of ghosts.

This, however, was not always the case. The biblical records reflect the writing culture of the winners, especially that of the Deuteronomists, but amulets for the purpose of warding off ghosts and demons found at burial sites might tell a vastly different story. Indeed, buried in the sediment of biblical traditions themselves, vestiges of the belief in ghost can still be unearthed. Two terms are found in the Hebrew text for ghost or spirit of the dead—*rēpāʾim* (always in the plural and often simply “Rephaim”) and *ḇōb* (often “spirit of the dead” or “ancestral spirit”). The history of the two terms is complex, but its very complexity might afford us a glimpse into the evolution of ghosts and spirits from Ancient Israel to early Judaism and early Christianity.

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