The Mediumistic Secret

Reconsidering Historical Criticism in Light of Modern Spiritualism

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> At least since classical antiquity, writers have invoked ghosts and spirits to symbolize the discomfiting resurgence of the past into the present. And if literary texts, human beings, culture itself, are ineluctably haunted by the past, then historians, literary critics, biographers, even psychoanalysts, function as spirit mediums of a sort: their task is to make the dead speak.[1]
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> Whereas linear, secular history demands the transcendence of the past, Spiritualist practice collapsed time and refused to accept the past as over.[2]

During the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries many see ghosts, seek ghosts, refuse ghosts, and are trying to figure out what to do about them. Academics of various disciplinary stripes since the early 1990s have become seemingly "haunted by the idea of haunting".[3] Our contemporary fascination with spectrality in popular culture, literature, and critical theory is indebted to modern spiritualism in ways that are often unknown or unacknowledged. Molly McGarry and Helen Sword's works begin to

1. Helen Sword, *Ghostwriting Modernism*, Ithaca, NY 2002, 164–165.

2. Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America*, Berkeley, CA 2008, 6.

3. McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past*, 8.

connect the dots between spiritualism as a religious movement that centres communication with "ghosts" and the work of specters in hauntology.[4] This piece builds on their insights and extends them as part of a larger project exploring legacies of modern spiritualism (and its esoteric offshoot, modern Theosophy) on the study of religion, especially within biblical and early Christian studies.[5] Here, I argue that historical criticism is indebted to a mediumistic relation to the past, one that needs to be understood in the historical context of the flourishing of modern spiritualism.

Modern spiritualism, sometimes called séance spiritualism, emerges and flourishes in the second half of the nineteenth century in the United States, Britain, and Europe, precisely at the same time as historical criticism, which became and remains the dominant approach to biblical studies. Historical critical methods minimize, if not erase, the present conditions of the interpreter in the act of focusing on ancient sources. As a result, scholars of the New Testament and early Christian history rarely pause to interrogate either the contexts in which their interpretive approaches were forged or the inheritances accompanying them, for good or for ill. My point is not that spiritualists directly influenced the shaping of the historical critical method but rather that a focus on spiritualist claims and practices illuminates a largely hidden or suppressed aspect of historical criticism. As movements that emerge contemporaneously, we can see historical critics and spiritualists making overlapping but also contrasting choices about authority, agency, temporality, and knowledge production.

This essay's title is a play on William Wrede's (1859–1906) influential *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien*.[6] Wrede uses the lens of historical criticism to argue that gospel depictions of Jesus as God's messiah are the products of those shaping what became early Christianity rather than records

4. Along slightly different lines, John Lardas Modern traces the role of spiritualism and fascination with haunting in the emergence of secularism. John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America: With Reference to Ghosts, Protestant Subcultures, Machines, and Their Metaphors; Featuring Discussions of Mass Media,* Moby-Dick*, Spirituality, Phrenology, Anthropology, Sing Sing State Penitentiary, and Sex with the New Motive Power*, Chicago 2011.

5. See Denise Kimber Buell, "The Afterlife is Not Dead: Spiritualism, Postcolonial Theory, and Early Christian Studies", *Church History* 78 (2009), 862–872; Denise Kimber Buell, "Hauntology Meets Posthumanism: Some Payoffs for Biblical Studies", in Jennifer Koosed (ed.), *The Bible and Posthumanism*, Minneapolis, MN 2014, 29–56; Denise Kimber Buell, "This Changes Everything: Spiritualists, Theosophists, and Rethinking Early Christian Historiography", in Taylor G. Petrey (ed.), *Re-Making the World: Categories and Early Christianity. Essays in Honor of Karen L. King*, Tübingen 2019, 345–368. My deep thanks to Joel Kuhlin and Mårten Björk for organizing and hosting the stimulating symposium at which the original version of this essay was presented and to Karen King and the anonymous reviewers at *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* for their insightful feedback.

6. William Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien: Zugleich ein Beitrag zum Verständnis des Markusevangeliums*, Göttingen 1901.

of Jesus' historical ministry. He develops his argument by interpreting the Gospel of Mark, notably passages in which Jesus admonishes recipients of exorcisms as well as disciples not to tell others that he is the Messiah and to keep his messiahship a secret until after his death (Mk. 9:9), a motif known as the "messianic secret". Wrede proposes to reveal a different secret, that the concept of Jesus as God's messiah is not original to Jesus or even to others interacting with him during his lifetime. Wrede distinguishes between theology and history, arguing that "the idea of the messianic secret is a theological idea" belonging to the late first century CE, rather than a historical claim arising during Jesus' lifetime, as the gospel narratives suggest.[7] The form of secular history writing that historical critics promote is indebted to making a cut not only between past and present, but also among pasts; the past as narrated in the Gospel of Mark is distinguished from the past of the gospel's composition. These distinctions imply that reading as a historian requires skills to interpret the ancient texts in a way that resists surface meaning; a different truth can be discerned within and through the body of the ancient text, if the scholar is properly trained. Even as this method was widely accepted by the turn of the twentieth century, Wrede's views on Jesus' messiahship as a belated attribution were controversial. Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) largely praised Wrede while other biblical critics disagreed about whether Jesus understood himself to be God's Messiah (and if so, what that meant to him) or whether such an understanding only arose after his death.

