WORKING PAPER 006

The Figure in the Room

Sleep Paralysis, the Sensed Presence, and the Question of Spiritual Attack

Alisha Bradley, M.A.

October 2026 | Version 1.0

Independent working paper. This paper presents developing hypotheses, research questions, and interdisciplinary inquiry. It has not undergone peer review.

Abstract

Sleep paralysis is one of those experiences that becomes more interesting the closer I look at it. Science can explain a great deal about what is happening: a person becomes conscious while the body is still in the muscle paralysis of REM sleep. But many people describe something more than simply being unable to move. They describe a presence. A figure. Footsteps. Pressure on the chest. A voice. The overwhelming sense that someone - or something - is in the room with them. Across cultures, the details change, but the basic pattern appears again and again. This paper asks a question I do not think should be dismissed too quickly: Does the biology of sleep paralysis fully explain the sensed presence, or could the biological state describe the conditions of the experience without necessarily settling what the person is experiencing? I examine what sleep science explains well, what remains curious, and why Christian theology gives me reason to keep the question of spiritual oppression open without claiming that every episode of sleep paralysis is demonic.

Author's Note

I am interested in the places where psychology, neuroscience, the physical body, and the spiritual world seem to meet. Sleep paralysis is especially compelling to me because the biological component is not in dispute. Something measurable is happening in the body and brain. The question is whether that measurable process tells us everything there is to know about the experience.

My purpose is not to replace sleep medicine, psychiatric care, or neurological explanation with a spiritual one. It is to ask whether a biological mechanism and a spiritual interpretation must always be treated as mutually exclusive. I want to distinguish what science has established, what people consistently report, what Christian theology allows us to consider, and what remains an open question.

The Part I Cannot Get Past

The part of sleep paralysis that stays with me is not the paralysis itself.

It is the figure in the room.

A person wakes up. They know where they are. They may recognize the bedroom, the bed, even the light coming through the window. But they cannot move or speak. Then, for many people, the experience becomes strangely social: they sense that someone else is there.

Sometimes the presence is never seen, but the person feels absolutely certain it is nearby. Sometimes it appears as a dark or shadow-like human figure. Some people report footsteps, whispering, breathing, voices, touch, movement, or the sensation of something sitting on the chest or pressing against the body.

The reports are not identical, and I do not want to pretend they are. Culture clearly affects what people believe the presence is. But the recurring structure is striking enough that researchers themselves use terms such as the 'intruder' experience and the 'incubus phenomenon.' A systematic review describes the incubus phenomenon as an

almost stereotyped experience involving an apparent being, chest pressure, paralysis, fear, and sometimes aggressive or sexual behavior (Molendijk et al., 2017).

So the question is not built only on folklore. The phenomenon itself is documented. What I want to understand is why this particular state of the sleeping brain so often becomes an encounter with an apparent agent.

What Sleep Science Explains

There is a strong biological explanation for sleep paralysis, and I think it deserves to be understood before anything supernatural is proposed.

During REM sleep, the brain normally suppresses most skeletal muscle movement. This keeps us from physically acting out our dreams. In sleep paralysis, conscious awareness returns before that muscle inhibition has fully released. The person is awake enough to know what is happening, but the body is still temporarily operating as though it is in REM sleep.

That explains why the person cannot move.

REM physiology can also help explain other parts of the experience. Dream imagery can spill into waking awareness. Changes in breathing and sleeping position may contribute to chest pressure or the feeling of restricted breathing. And imagine becoming conscious, realizing you cannot move, and not knowing why. The brain's threat systems have every reason to become highly alert. Researchers have proposed that this combination of REM imagery, fear, bodily sensation, and hypervigilance can help produce the intruder experience. Disturbances in how the brain represents the body may also contribute to floating, movement, or out-of-body sensations (Denis et al., 2024; Olunu et al., 2018).

That is a coherent explanation. It accounts for a great deal. But understanding the mechanism that creates the vulnerable state still leaves me with another question.

Why Does the Brain Create Someone?

Why a presence?

If the brain is confused, frightened, and partly dreaming, why does the experience so often become not merely a strange color, a random sound, or an abstract dream fragment, but an agent - someone or something that seems to be watching, approaching, threatening, touching, or intentionally acting?

