

THE FIRST GHOSTS: MOST ANCIENT OF LEGACIES

Irving Finkel

HODDER & STOUGHTON, £25,
HARDBACK

ISBN 978-1529303261



Ancient Mesopotamian literature, written in cuneiform from around 3000 BC, is haunted by omens and ghosts. Most of the sources on ghosts come from the 1st millennium BC, written in Akkadian, but some texts and ideas hark back to even older texts written in Sumerian.

Irving Finkel was first drawn to the subject, decades ago, while writing his doctoral thesis on Babylonian exorcistic magic, including cuneiform spells for driving ghosts away. He subsequently moved to the British Museum, and is now among the world's authorities on cuneiform, known for his entertaining style of presentation to the general public, and for his fascination with the Flood, Noah's Ark, and board games. Sometimes, Finkel admits, he has crouched silently in the darkness of evening at the top level of the museum's Victorian Arched Room library, 'like a wildlife photographer at a waterhole', hopefully awaiting a spectral figure who is said to have been observed there more than once. 'For me, though, no shady visitor.' So there could hardly be a better guide to this esoteric subject – witness his latest study: *The First Ghosts*. Deeply scholarly but mostly accessible to the patient general reader, the book is conceived 'to seek out', with the help of archaeology and especially

the most ancient writing, 'the very first ghosts within our reach.'

Finkel argues that ghosts probably arrived among humans by the Upper Palaeolithic period, perhaps as early as 50,000 BC, and that they arise from the habit of 'burial with bits'. This custom implies the existence of a human being beyond his or her death. Second, 'something escapes the grasp of the corpse and goes somewhere'. Third, this something can reasonably be expected to be able to reappear.

Among the many ancient Mesopotamian burials (most famously the royal tombs at Ur excavated by Leonard Woolley from the 1920s) and the hundreds of cuneiform tablets (including the Epic of Gilgamesh, and his understanding of the underworld) that Finkel discusses in detail, consider this one from the British Museum's massive cuneiform collections. It comes from the library of Nineveh, devastated in 612 BC. For the last 150 years, scholars such as Finkel have been labouring over its 15 rejoined pieces and fragments (shown in a disconcerting colour photograph); more are no doubt still to be identified or found. It includes the following vivid incantation to be read by a haunted sufferer, in the presence of a professional exorcist: 'Ghost who keeps appearing to me, whether you be a strange ghost, or a forgotten ghost, or a roving ghost who has no one to care for him, whether

you be a ghost who died as a result of a sin against a god or an offence against the king or a ghost who died when his fate was completed; do not approach, do not come close to my bed, may the wall hold you back, may the door turn back your breast.'

As Finkel observes, 'The crucial point behind the Mesopotamian welter of ominous predictions is that they were compiled to enable and facilitate solution: they lead to avoidance, prevention or deflection of misfortune through ritual. There is no flirting here with spine-chilling, ineluctable Hollywood fate.'

Why, despite the modern prevalence of science, do we remain gripped by ghosts just like the ancient Mesopotamians? Religions obviously play a part in this, given that all the religious systems of the world maintain life survives death as a 'spirit'. Presumably 'ghost' describes a visible spirit. However, maintains Finkel, even without believing in a religion most people believe in ghosts, whether they admit this openly or not. 'The conviction that some part of a human being triumphs over annihilation by death and the dissolution of the body is intrinsic to the species, hard-wired at the deepest level from the start, and inextricable.' Perhaps one day he will see a ghostly figure among the cuneiform tablets at the British Museum to which he has devoted his scholarly and literary life.

Andrew Robinson