Such debates turn on presumptions about how to read ancient sources and how to engage contemporary perspectives on biblical interpretation and Christian origins. The historical critic has to navigate the demonstration of expertise to have one's interpretation viewed as viable while avoiding the charge of imposing meaning on the ancient sources. Conventionally, this challenge has been characterized as the problem of interpretive bias or the impossibility of objectivity – the historical critic, no matter how assiduous, cannot escape her locatedness, the questions she asks will inevitably shape the meaning she can make of the past. Within biblical studies, this insight has been extremely productive and enabled work that embraces forms of standpoint epistemology, making a virtue out of what might appear to be a flaw.

Placing historical criticism in relation to its historical contemporary movement of modern spiritualism helps us to notice a different kind of challenge: namely, that historical criticism relies on the premise that the historical critic actually has a way to access and successfully channel the

7. William Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*, London 1971, 67.

authentic past into the present, even as the method insists on a sharp distinction between the present and the past. In other words, historical critics ideally serve as reliable mediums for the ancient past to be brought to light or life in the present; it is this function that is called into question when the interpreter's "objectivity" is questioned.

Like many historical critics, spiritualists strongly criticize what they view as problematic theological views in the Christian churches of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But spiritualists offer a modern alternative distinct from secular history.[8] In contrast with historical critics and more like claims within Christian churches, spiritualists posit an ongoing connection between the past and the present. For spiritualists, mediumship offers an alternative to clerical authority for authorizing claims about the ways that the past is meaningful in the present. Furthermore, spiritualists emphasize the empirical, locating spirit communication within the realm of science: each individual is invited to experience or witness spirit communication and decide for themselves about its truthfulness.

Whereas historical critics could critique or seek to reform present Christian doctrine or practices by claiming to be able to discern the truth about the difference of the past thanks to painstaking acquisition of expertise undertaken in increasingly professionalized contexts, spiritualists ground their claims both in a deliberate cultivation of receptivity rather than mastery and in an appeal to each individual to examine spiritualist claims for themselves. Spiritualist expertise is cultivated by individuals to be sufficiently "sensitive" to receiving and transmitting messages from spirits for whom the temporal bounds of past, present, and future do not apply. Such spirits, under the proper conditions, may provide information that also corrects, educates, and informs present humans about both the past and the future. The next section explores spiritualist claims about mediumship in relation to biblical interpretation before returning to consider historical critical claims in their light.

As I discuss in the final section, spiritualism anticipates, almost uncannily, recent interventions into historiography under the moniker of "hauntology" and recent biblical studies work informed by queer and trans-critical approaches, affect theory, and race-critical theory that foreground nonlinear temporalities and the openness, if not passivity, of the interpreter, even as these recent works seem largely unaware of the ways that their interventions resonate with the historical terms of debate in which historical critical methods and their contemporary alternatives emerged.

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8. See Daniel Cottom, *Abyss of Reason: Cultural Movements, Revelations, and Betrayals*, New York 1991.

Modern Spiritualism and Jesus the Medium

For spiritualists, Mk. 9 reveals not the secret of a late first-century rendering of Jesus as the expected Messiah, but rather the secret of Jesus' power as a medium to channel the biblical predecessors Elijah and Moses. The transfiguration scene important for Wrede's argument to de-historicize the messianic secret in the Gospel of Mark is, for most nineteenth-century spiritualists, adduced as proof that spirit communication is a practice with ancient roots.

In an anonymous pamphlet published in 1884, structured as a dialogue between a Christian minister (known as "Rev. Dr.___") and a former member of his congregation (known as "Mr. Smith"), the principles of modern spiritualism are directly linked to claims about Christianity's origins.[9] Late in the dialogue, the spiritualist ex-parishioner deals a rhetorical blow to the anti-spiritualist minister:

> When you repudiate Spiritualism you give up the very foundation of Christianity – the "signs and wonders" of Christ and his reappearance after his crucifixion. The latter event is especially vital, because you must admit that, had not Christ reappeared, there would have been no such thing as Christianity. When he was condemned and executed as a malefactor, "all forsook him and fled". [...] Hence, if he had not shown himself to his disciples they would have given it all up as a delusion. This, probably, was the reason that Paul laid so much stress upon the "resurrection", as the foundation-stone of Christian faith, and especially as evidence of a future state. Thus, you see, *Christianity rests upon a spirit manifestation*.[10]