Recent reviews describe the recurring reports of frightening presences and shadowy human-like figures and suggest that our shared neurobiology may explain why similar experiences appear across cultures (Denis et al., 2024). That is entirely possible. Human beings share a nervous system. Similar brain states can produce similar perceptual experiences.

But I think there are two questions here that are easy to collapse into one. The first is: What is happening in the brain and body when this experience occurs? The second is: Does explaining the brain state automatically tell us whether the perceived presence is entirely generated by the brain?

Those are not necessarily the same question.

The Cross-Cultural Pattern

Sleep paralysis has been interpreted spiritually for centuries, in cultures separated by geography, language, and religion. Researchers have documented traditions involving the Old Hag in Newfoundland, ghost oppression in China, vengeful spirits in Japan, jinn in Egypt, evil spirits in Ethiopia, pressing spirits among Hmong communities, demonic beings in Nigeria, the Brazilian Pisadeira, the Turkish Karabasan, Cambodian ghost attacks, and the Italian Pandafeche (de Sá & Mota-Rolim, 2016; Jalal et al., 2021).

I want to be precise about what this does and does not show. It would be inaccurate to say that people all over the world are describing exactly the same being. They are not. Culture shapes the name, appearance, story, and meaning attached to the experience.

What does repeat is something narrower: paralysis, fear, pressure or suffocation, intrusion, sensed presence, and the impression of human-like or supernatural agency.

One explanation is that the biology is shared and culture supplies the interpretation. The same nervous system produces the same basic experience, and people give that experience a name drawn from the world they know.

But another question remains possible: What if different cultures are using different language for experiences that sometimes involve the same broad category of hostile non-physical presence?

The existing evidence cannot decide that question. But I do not think the cross-cultural record becomes uninteresting simply because culture influences interpretation.

What Christianity Allows Me to Ask

Christian theology already includes a category that modern sleep science does not: hostile spiritual intelligence. The New Testament presents demonic and unclean spirits as personal agents, not simply metaphors for difficult emotions. That matters to the question I am asking.

At the same time, Scripture never says that REM sleep paralysis is demonic. There is no verse that tells us a shadow figure seen during sleep paralysis is a demon. I do not want to make the Bible say something it does not say.

The theological question is broader. If Christianity is correct that spiritual beings exist and that demonic oppression is real, could a person ever experience spiritual oppression while the body is in an unusual state of sleep, perception, and reduced physical control?

That possibility interests me because my larger work asks a very simple question: If spiritual phenomena are real, how would an embodied human being experience them? We do not encounter anything - fear, joy, trauma, prayer, memory, or spiritual experience - without a nervous system participating. The presence of brain activity does not, by itself, tell us the ultimate source of an experience.

Mechanism Is Not the Same as Source

This distinction is central to the paper.

Sleep science may be describing the mechanism: REM atonia, dream intrusion, breathing changes, hypervigilance, body-schema disruption, and threat perception.

The source question is different: What, if anything, is being perceived?

My hypothesis is not that sleep paralysis is demonic. It is that a REM-related state can explain the biological vulnerability and many of the perceptual features of sleep paralysis while leaving open the possibility, within a Christian worldview, that some experiences could also involve spiritual oppression.

In other words, the biology could be the whole explanation. Or, in some cases, the biology could be the embodied condition through which something else is experienced. Those possibilities have to be distinguished rather than assumed.

What Could We Actually Study?

If we wanted to move this conversation beyond competing beliefs, I would begin with the experience itself and ask much more detailed questions.

- How many people with sleep paralysis experience a presence, and how many experience paralysis without one?
- When a presence is reported, is it seen, heard, felt physically, or simply known to be there?
- Which features remain consistent across cultures, and which features change with religious or cultural expectations?

- What do people with no prior belief in demons, ghosts, jinn, or supernatural beings report during a first episode?
- Does fear begin before the sensed presence, or does the sense that something is present trigger the fear?
- Are episodes involving an intruder measurably different from episodes without one in heart rate, breathing, autonomic arousal, sleep stage, or neural activity?
- Do later episodes change after a person learns a cultural or spiritual explanation for what happened?

Then there is the much harder question. Is there ever information within an episode that cannot reasonably be explained by dream imagery, memory, expectation, sensory ambiguity, or known sleep physiology? Are there independently verifiable perceptions? Are there patterns associated with prayer or other spiritual interventions that remain after expectancy, calming, and ordinary physiological regulation are accounted for?

