

William Stainton Moses

William Stainton Moses (1839-1892) was an Anglican priest and teacher who described his experiences with mediumship in a private circle. The phenomena were witnessed by few, as Moses gave seances only for close friends, and did not submit to scientific investigation. But the strength and variety of the phenomena, together with his reputation for complete integrity, led him to be regarded by some as one of the most significant mediums of the period.

Personal Background

Moses was born in Lincolnshire, England. He went to Exeter College, Oxford, in 1858, but became seriously ill before completing his undergraduate studies, and spent a year convalescing in Europe. He returned to Oxford and gained his Master's degree in 1863, before being ordained as a clergyman in the Church of England. He then served as a curate first at Maughold and Douglas, Isle of Man, then at Dorsetshire and Salisbury. Afflicted with throat problems that prevented him from preaching, he returned to London in 1870 to convalesce. While there, he tutored Charlton Templeman Speer, the son of Dr and Mrs Stanhope Speer. In 1871, he was appointed to teach English at University College School, London, a position he held until 1889.

According to Frederic Myers, in 1875 Serjeant Cox founded a 'Psychological Society', with both Myers and Moses as members; however, it never got off the ground and was abandoned at Cox's death in 1879. When the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) was founded three years later, Moses was part of the organizing group and was made a vice-president. However, he took little interest in the purely scientific objectives of the SPR and resigned in 1886 in protest at what he considered unreasonable and inappropriate controls in the SPR's study of the medium William Eglinton.

Moses was instrumental in the formation of the London Spiritualist Alliance, now The College of Psychic Studies, in London in 1883, and edited its journal *Light* for some years.

Like many other Anglican clergymen, Moses initially frowned upon mediumship, considering it either fraudulent or demonic. (When he first heard of Lord Adare's 1870 book about the Scottish-American medium Daniel Dunglas Home, he called it the 'dreariest twaddle'.) However, after reading Robert Dale Owen's *The Debateable Land* – recommended to him by the wife of his friend Stanhope Speer – Moses became curious, and, along with Speer himself, who at the time was also highly sceptical, began visiting mediums. At a sitting in April 1872, Moses received evidential information from a departed friend, an experience that converted him to Spiritualism.

It gave me a faith – I will say a knowledge – which no amount of after-experience has served to shake. From that time to this I have never wavered, though I have seen much to perplex me, much that greatly offends good taste. Though I have heard of deception, and though I believe that fraud exists; though I see reason to question all the round conclusions of some Spiritualists, and to assign a wider area to the realm of cause that they are disposed to concede; though I meet problems day by day which I cannot solve, and difficulties which only advanced knowledge and experience can fully grasp; in spite of all this, the conclusions of that night, supported and confirmed by many an after-experience, remains firm and unshaken.^[1]

Moses visited other mediums and began to realize that he, too, possessed mediumistic ability. On one occasion he felt an invisible hand grasp his arm and move it about violently, in spite of his attempts to control what he then thought of as 'unconscious muscular action'. Soon after this he paid his respects at the home of a recently-departed friend: when he entered the room where the corpse lay, the spirit form of the friend stepped forward with a smile and extended his hand to greet him.

I saw him with clairvoyant sense as really as my natural eye discerned the objects that surrounded me, and that not once only, but on repeated occasions. This, I need not say, deepened my faith, and strengthened its foundations.^[2]

Friends, including the Speers, a lawyer named Serjeant Cox, and a Dr. Thompson, formed a circle that met regularly at the Speers' home to observe phenomena facilitated by Moses. Among those described by Charlton Speer were:

- communicating raps, which answered questions and gave messages by means of the sitters reciting the alphabet
- many and varied musical sounds, including some not recognized by Charlton Speer, an accomplished musician
- various scents emanating from a substance oozing from the Moses's head
- movements and levitations of heavy furniture

- direct writing (a pencil recording messages independent of any visible hand holding it)
- apports (objects floating into the locked room through the walls from other rooms)
- trance voice (inspirational addresses from the spirits expressed through the entranced Moses)
- direct voice (spirit voices coming from the air above them and independent of the medium's vocal cords)
- luminous hands and lights

The communicators who delivered the messages described themselves as a band of spirits led by 'Imperator', who was recorded as saying in an early sitting:

I, myself, Imperator Servus Dei, am the chief of a band of forty-nine spirits, the presiding and controlling spirit, under whose guidance and direction the others work. I come from the seventh sphere to work out the will of the Almighty; and, when my work is complete, I shall return to those spheres of bliss from which none returns again to earth. But this will not be until the medium's work on earth is finished, and his mission on earth exchanged for a wider one in the spheres.^[3]

