

William Stainton Moses (1839-1892)

William Stainton Moses (November 5, 1839 to September 5, 1892) was an ordained clergyman of the Church of England, a pioneering psychical researcher, and a gifted medium. He is most remembered for the latter, producing both physical and mental phenomena.

Born in Lincolnshire, England, Moses, who went by Stainton, his mother's maiden name, began his studies at Exeter College, Oxford, in 1858. However, because of health problems, he was advised to convalesce in the warmer climates of Europe and he spent considerable time at the old Greek monastery of Mount Athos before returning to Oxford, taking his Master's degree in 1863 and being ordained as a clergyman. After serving as a curate on the Isle of Man for some five years, Moses was forced to return to London because of health issues. While convalescing, Moses tutored Charlton Templeman Speer (the son of Dr. and Mrs. Stanhope Speer), who would later become his biographer. Upon recovery, Moses was appointed English Master in University College, London, a position he would hold until 1889.

In Moses' biography, Charlton Speer stated that Moses and his father frequently discussed religious matters and both were gradually drifting into an unorthodox, almost agnostic, frame of mind. Mrs. Speer had taken an interest in Spiritualism and persuaded her husband and Moses to attend a séance with Miss Lottie Fowler. During that sitting, on April 2, 1872, Moses received some very evidential information about a friend who had died. His curiosity aroused, Moses attended other séances, including some with D. D. Home, the renowned Scottish-American physi-

cal medium. Moses had earlier referred to Lord Adare's book on Home as the "dreariest twaddle" he had ever come across. Dr. Speer, who had shared Moses' early view, calling it all "stuff and nonsense," joined Moses in the investigation of Spiritualism.



After several months, Moses was convinced that he was indeed communicating with the spirit world, and soon thereafter he began to realize that he was a medium himself. A small circle of friends gathered regularly to observe and record the phenomena. They included himself, Dr. and Mrs. Speer, a Dr. Thompson, Serjeant Cox, a lawyer, and several others. Occasionally, William Crookes (later Sir William), the distinguished chemist and psychical researcher, would attend the circle.

As reported by Cox, Moses (or the spirits working through him) could, by simply placing his hands on it, levitate a large mahogany table which otherwise required the strength of two men to move it an inch. The spirits levitated Moses at least three times, on one occasion raising him on

the table and then lifting him from the table to an adjacent sofa.

Other phenomena reported by Charlton, a renowned musician, included a great variety of communicating raps, numerous lights, luminous hands, musical sounds, direct writing (no hand holding the pencil), apports, the passage of matter through matter, the direct voice, and trance voice, the latter including inspirational messages given by various spirits through the entranced Moses. Of the latter, Speer wrote: "Touching the manner of these addresses, 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."¹

Charlton recalled one occurrence when he and Moses were sitting one night as usual. "I had in front of me, with my hand resting upon it, a piece of notepaper, with a pencil close by," Charlton related. "Suddenly Stainton Moses, who was sitting exactly opposite me, exclaimed, 'There is a very bright column of light behind you.' Soon afterwards he said that the column of light had developed into a spirit-form. I asked him if the face was familiar to him and he replied in the negative, at the same time describing the head and features. When the séance was concluded, I examined my sheet of paper, which my hand had never left, and found on it a message and signature. The name was that of a distinguished musician who died in the early part of the present century. I purposely refrain from specifying him, as

the use of great names very frequently leads to results quite different from those intended."

Charlton then asked Moses, without showing him the written message, whether he thought he could recognize the spirit if he saw a portrait of him. Moses replied that he thought he could. Charlton then gave him several albums containing likenesses of friends dead and alive and also portraits of various celebrities. "On coming to the photograph of the composer in question he at once said, without hesitation, 'That is the face of the spirit I saw behind you.' Then, for the first time, I showed him the message and signature. I regarded the whole incident as a very fair proof of spirit-identity."²

While different spirits came through, the chief communicator called himself Imperator. Mrs. Speer did the recording of the trance messages, but she said it was impossible for her to capture the beauty and refinement of the manifestations or the power and dignity of Imperator's influence. "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," Mrs. Speer recorded the words coming through Moses' voice at one of the early sittings. "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 till the medium's work on earth is finished, and his mission on earth exchanged for a wider one in the spheres."³

Imperator added that spirits named Rector and Doctor were his immediate assistants. He had come, he said, to explain the spirit world, how it is controlled, and the way in which information is conveyed to humans. "Man must judge according to the light of reason that is in him." Imperator voiced through Moses. "That is the ultimate standard, and the progressive soul will receive what the ignorant or prejudiced will reject. God's truth is forced on none."⁴

On March 30, 1873, spirit messages started coming through Moses' hand by means of "automatic writing." This method was adopted, Moses was informed, for convenience purposes and so that he could preserve a connected body of teaching. Those teachings were compiled in two books, *Spirit Teachings*, published by Moses in 1883, and *More Spirit Teachings*, collected and published after his death in 1892 by Mrs. Speer. Moses also edited *Light*, a publication of the London Spiritualist Alliance, of which he helped found.

In 1875, Moses, Serjeant Cox, and Frederic W. H. Myers formed a "Psychological Society" to seriously discuss the various phenomena, but upon the death of Cox in 1879, the society was dissolved. "When, however, in 1882, Professor [William] Barrett consulted [Moses] as to the possibility of founding a new society, under better auspices, he warmly welcomed the plan," Myers explained in his 1903 book, *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*. "Edmund Gurney and I were asked to join, but made it a condition that the consent of Professor Sidgwick to act as our President should first be obtained. Under his guidance the Society for Psychical Research assumed a more cautious and critical attitude than was congenial to Stainton Moses' warm heart, strong convictions, and impulsive temper, and in 1886 he left the Society, in consequence of the publication in the *Proceedings* of certain comments on phenomena occurring through the agency of the so-called 'medium' Eglinton."⁵

Myers continued: "With the even tenor of this straightforward and reputable life was woven a chain of mysteries which, in whatever way they may be explained, make that life one of the most extraordinary which our century has seen."⁶

Myers explained that he and Gurney were introduced to Moses on May 9, 1874 by Lady Mount-Temple, who had become aware of their interest in psychical matters. She told them that she knew a man of honor who had been experiencing some phenomena. "That evening was epoch-making in Gurney's life and mine," Myers

wrote. "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 known 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; (3) interference, due to unknown agencies, with the ponderable world."⁷

Myers went on to say that while Moses might have been lacking in judgment when it came to strictly scientific observation, he had no doubt that the messages recorded by Moses' hand were in no way fabricated.

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¹ Moses, William Stainton, *Spirit Teachings*, Arno Press, 1976 (reprinted from 1924 edition published by London Spiritualist Alliance), p. xvii.

² Meilach, <http://www.meilach.com/spiritual/books>.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Myers, F. W. H., *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death*, University Books, Inc., 1961 (reprint of 1903 book), p. 372.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 373.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 371.