Resurrection for spiritualists, however, does not mean physical resurrection. The core spiritualist ideas are that human personality persists after the death of the body as spirit, that "discarnate" souls can communicate with those still in the body, and that the human condition is one of spiritual progression (enabled by learning from spirits and improving the condition of one's soul, even while still embodied). For many modern spiritualists, almost all of whom had been raised Christian, the figure of Jesus is central as an exemplar for the kind of human life one ought to cultivate. They understand Jesus as a "highly-gifted psychic" or fully developed medium rather than an incarnated deity and/or one who saved others by his sacrificial death.[11]

9. *The Biblical and Theological Objections to Spiritualism Answered in a Colloquy between a Clergyman and an Ex-Parishioner*, New York 1884.

10. *Biblical and Theological Objections to Spiritualism Answered*, 37. My italics.

11. Abraham Wallace, *Jesus of Nazareth and Modern Scientific Examination: From the*

Spiritualists do not all draw the same conclusions from their engagement with spirits and biblical texts. Some "identify true Christianity, as taught by its founder, with the religion of Spiritualism" and hold that "Primitive Christianity and Modern Spiritualism are identical".[12] For others, spiritualism leads to a rejection of Christianity, which can take the form of positioning spiritualism as a successor to Christianity. "Mr. Smith" articulates this third view: "I must cling to the New Dispensation, which I know to be true, without regard to the Church or the Bible; for modern Spiritualism does not depend upon the Bible for support, though it demonstrates the plausibility and reasonability of many statements contained in that book."[13] The implications of this latter claim are profound and will be considered in the next section.

Among the many biblical passages that spiritualists cite to support the existence and antiquity of spirit communication, they especially appeal to what they refer to as a "divine séance", also known as the transfiguration (Mk. 9:2–8), in which Moses and Elijah appear next to and speak with a transfigured Jesus in front of the disciples Peter, James, and John (9:2–4). In a work that was influential for spiritualists as well as Theosophists, William Howitt (1792–1879) characterizes this scene as follows:

> The Lord of life, who was about to become the Prince of the spirits of the dead, broke the law prohibiting the intercourse with the spirits of the dead, and in no other presence than that of the promulgator of the law, who had long been a spirit of the dead, and at the same time in the presence of those selected by Christ to teach this great act to posterity.[14]

This characterization of the transfiguration scene positions Jesus as a medium whose goal is to authorize and instruct his disciples to become mediums themselves. Spirit communication is the lesson being imparted. The voice from the clouds that states "This is my beloved Son; listen to him" (Mk. 9:7) is here interpreted to proclaim Jesus as a trustworthy medium rather than God's Messiah. "Mr. Smith" explains:

Spiritualist Standpoint, 2nd ed., Manchester 1920, 13. See also Buell, "Hauntology Meets Posthumanism", 45–52.

12. E. Louisa Thompson Nosworthy, "Christ a Guide to the Poor and Illiterate as well as the Cultured", *The Herald of Progress* 2 (1881), 204.

13. *Biblical and Theological Objections to Spiritualism Answered*, 37–38.

14. William Howitt, *The History of the Supernatural in All Ages and Nations, and in All Churches, Christian and Pagan: Demonstrating a Universal Faith*, London 1863, 197. See also *Biblical and Theological Objections to Spiritualism Answered*, 11.

> If [Jesus] could cause the appearance of holy spirits of the departed and talk with them, then his disciples, or those who believed on him, could and can do the same. Else why was he careful to have certain selected members of the twelve present at this divine séance as witnesses of the example which he set?[15]

For spiritualists, spirit communications are a primary source of knowledge, even as they insist that each person must decide for themselves the veracity of spiritualist claims and that not all spirit communications are truthful or accurate (i.e., individuals must employ reason to discern truth from falsehood even if they accept the principle of spirit communication).[16] A common "conversion" narrative among spiritualists is of a transition from scepticism about spirit communication to interest to amazement and persuasion in the context of witnessing mediumship (such as at a household séance or public demonstration), sometimes leading to the experience of being a medium for spirits oneself. Although many sceptics of spiritualism delight in exposing fraudulent mediums, spiritualists accommodate the presence of both fraudulent mediums and deceitful spirits into their worldview. "Mr. Smith" does so by interpreting gospel texts, asserting that Jesus

> did not claim to exercise special powers of God in casting [daimones] out. You remember that the man who brought to Jesus his son that had a dumb spirit stated that the disciples had failed to cast him out. [...] [Jesus] did not tell them that [their failure to cast out the demon] was because they were not of the same divine nature as himself, that they were not God, *but because their spiritual powers had not been properly developed*. The word demon does not necessarily mean a low or bad spirit. You will find, if you investigate this subject, that *the spirits (Greek, daimones) who control mediums are of various grades, some as pure as angels, other as low, ignorant, and depraved as many of the spirits whom we see in the flesh*. This is what we might expect, since disembodied spirits pass into the future life with their earthly characteristics.[17]

In other words, for spiritualists, the reliability of spirit communications depends on two critical factors: the relative development of the communicat-

15. *Biblical and Theological Objections to Spiritualism Answered*, 11–12.