A more frequent communicator was another of the band named Rector, who seemingly existed at a less-exalted level, and was therefore more easily able to communicate. Moses's handwriting differed depending on the spirit controlling his hand while communicating. Referring to the messages that came by means of voice in their sittings, Charlton Speer wrote:

I can only say that they were delivered in a dignified, temperate, clear, and convincing tone, and that though the voice proceeded from the medium, it was always immediately apparent that the personality addressing us was not that of the medium. The voice was different, and the ideas were often not in accordance with those held at the time by the medium. An important fact, too, was that although many spirits exercised this power of control, the voice which spoke was always different; and in the case of those spirits which controlled regularly we came to know perfectly well which intelligence was communicating, by the tone of the voice and method of enunciation.^[4]

In a January 1873 sitting, Speer recorded:

Séance in red light. Great movements of the table. It was repeatedly lifted up to the level of our faces, even without touching it. Subdued light, quite sufficient to see the table and our hands. The table was moved and floated several times; we could watch in light its every movement.^[5]

According to Speer, the table was an extremely heavy dining table made of solid Honduras mahogany. On another occasion Speer reported that the table 'danced a jig'.^[6]

These strange physical phenomena, the spirits told the group, were of secondary importance.

Such phenomenal manifestations are necessary to reach men who can assimilate no other evidence. They are not any sort of proof of our claims, no evidence of the moral beauty of our teachings; but they are the means best adapted to reach the materialist.^[7]

Many phenomena occurred in clear light and were not part of any sitting. Cox reported that on June 2, 1873, Moses came to his residence and while they were in the dining room they heard frequent and loud raps on the heavy mahogany table.

Presently the solid table quivered as if with an ague fit. Then it swayed to and fro so violently as almost to dislocate the big pillar-like legs, of which there are eight. Then it moved forward about three inches. I looked under it to be sure that it was not touched; but still it moved, and still the blows were loud upon it.

Cox added that Moses was as astonished as he was, and said nothing like it had ever happened before. Cox suggested that they experiment and the two men stood upright, Moses on one side of the table and Cox on the other side, each about two feet from the table, their hands about eight inches above it.

In one minute it rocked violently. Then it moved over the carpet a distance of seven inches. Then it rose three inches from the floor on the side on which Moses was standing. Then it rose equally on my side. Finally, Moses held his hands four inches over the end of the table, and asked that it would rise and touch his hand three times. It did so; and then, in accordance with the like request, it rose to my hand, held at the other end to same height above it, and in the same manner.^[8]

In a sitting in September 1873, Mrs Speer recorded that a spirit called Mentor, another of the Imperator band, showed several beautiful spirit lights. They observed Mentor's hand holding the light, and saw his arm – described as 'long, thin,

and not at all like the medium's' – up to his elbow.^[9]

In a sitting the following year, Speer recorded an admirable specimen of zither playing. The spirit musician performed a short unbarred composition called a free prelude. He commented: 'The whole thing was most marvellous, for there is no zither in our house, and it is an instrument that cannot be mistaken.'^[10] In his biography, Charlton Speer, a member of the Royal Academy of Music, said that Moses had no musical talent whatsoever and that there definitely were no instruments in the house that could have made the musical sounds he heard.

In May 1874, Moses met with Myers and his colleague Edmund Gurney, members of the Sidgwick Group that founded the SPR eight years later. The pair were profoundly impressed, as their group's experience with physical mediums hitherto had inspired little confidence.

Standing as we were in the attitude natural at the commencement of such inquiries, under such conditions as were then attainable an attitude of curiosity tempered by a vivid perception of difficulty and drawback, we now met a man of university education, of manifest sanity and probity, who vouched to us for a series of phenomena – occurring to himself, and with no doubtful or venal aid – which seemed at least to prove, in confusedly intermingled form, three main theses unknown to science. These were (1) the existence in the human spirit of hidden powers of insight and of communication; (2) the personal survival and near presence of the departed; and (3) interference, due to unknown agencies, with the ponderable world. He spoke frankly and fully; he showed his notebooks, he referred us to his friends; he inspired a belief which was at once sufficient, and which is still sufficient, to prompt to action.^[11]

However, Moses could not be persuaded to give demonstrations of his gift outside of his circle of friends; his primary interest was to learn what the spirits had to say about their world. During his first year of mediumship, these messages were recorded by Mrs Speer as they came, primarily by means of rappings and the trance voice. After a year or so, Moses developed a facility for automatic writing, and began communicating directly with the spirits in the privacy of his home.

