

The Witch at Endor and Saul

1 Samuel 28:7-24 (1 Chronicles 10:13-14)

By Dr. Gary M. Gulan, ©1984 (Rev. 09)

Introduction: It is interesting to me that even some unregenerate individuals know about the witch at Endor. The story of the witch at Endor and the events surrounding the story create great interest for the reader. Over the course of history students of the Bible have raised serious questions about the story. “Are witches real?” “Could a witch have control over one of God’s servants?”

Early in church history, church leaders struggled with this story. The “Early church fathers, fearful of affirming that the prophet Samuel was a shade in Sheol [Hebrew for the place of the departed dead], that a medium was an appropriate intermediary between the divine and human worlds, and that necromancy is efficacious, ‘proceeded to undermine the literal text with one of two arguments: either sorcery is just demonic deceit, and what appeared was not really Samuel, but a demon in his guise; or Samuel was not really in Hades but had been sent by God to announce Saul’s fate.’” (Youngblood; Cox)

There are six major views on what happened in this story.

(Davis; Willmington; Youngblood; Cox):

1. Samuel’s appearance was not real, but rather a product of psychological impressions.
 2. Samuel’s appearance was a demonic illusion or impersonation by the medium’s spirit. (Proponent: Calvin)
 3. Samuel’s appearance was not real, but was an elaborate acting role or hoax played on Saul by the medium. (Proponent: Orr)(Saul saw and heard nothing; and the witch was only three miles from the place where the upcoming battle was to take place)
 4. The medium was able, through her craft, to actually make Samuel appear. (Proponent: Keil; Eerdman)
 5. God allowed the medium to raise up Samuel on this rare occasion. (Proponent: Lange)
 - *6. God intervened and through no action of the medium herself, made it appear as though the medium raised up Samuel, using Samuel’s appearance as a judgment tool over Saul. (Proponent: MacArthur; Willmington; Unger; Jamieson; Davis; Merrill; Archer; Kaiser; Bruce; Brauch; Geisler; Howe)
- (* Indicates this is the best view and the view held by orthodox evangelicals)

1. INSIGHTS AND BACKGROUND INTO THE STORY

As we come into this section of Scripture, we are given a few facts to introduce the subject.

- A. Saul had already lost the kingdom and the Lord departed from him, (1 Sam. 13:9-13; 15:1-28; 16:1).
- B. Saul had a “distressing”(NKJV) or “evil” (KJV) spirit from the Lord that was troubling him, (1 Sam. 16:14).
- C. David, who was an outcast of Israel at the time, and Achish, a leader of the Philistines, were together ready to attack Israel and Saul. David finds himself in a strange dilemma,

(1 Sam. 27:1-28:1).

D. The Philistines were ready to do battle against Saul and Israel, and Saul was really worried God would use this battle to kill him in judgment, (1 Sam. 28:1-2,4).

E. The text reminds us that Samuel was dead for background to the story, (1 Sam. 28:3).

F. The text also reminds us that Saul had removed all mediums and spiritists from the land earlier, (1 Sam. 28:3).

2. THE NEED FOR INFORMATION

As we get into the text we are introduced to two facts that bring out Saul's character.

A. Saul was afraid and his heart trembled greatly, (28:5).

This could be due to the fact that Saul lost his kingship and kingdom, but was still physically in place. Something was going to remove him and he thought this battle was it.

B. Saul wasn't getting any help from the Lord, (28:6)

Saul, as others in the Old Testament, had access to information from God through three avenues:
(1.) By dreams

(2.) By Urim

The Urim was used by the High Priest to cast lots in finding the Lord's will, (23:6,9). This may not have been working for Saul, because, "Saul may have set up under Zadok a rival priesthood to Abiathar's and so he could get not guidance from God." (Ryrie)

(3.) By prophets

Note: "It may be correctly remarked that Saul's attempts at inquiry were of so unworthy a nature that it would be an abuse of language to speak of him as really 'inquiring of Jehovah.' For all Saul's efforts, whether desperate, sincere, or otherwise, to receive an answer (6,15) from the Lord, none came (a disquieting echo of 14:37). The normal modes of divine communication were silent...." (Youngblood)

3. SAUL'S COMPROMISES

In this chapter Saul was involved in many items that we call "irony" and reveal his true character.

There are eleven rather ironic facts about Saul worth probing.