16. "Mr. Smith" says this held true in antiquity as well, citing 1 John 4:5–6 to support his point that "the spirits who manifested then were like those who manifest now [...] 'good, bad, and indifferent'" and that one must "judge of the character of the spirits by our reason and intuition". *Biblical and Theological Objections to Spiritualism Answered*, 28.

17. *Biblical and Theological Objections to Spiritualism Answered*, 20. My italics.

ing spirit and the relative level of the human instruments through which a spirit communicates.

Spiritualists stress the potential of all humans to be and become Christ-like (human "eternal progression") and that Jesus taught and exemplified a potential in all humans. This perspective aligns with spiritualist critiques of the current state of human existence and a concomitant optimism that humans have the capacity to transform the world for the better, even while still embodied. Spiritualists offer communications from spirits as the means for acquiring and passing on knowledge of this capacity for positive transformation.

Even as spiritualists adduce biblical texts as precedents for communications between the living and spirits, they cite spirit communications to interpret biblical texts. In one of the most popular and enduring works of spiritualist writings, John W. Edmonds (1799–1874) reports that, in his presence, spirits communicated the following interpretation of a passage from the Gospel of John: "'Whoso believeth in him shall not perish, but have eternal life,' means to believe in the doctrine of Christ, not his person, in the spiritual condition of man and his eternal progression, which Christ came to teach and did teach."[18] This interpretation clearly supports the key spiritualist principle of eternal progression, that is, of human potential for spiritual development in contrast to the belief in Christ's person (or death) as the source of human salvation.

Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930), an avid spiritualist best remembered for his fictional character Sherlock Holmes, makes a very similar point, reporting on what a certain "Mr. Miller of Belfast" learned when he asked the spirit of his deceased son "about the exact position of Christ in religion". The father was apparently in regular spirit communication with his son through a medium, but at this question, the son "modestly protested that such a subject was above his head, and asked leave to bring his higher guide to answer the question".[19] The arrival of this more advanced spirit is registered physically:

> Using a fresh voice and in a new and more weighty manner the medium then said: "I wish to answer your question. Jesus the Christ is the proper designation. Jesus was perfect humanity. Christ was the God

18. John W. Edmonds & George T. Dexter, *Spiritualism*, 4th ed., New York 1853, 56–57. Those attentive to the rhetoric of the Gospel of John have long noted that one of its features is a call for readers to believe in Jesus, not simply in what Jesus has to say. The spirits communicating to Edmonds and his fellow sitter George T. Dexter counsel an approach to the Gospel of John that subordinates its narrative rhetoric of belief in the person of Jesus to that of the synoptic gospels, with their foregrounding of Jesus' actions and teachings.

19. Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Wanderings of a Spiritualist*, New York 1921, 26.

> idea in Him. Jesus, on account of His purity, manifested in the highest degree the psychic powers which resulted in His miracles. Jesus never preached the blood of the lamb.[20] The disciples after His ascension forgot the message in admiration of the man. The Christ is in every human being, and so are the psychic forces which were used by Jesus. If the same attention were given to spiritual development which you give to the comfort and growth of your material bodies your progress in spiritual life would be rapid and would be characterized by the same works as were performed by Jesus. The one essential thing for all on earth to strive after is a fuller knowledge and growth in spiritual living."[21]

In this fascinating passage, Conan Doyle first frames the context for us, that he is personally persuaded by this account, that it comes from a father who has been communicating with his dead son via an unnamed medium. In the course of these communications, the dead son (the "young soldier") demurs on a Christological question and instead his "higher guide", meaning another spirit, answers through the medium.

The answer that the spirit provides through the medium defines Jesus to be the Christ in a way that challenges contemporary Christian dogma: "Jesus was perfect humanity" and "the Christ is in every human being, and so are the psychic forces that were used by Jesus". Jesus is thus not unique as Christ, but rather each human has comparable potential, since "Christ was the God idea" in Jesus.