I never could command the writing. It came unsought usually; and when I did seek it, as often as not I was unable to obtain it. A sudden impulse, coming I knew not how, led me to sit down and prepare to write. Where the messages were in regular course, I was accustomed to devote the first hour of each day to sitting for their reception.^[12]

He added that he cultivated the ability of occupying his mind with other things during the time the writing was going on, such as reading an obscure book.

Views of Moses

Doubts about Moses were expressed by Frank Podmore, an early SPR member, in his 1902 book *Modern Spiritualism* – a work that takes a generally sceptical view of mediumship and other psi phenomena. As he did with DD Home and other mediums, Podmore speculated how Moses might have performed the tricks fraudulently, without having witnessed the phenomena himself.^[13]

By contrast, Frederic Myers and other SPR members were convinced of Moses's essential decency and honesty, and were sceptical that a man of his standing would have thought it worth practising tricks on his close friends and associates on repeated occasions over a long period. In his paper on Moses, published in the SPR Proceedings of 1893, Myers quoted testimonials which he solicited from professional colleagues and others, and in general states:

More important, however, than the precise degree of attractiveness, or of spiritual refinement, in Mr. Moses' personal demeanour are the fundamental questions of sanity and probity. On these points neither I myself, nor, so far as I know, any person acquainted with Mr. Moses, has ever entertained any doubt. "However perplexed for an explanation," says Mr. Massey, "the crassest prejudice has recoiled from ever-suggesting a doubt of the truth and honesty of Stainton Moses." "I believe that he was wholly incapable of deceit," writes Mr. H. J. Hood, barrister-at law, who knew him for many years.^[14]

Myers said he felt bound to add that he had heard those who disagreed with him describe him, in his later years, as an 'an obstinate, confused, and irritable controversialist', and added:

I have heard him described as lacking in the grace of humility, and in that spirituality of tastes and character which should seem appropriate to one living much in the commerce of the Unseen. But I have never heard anyone who had even the slightest acquaintance with Mr. Moses impugn his sanity or his sincerity, his veracity or his honour.^[15]

Podmore's attack was rebutted in some detail by Italian researcher Ernesto Bozzano.^[16]

Final Years

Moses's physical mediumship declined during the late 1870s, probably the result of declining health, including gout, and the concomitant loss of vitality. It ended sometime around 1880. However, he continued to practice automatic writing, which recorded teachings on a wide range of subjects relating to the material life and the spirit world. These were compiled by Moses in two books, *Spirit Teachings*, published in 1883, and *More Spirit Teachings*, compiled by Cordelia Grylls from *Light* and eventually published in 1928.^[17] (*Spirit Teachings* in particular has become a classic in Spiritualist literature).

Moses himself was at first considerably distressed by the content of the communications, some of which were in direct conflict with the Christian teachings that formed the basis of his faith. 'Imperator' told him:

Friend, you must discriminate between God's truths and man's glosses. We do not dishonour the Lord Jesus – before whose exalted majesty we bow – by refusing to acquiesce in a fiction which He would disown, and which man has forced upon His name. No, assuredly: but they who from a strict adherence to the literal text of Scripture – a text which they have not understood, and the spirit of which they have never grasped – have dishonoured the Great Father of Him, and of all alike, and have impiously, albeit ignorantly, derogated from the honour due to the Supreme alone ... The holding of a narrow, cold, dogmatic creed, in all its rigid lifeless literalism, cramps the soul, dwarfs its spirituality, clogs its progress, and stunts its growth. "The letter," says your Scripture, "the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life." Hence we denounce such views of God as are contained in the fable of a material hell; and we proclaim to you purer and more rational ideas than are contained in the orthodox notions of atonement and vicarious sacrifice.^[18]

Moses wondered how such spirits all spoke English. In reply, several addressed him in different languages. He wrote:

They were not intelligible to me, but were interpreted by Imperator. He also showed me how spirits commune with each other by transfusion of thought. Imperator explained that the sounds could be made in the same way, without any aid from material.^[19]

When one of the members of the circle asked why better evidence of the existence of God and the spirit world is not given, the reply came:

We have frequently said that God reveals Himself as man can bear it. It must needs be so. He is revealed through a human medium, and can only be made known in such measure as the medium can receive the communication. It is impossible that knowledge of God should outstrip man's capacity. Were we now to tell you – if we could – of our more perfect theology it would seem to you strange and unintelligible. We shall, by slow degrees, instill into your mind so much of truth as you can receive, and then you shall see your present errors. But that is not yet. Indeed, since the conception which each frames for himself is to him his God, it cannot be that revelation can be in advance of capacity. It is in the nature of things impossible.^[20]

Moses asked for the earthly identifications of Imperator and the others. 'Imperator' initially refused, maintaining that to reveal their earthly names would result in casting additional doubt on the validity of the messages.