Those questions would be difficult to study. But difficulty is not the same thing as meaninglessness.

Prayer, Relief, and What We Can Claim

Many Christians report praying, calling on Jesus, quoting Scripture, or otherwise engaging spiritually during sleep paralysis and experiencing relief. I think those reports deserve documentation. But we have to be careful about what the relief establishes.

Prayer may reduce fear. It may change attention. It may regulate breathing. It may create a sense of agency in a moment of helplessness. It may alter the person's interpretation of what is happening. And within Christian theology, the person may believe that prayer also confronted an actual spiritual presence.

A reduction in symptoms after prayer would be worth studying. It would not, by itself, prove that a demon was expelled. The same standard should apply in the other direction: if prayer has measurable psychological or physiological effects, identifying those effects would not automatically prove that nothing spiritual occurred.

The Similarity Is Evidence of Something

I keep coming back to the similarity of the reports because I think it is easy to overstate it and easy to dismiss it.

The similarities do not prove a demon. But they do establish a recurring human phenomenon that deserves explanation.

Shared neurobiology predicts recurring perceptual patterns. Cultural learning predicts differences in how those patterns are named and understood. A spiritual model could predict recurring experiences of hostile agency. The literature contains observations that can be discussed within all three frameworks.

That is exactly why I do not think sleep paralysis belongs exclusively to either sleep medicine or spiritual warfare. It is an unusually clear place to ask what happens when biology, perception, culture, and theology all seem to touch the same experience.

Clinical Care and Spiritual Care Do Not Have to Compete

For most people, isolated sleep paralysis is frightening but not dangerous. Recurrent or highly distressing episodes can be associated with sleep disruption, narcolepsy, anxiety, trauma, and other conditions, and those possibilities deserve appropriate evaluation.

A Christian does not have to choose between understanding REM sleep and praying. Someone can improve sleep regularity, investigate a possible sleep disorder, address anxiety or trauma, and also seek spiritually meaningful support.

What I would avoid is telling a frightened person that a presence was definitely a demon when we do not have evidence to establish that. I would also avoid using a spiritual explanation to discourage appropriate medical or sleep evaluation.

Taking the spiritual world seriously should not require us to become careless with the physical one.

The Question I Am Carrying Forward

Sleep science has given us a compelling explanation for how a person can become conscious while REM paralysis remains. It gives us plausible explanations for dream intrusion, chest pressure, fear, altered body perception, and even the sensed presence.

And I am still left with the figure in the room.

Why does the experience so often become social? Why an intruder? Why agency? Why does the person so often feel not merely afraid, but watched? How much of that is the architecture of the human threat system? How much comes from culture? And is there ever anything left over that our current models do not adequately explain?

If Christian theology is correct that reality includes hostile spiritual intelligences, what kind of evidence would allow us to responsibly distinguish an internally generated sleep-related hallucination from an experience that may also have a spiritual dimension?

I do not think the answer is to call every shadow a demon.

But I also do not think the answer is to stop asking simply because we have identified a biological mechanism.

The biology is real. The experience is real. What the experience ultimately is remains a question worth investigating.

References

de Sá, J. F. R., & Mota-Rolim, S. A. (2016). Sleep paralysis in Brazilian folklore and other cultures: A brief review. Frontiers in Psychology, 7, 1294. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01294

Denis, D., et al. (2024). Recent insights into sleep paralysis: Mechanisms and management. Cureus. PMCID: PMC11344621.

Jalal, B., et al. (2021). Beliefs about sleep paralysis in Turkey: Karabasan attack. Transcultural Psychiatry. PMCID: PMC8060736.

Molendijk, M. L., Bouachmir, O., Montagne, H., Kloosterboer, M. A., & Blom, J. D. (2017). Prevalence rates of the incubus phenomenon: A systematic review and meta-analysis. Frontiers in Psychiatry, 8, 253. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2017.00253

Olunu, E., Kimo, R., Onigbinde, E. O., et al. (2018). Sleep paralysis, a medical condition with a diverse cultural interpretation. International Journal of Applied and Basic Medical Research, 8(3), 137-142.

Sharpless, B. A., & Doghramji, K. (2015). Sleep Paralysis: Historical, Psychological, and Medical Perspectives. Oxford University Press.

The Holy Bible. Ephesians 6:12; Mark 5:1-20; Luke 8:26-39; James 4:7.