Mediumship Haunts Historical Criticism

Spiritualists' embrace of mediumship appears to contrast sharply with historical criticism. There are indeed important distinctions. Without claiming direct causation, I nonetheless think we have not reckoned adequately with the fact that nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historical critics worked in contexts awash with spiritualists, the psychical researchers who took an interest in them,[22] as well as a range of other people participating in and developing forms of mystical and esoteric practices. Thus, it should not surprise us to find biblical scholars using imagery that recalls these practices

20. This is a typical spiritualist position against the doctrine of atonement. For example, John W. Edmonds claims that "there is no vicarious atonement which is to redeem us, but we are to work out our own salvation". Edmonds & Dexter, *Spiritualism*, 64–65. See also discussion in Buell, "This Changes Everything", 345–368.

21. Doyle, *The Wanderings of a Spiritualist*, 26.

22. On psychical researchers, see Courtney Raia, *The New Prometheans: Faith, Science, and the Supernatural Mind in the Victorian Fin de Siècle*, Chicago 2019.

even when they avoid equivalencies.[23] We find a shared vocabulary of concern across spiritualist and historical critical scholarship about inspiration, authority, and ability to bring into the present ideas from other temporalities. Juxtaposing spiritualism with historical criticism lets us discern a dimension of historical critical approaches that has been forgotten, rendered invisible, or suppressed.

As noted above, William Wrede sought to distinguish between the ideas and perspectives that had become layered onto biblical texts and the ancient (somehow also timeless) truths lurking in them to be excavated by trained experts. Take also this example from the first quarter of the twentieth century, by American biblical scholar Shirley Jackson Case (1872–1947):

> The reformers gave the New Testament books life by freely injecting into them the vital interests of the age of the reformation. Social emphasis, on the other hand, calls for the revitalizing of the literature, not by reading into it the life of a subsequent age, but by visualizing in realistic fashion the very life of the place and time in which the various New Testament books were produced. *One infuses them, not with the spirit of the modern age, but with the living spirit of the ancient world*. Whether the interests of the present are in strict agreement with those of the past may often be open to question. But the function of interpretation is, at all costs to modern wishes, *to allow the life of the ancients to throb afresh through the veins of the historical documents*.[24]

Although Case contrasts the efforts of Protestant reformers with the social historical analysis he is promoting, his imagery brings him close to spiritualists, even with some important distinctions. The goal of activating the "living spirit of the ancient world", so that "the life of ancients" will "throb afresh" through a textual body, makes the biblical scholar a catalyst, like a spirit medium, for ancient living spirits. Unlike spirit mediums, however, who function as the embodied channel for spirit communications, the biblical scholar is positioned as the one who can interpret such communications, while the biblical (or other ancient) text serves as the physical medium. This distinction deploys metaphors of modern séance spiritualist practices but implies that the biblical scholar is more akin to those who sought to study spiritualist phenomena as psychical researchers than to spirit mediums themselves.

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23. For an in-depth study of how and with what effects biblical scholars adopt metaphors from the biological sciences in the nineteenth century, see Yii-Jan Lin, *The Erotic Life of Manuscripts: New Testament Textual Criticism and the Biological Sciences*, Oxford 2016.

24. Shirley Jackson Case, *The Social Origins of Christianity*, Chicago 1923, 31. My italics.

Historical criticism emphasizes the gap between the present and the past in a manner that places paradoxical demands on its practitioners: on the one hand, one must attempt not to impose anything of the present upon the past; on the other hand, one must have cultivated the expertise to engage with the past and thus be an authorized and trustworthy means by which the past can speak to the present. Both of these demands resonate with the way that spiritualists speak about the development of mediumship, as a process in which one learns to become a reliable instrument through which spirits can speak and has developed the ability to discern the reliability and meaning of spirit communication, however it is transmitted. In other words, historical criticism promotes cultivating the historian as a kind of medium, one through whom the past can speak while minimizing the impact of the historian upon the source(s). However, as Case's phrasing indicates, the professionalization of historical critics means that the attribution of mediumship is displaced, such that the biblical scholar is properly the interpreter of mediumistic transmissions, with the medium itself being identified as the ancient sources under interpretation. Nevertheless, in practice, the scholar acts much like a medium: The scholar stages the conditions for the "séance" in which the ancient spirits may "speak" through the otherwise inert ancient documents and then interprets these ancient voices for a wider audience.

This kind of mediumistic relation to the text is a modern way of interpreting the past, as Helen Sword puts it, "historians [...] function as spirit mediums of a sort: their task is to make the dead speak". Moreover, historians and others seek ways to demonstrate their credibility for this task: "Contemporary critics have a strong professional interest in proving themselves indispensable as the messengers and interpreters of voices from a remote 'other world': of literature, the unconscious, the past."[25]

At the same time, as Ward Blanton observes, historical critics do not make explicit connections between their work and mediumship:

> There is no modern historical criticism of the Bible without the implicit assumption that the scholar is able to identify and translate religion into something that is essentially *other than* religious history, whether "historical rationality" or "modern" or "critical" thought [...] Without the convincing, performative embodiment of this difference, the scholar becomes just another shaman, prophet, or scribe, a possibility that self-consciously modern scholarship found quite intolerable.[26]

25. Sword, *Ghostwriting Modernism*, 165.

26. Ward Blanton, *Displacing Christian Origins: Philosophy, Secularity, and the New Testament*, Chicago 2007, 11. Italics in original.