These names are but convenient symbols for influences brought to bear upon you. In some cases, the influence is not centralized; it is impersonal, as you would say. In many cases the messages given you are not the product of any one mind, but are the collective influence of a number. Many who have been concerned with you are but the vehicles to you of a yet higher influence which is obliged to reach you in that way. We deliberate, we consult, and in many instances you receive the impression of our united thought.^[21]

However, 'Imperator' later revealed their names, advising Moses that they should not be mentioned in the book he would write. It was not until after Moses's death that the identities were made public by AW Trethewy in a book, *The Controls of Stainton Moses*. 'Imperator' was said to be the Old Testament prophet Malachias; 'Rector' was Hippolytus; 'Imperator' took directions from 'Preceptor', who was Elijah, and who in turn communed directly with Jesus. Other communicators in the band of 49 were said to include various major biblical figures.

Other books authored by Moses (under the pseudonym 'M. A. (Oxon)' were *Spirit Identity* (1879), *Higher Aspects of Spiritualism* (1880), and *Psychography* (1882).

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Myers, Frederic. The Experiences of W. Stainton Moses 1 & 2, *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 9, 1893-4, pp. 245-353; *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 11, 1895, pp. 24-113. Extracts from the notes and diaries of a leading spiritualist are published posthumously in two articles, offering substantial evidence of séance phenomena, automatic writings and trance utterances in the period 1872-83. In the first, Moses's life as a curate and teacher are briefly described, also his relationship with Dr and Mrs Speer in whose presence much of the phenomena was witnessed. Testimonials of his honesty and sanity are given. Three types of personalities communicating during the séances are described (257): recently deceased; earlier generations (including a friend of Erasmus); 'higher spirits' who call themselves 'emanations from higher spheres' (258). Extracts from Moses's writings and statements from other witnesses describe furniture levitations (259); apports (266); scents (269); lights (273); sounds (277). Séance notes are given (283); others present include William Crookes and D.D Home (306), when substantial materialisations are recorded. Finally, the author considers the possibility of fraud (340), which he concludes is in the highest degree unlikely.

The second article gives more extracts from séance notebooks (26) and a description of automatic writings (64). The rest of the paper concerns the communications as evidence of survival, giving Moses's own reflections (70) and other apparently convincing evidential communications (96), including one from the recently-deceased Dr Speer involving a pet-name (103). On the other hand the possibility that the 'higher spirits' have no identity beyond Moses's subliminal consciousness is also considered (104).

Correspondence. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 6, 1893-94, pp. 200-7, 214-23, 232-7, 251-6, 265-72. Abstract and Discussion, *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 6, 1894, pp. 175-6, 228-30, 261-2, 274-80.

References

Footnotes

- 1.^ Moses (Spirit Identity), p. 126
- 2.^ _____p. 129
- 3.^ Moses (More Spirit Teachings), Part II

- 4.^ Moses (Spirit Teachings) preface, xvii
- 5.^ Bozzano, p. 87 (SPR Proceedings, Vol. IX, p. 301)
- 6.^ Bozzano, p. 85 (SPR Proceedings, Vol. IX, p. 297)
- 7.^ Moses (More Spirit Teachings), part II
- 8.^ Doyle, pp. 49-50 (SPR Proceedings, Vol., IX, p. 260)
- 9.^ Bozzano, p. 112
- 10.^ Bozzano, p. 97 (SPR Proceedings, Vol. IX, p. 338)
- 11.^ Myers, p. 371
- 12.^ Moses (Spirit Teachings), pg. 6
- 13.^ Podmore, pp. 286-287
- 14.^ Myers, 'The Experiences of W. Stainton Moses', p. 247
- 15.^ Myers, 'The Experiences of W. Stainton Moses', p. 252
- 16.^ Bozzano
- 17.^ Grylls used material earlier published in *Light* by Mrs Speer, based on notes made by her at seances where Imperator and other guides spoke. Unlike *Spiritual Teachings*, which was carefully edited by Moses and derives from his notebooks, which still survive, *More Spirit Teachings* has passed through several editorial hands, none of them Moses.
- 18.^ Moses (Spirit Teaching), pp. 90-91
- 19.^ Moses (More Spirit Teachings), Part III
- 20.^ Moses (Spirit Teaching), p. 94
- 21.^ Moses (More Spirit Teachings), Part II