In this respect, as Blanton notes, historical critics aim to contribute to a secular form of history writing in contrast to religious or theological writing, thereby participating in the creation of what Courtney Raia describes as an "emerging institutional and epistemological boundary between science and religion".[27] But in the mid-late nineteenth century, what being modern and scientific could look like are under active debate. Although spiritualists are regularly denigrated as gullible sops, their own self-positioning claims the language of the modern and the scientific.

A correlation between spiritualist mediumship and historical criticism becomes clearer if we explore approaches to biblical authority, and specifically the question of the Bible as an inspired text. The challenge to the idea of biblical inspiration is one often linked with the rise of historical critical methods. In their review of the history of New Testament interpretation, Stephen Neill and N.T. Wright describe Christians in Britain as "almost in a state of panic" after 1860 as a result of the Tübingen school publications – especially those of Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860) – and their uptake by Joseph Barber Lightfoot (1828–1889), Brooke Foss Wescott (1825–1901), and Fenton John Anthony Hort (1828–1892) in Britain: "Put in the simplest words, the question orthodox Christians had to face was this: 'Is the Bible to be treated like any other book or not?' [...] Traditional Christian reverence held a view of biblical inspiration which separated it off from every other book; these were the authentic words of God himself."[28] But it was not only historical criticism that called biblical inspiration into question. Perhaps ironically, so too did those who themselves sought and received teachings from spirits.

Spiritualists connected the principle of spirit communication with divine revelation, but their insistence on continuing communication with spirits led them to challenge the Bible itself as an inspired text. As we saw above, "Mr. Smith" claims that "modern Spiritualism does not depend upon the Bible for support, though it demonstrates the plausibility and reasonability of many statements contained in that book".[29] The Bible contains examples of spirit communications, but spirit communication rather than the canonical content of the Bible is the source of authority. E. Louisa Thompson Nosworthy, writing for the spiritualist periodical *The Herald of Progress*, makes this point by citing another spiritualist author:

27. Raia, *The New Prometheans*, 36.

28. Stephen Neill & N.T. Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861–1986*, Oxford 1988, 33–34.

29. *Biblical and Theological Objections to Spiritualism Answered*, 37–38.

> "We do *not* believe that God once spoke and has for ever since been dumb. We do *not* believe that He inspired both the Jewish and Christian Bibles, both in the original and the translations, and that we have there an infallible record of the Divine Word [...] But we *do* believe that in the Bible we possess a strange and tangled, but most deeply valuable, record of the dealings of God with divers men in divers ages. [...] We *do* believe in a present God operating in our midst now as of old; in the same God using similar means for a similar end."[30]

Spiritualists, Nosworthy insists, "profess the highest reverence" for Jesus and his work; they "declare their mission to be but the complement to His, and where they seem to contravene or to traverse some part of Christian faith, they say that it is man's addition, and not God's revelation, or the real teaching of the Christ, that they contradict".[31] This position also, rather radically, means that new spirit communications may be of equal value to those contained in biblical texts.

The importance of assessing a spirit communication thus extends also to critical assessment of texts that purport to contain transcripts of spirit communication, including the Bible. Abraham Wallace explicitly aligns the goal of spiritualism with historical criticism:

> We are not bound to accept as divine truth all communications given by an ancient or modern seer, because he chooses to ascribe to some exalted personality what, perhaps may have originated in his own deeper self, or from some discarnate intelligence external to his own; so that a "Thus saith the Lord" prefaced to any communicated does not necessarily guarantee its divine origin. Many such messages are scarcely worthy of ordinary human intelligence, and indeed may not be in accordance with fact. Therefore all so-called "inspired" writings must be submitted to critical investigation, as is being done at the present day by "higher criticism" in regard to the Gospels.[32]

Wallace here references higher criticism in a manner that might seem to draw on its prestige for some readers (he elsewhere cites Alfred Loisy [1857–1940] and Adolf von Harnack [1851–1930]). Nonetheless, the context ironically grants its authority and exposes a key way in which the historical critic is as subject to critique as the spiritualist. Historical critics are not the only

30. Nosworthy, "Christ a Guide", 204. Italics in original.
31. Nosworthy, "Christ a Guide", 204.
32. Wallace, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 11–12.

ones engaging in "critical investigation" of scripture; spiritualists view themselves as the ones with the sharpened critical capacities to discern truth and, indeed, to access it from external discarnate intelligences.

Spiritualists emphasize the pastness of the biblical text as an ancient document. And yet the principle of spirit communication means that the same spirits communicating in biblical texts may still communicate today and, moreover, that the site of authority is revelation and its interpretation rather than static textual content. In other words, whether or not they understood themselves to be Christian, spiritualists take two things from the spirit communications they were receiving in the nineteenth century. First, spirits offered spiritualists access to the "real teaching of the Christ" or those of other early Christians. Knowledge acquired through spirit communications was knowledge that was not bound by linear temporality and thus temporarily collapsed the differences between the present and any possible past (or future). Second, the content of spirit communications offered spiritualists a means to challenge the authority invested in biblical texts per se by their still incarnated contemporaries who interpreted the Bible differently. Discarnate spirits, with access to all temporalities and without the constraints of embodied existence, could provide knowledge to discerning mediums and their audiences that was viewed as superior to that produced by clerics or this-worldly academics.

Both spiritualism and historical criticism offer challenges, in different ways, to various aspects of Christian dogma and doctrine, and both are embraced by some Christians seeking reform to existing Christian structures as well as by those seeking alternatives to Christianity. Both spiritualists and historical critics argue that modern forms of Christianity had diverged (usually for the worse) from primitive Christianity, and that the Bible is not an infallible record of the Divine Word but rather a deeply valuable, if "strange and tangled", document. Both the historical critic and spiritualists prioritize acquisition of knowledge from a distant source through a medium whose own agency is understood to consist of being a reliable conduit of this knowledge. Modern spiritualism enables us to understand better what haunts normative biblical studies, including suppressed participation in nonlinear temporalities that characterize mediumship.

Spiritualist Afterlives in the Present: Of Hauntology and Queer Temporalities

I began this essay by observing the recent proliferation of popular and scholarly fascinations with ghosts, spectrality, and hauntings. Those who have advocated for approaches that pay attention to what haunts regularly do so with a view to accessing minoritized, marginalized, or suppressed

perspectives.[33] Biblical scholars have also begun to entertain hauntological approaches, often in a manner that intersects with queer theory, to critique perceived shortcomings of historical criticism.[34] Although this scholarship shows little awareness of the ways that spiritualist practices anticipate recent challenges to linear temporalities and calls to attend to what haunts, further consideration of what this new work might unknowingly inherit from spiritualism could be valuable both to make this work more powerful and to avoid potential pitfalls.[35]

Historian Carla Freccero sketches an approach to the writing of history that deliberately seeks to cultivate a mediumistic-like modality, using the metaphoric language of being willing to be haunted: a "willingness to be haunted is an ethical relation to the world, motivated by a concern not only for the past but also for the future, for those who live on the borderlands

33. Without attempting to be comprehensive I have in mind work such as Kathleen Brogan, *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature*, Charlottesville, VA 1998; Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Minneapolis, MN 1997; Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, New York 2005; Carla Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern*, Durham, NC 2005; Hershina Bhana Young, *Haunting Capital: Memory, Text, and the Black Diasporic Body*, Hanover, NH 2006; Elizabeth Freeman (ed.), *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13:2–3 (2007); Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts", *Small Axe* 12:2 (2008), 1–14; José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, New York 2009; Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, Durham, NC 2010; Grace Kyungwon Hong, *Death Beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Politics of Difference*, Minneapolis, MN 2015.

34. See, for example, Laura Donaldson, "Gospel Hauntings: The Postcolonial Demons of New Testament Criticism", in Fernando F. Segovia (ed.), *Postcolonial Biblical Criticism*, New York 2007, 97–113; Tat-siong Benny Liew, *What Is Asian-American Biblical Hermeneutics? Reading the New Testament*, Honolulu, HI 2008; Denise Kimber Buell, "God's Own People: Specters of Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in Early Christian Studies", in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza & Laura S. Nasrallah (eds.), *Prejudice and Christian Beginnings: Investigating Race, Gender, and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies*, Minneapolis, MN 2009, 159–190; Denise Kimber Buell, "Cyborg Memories: An Impure History of Jesus", *Biblical Interpretation* 18 (2010), 313–341; Buell, "Hauntology Meets Posthumanism"; Joseph A. Marchal, "'Making History' Queerly: Touches across Time through a Biblical Behind", *Biblical Interpretation* 19 (2011), 373–395; Peter N. McLellan, "Specters of Mark: The Second Gospel's Ending and Derrida's Messianicity", *Biblical Interpretation* 24 (2016), 357–381; Stephen D. Moore, *Gospel Jesuses and Other Nonhumans: Biblical Criticism Post-Poststructuralism*, Atlanta, GA 2017, 85–106; Matthew J. Ketchum, "Haunting Empty Tombs: Specters of the Emperor and Jesus in the Gospel of Mark", *Biblical Interpretation* 26 (2018), 219–243; Jacqueline M. Hidalgo, "No Future for Biblical Studies? Or, Still Living with a Contingent Apocalypse as *Biblical Interpretation* Turns 25", in Tat-siong Benny Liew (ed.), *Present and Future of Biblical Studies: Celebrating 25 Years of Brill's* Biblical Interpretation, Leiden 2018, 133–155; Kent L. Brintnall, Joseph A. Marchal & Stephen D. Moore (eds.), *Sexual Disorientations: Queer Temporalities, Affects, Theologies*, New York 2018; *Biblical Interpretation* 28:4–5 (2020).

35. As Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past*, 154, 157, has shown, not only is it the case that "spiritualism as a practice offered historiographic techniques that challenge secular history itself", but also spiritualism as a form of religious experience may reveal "an alternative history of nonsecular sexualities". See pp. 154–176 for her larger argument about the relevance of spiritualism for the history of sexuality.

without a home". Such an orientation is "characterized by a penetrative reciprocity, a becoming-object for an other subject and a resultant joy or ecstasy".[36] Although Freccero locates this in relation to queer theory and politics, the effect sounds a lot like becoming a medium who does not reduce self to the other but rather opens oneself to the temporary penetration by spirits in order to enable them to communicate with those in the still-embodied material world.

As she concludes, Freccero calls specific attention to the passivity a hauntological approach entails:

> If this spectral approach to history and historiography is queer, it might also be objected that it counsels a kind of passivity, both in [a] sense of self-shattering and also potentially in the more mundane sense of the opposite of a political injunction to act. In this respect it is also queer, as only a passive politics could be said to be. And yet, the passivity – which is also a form of patience and passion – is not quite the same thing as quietism. Rather, it is a suspension, a waiting, an attending to the world's arrivals (through, in part, its returns).[37]

Again, Freccero's reference points are not spiritualism, but the queer passivity she counsels resembles discussions of mediumship.

Within biblical studies, Peter McLellan offers an example of a scholar taking up Freccero's call. He links the transwomen of colour displaced by the "prostitution free zones" in Washington, DC and the possessed Gerasenes living in the imperial cities known as the Decapolis as portrayed in Mk. 5:1–20. But his argument is not to read the latter through the former (or the converse) but to challenge the historical critical conventional "cut" between temporalities, calling for an "alliance" across "temporal-spatial divisions" and "between past spaces and present spaces, between sacred texts and lived realities. [...] This alliance, therefore, calls attention to the biblical interpreter's act of understanding the Decapolis as 'over there' and 'back then' as the same violence that would push the transwoman of color out of their own neighborhoods".[38] If we embrace this passivity as a way to do biblical studies we do not simply enact a queer temporality, a refusal to straighten time into a linear progression of past, present, and future; we also re-enact, even if in an apparently secular form, the kinds of unsettling of linear time sought after at each séance or sitting with a medium. We might benefit from

36. Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern*, 75, 102.

37. Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern*, 104.

38. Peter N. McLellan, "Queer Necropolitics in the Decapolis: Here and There, Now and Then", *Biblical Interpretation* 28:4–5 (2020), forthcoming. Quotation from the conclusion.

further consideration of what it means to call for scholars to act more like mediums. Mediumistic relations to the past may perhaps contain positive ethical possibilities but I am unsure that they guarantee such: spiritualists themselves exhorted the importance of assessing whether a spirit communication was fraudulent, either due to the medium or the level or nature of the spirit. The answer may not be to reaffirm historical critical principles but even there, as I have shown, the spectre of the medium persists. ▲

SUMMARY

This essay posits that historical criticism is indebted to a mediumistic relation to the past, one that needs to be understood in the historical context of the flourishing of modern spiritualism as an alternative modern critical modality. Spiritualist views of Jesus and Christian origins shed light on the formation and occlusions of historical criticism and how it incorporates, but also suppresses, forms of knowledge and temporality central to modern spiritualism. We find a shared vocabulary of concern across spiritualist and historical critical scholarship about inspiration, authority, and ability to bring into the present ideas from other temporalities. Both historical critics and spiritualists prioritize acquisition of knowledge from distant sources through a medium whose own agency is understood to consist of being a reliable conduit of this knowledge. Many spiritualists and historical critics argue that modern forms of Christianity had diverged (usually for the worse) from primitive Christianity, and that the Bible is not an infallible record of the Divine Word but rather a deeply valuable, if strange and tangled, document. By centring modern spiritualism, we can explore how its practices, ideas, and tropes have been inherited, activated, or suppressed in the forms of biblical interpretation that became and remain dominant and better assess these legacies and their alternatives.