A. Saul had fear and his heart trembled greatly, (28:5)

"Saul was afraid with the kind of fear that gnaws physically and incapacitates a person for action." (Baldwin)

Saul actually had a history of fear. "Saul has hidden himself when he was chosen by lot to be king (10:22). When the Spirit of the Lord came upon him, he was changed (10:6), but after the Spirit had departed (16:14), he was afraid and dismayed by Goliath 917:11,20). He feared at

Gilgal when faced by the overwhelming size of the Philistine army (13:11-12). Saul was also afraid of David because he knew that the Lord was with David, (18:12,29). But Saul was to fear God (12:24) not people.” (MacArthur)

B. Seeking alternatives to the Lord, (28:7)

He had expelled all mediums and spiritists, now he wanted to consult one. When Saul can't get what he wants from the Lord, he pragmatically goes to the occult to get answers.

“That woman of Endor was identical with the modern medium appears in Saul's command to his servants to seek him out ‘a woman who is a medium.’ (KJV, ‘that hath a familiar spirit,’ Hebrew ‘eshet baa lat-ob,’ literally ‘a woman controlling, or mistress of, a divining demon’)...” (Unger)

Note: Irony, Saul was a lawmaker and lawbreaker. (Klein)

C. Allowing opportunities for failure, (28:8)

His men knew right away of the existence of a woman, which may indicate the need for her by someone previous to this.

Note: The nation was purged from having witches, yet Saul's men knew exactly where a witch was located.

D. Resorting to deception, (28:8,12)

Saul disguises himself. He was convinced if he disguised himself he would not be found out. He did this either to keep the witch from knowing who he was or to keep others from knowing he was going to a witch. He was wrong.

Note: Irony, the former king acts like a common criminal.

E. Entering into the night and leaving in the night, (28:8,25)

Saul travels to her at night. The nether world has always been considered the realm of “darkness” (Job 10:21-22; 17:13; Ps. 88:12; 143:3). The night provided the proper setting for contacting one of its workers of darkness. “The netherworld is a place of darkness.” (Youngblood)

Note: Irony, Saul goes to the people of darkness in the night.

F. Consulting that which is wrong, (28:8)

Mediums were a forbidden source for information (Lev. 19:31; 20:6-7; Deut. 18:10-11) and Saul previously purged the “mediums” or “witches” (Heb. “obot”) and the “spiritists” or “soothsayers” (Heb. “yidd’ onim”).

Note: It is interesting that Saul once had enough conviction to expel witches or mediums per the Law of Moses.

G. Swearing by the Lord, (28:9-10)

Saul was walking in disobedience to the Lord and yet swears by the very existence of the Lord as a means of assuring his credibility to the medium. (MacArthur)

Note: Irony, the king outlawed the practice, and now he is trying to comfort her into practicing the art. Saul actually uses one of the most solemn of oaths by swearing in the name of the Lord. This is the last time Saul would speak the name of the Lord.

H. Making exceptions, (28:9-10)

“Saul swore that no punishment would come upon her when the Levitical Law required her to be stoned to death (Lev. 20:27).” (MacArthur) Saul tries to put her at ease.

Note: She asked Saul twice why he would do this to her and that she would be in real trouble, (28:9,12). She was putting her life in danger of death. Saul who dealt with witches and wizards by purging the nation from them, now makes an exception.

I. Rebuked by a witch

She reminds him that the King cut off all contact with mediums and spiritists and wonders why he would put his life in jeopardy to violate a royal decree. Pure irony, even the reminder from the one who was still practicing the art illegally was not enough to convict Saul.

Note: Saul knew better than to get involved in the occult, and yet it is a witch that reminds him of what he is doing and who he is.

J. Why the desire to see Samuel, when they were at odds with each other? (28:15)

Saul and Samuel did not speak or have any fellowship after the Lord rejected Saul, (1 Sam. 15:26-35; 16:14). At the end of Saul’s reign Samuel and Saul were not friends or religious leaders in the same realm. Saul may have wanted to contact Samuel the prophet, remembering that it was Samuel whom he had first sought so long ago in pursuit of his father’s lost donkeys, (1 Sam. 9:6-9) and maybe Samuel would help him one last time. (Merrill)

Note: Irony, Saul and Samuel were at opposite ends of the purpose of God. They were at opposing view points, and now he wants to talk to him.

K. From fear of Philistines, to fear of death. (28:15,20)

Saul was afraid. He did not get good news. His kingdom was going to be taken from him and given to David. He would be delivered into the hands of the Philistines.

Note: Irony here, he was first afraid of the Philistines now afraid of Samuel’s news.

4. THE WITCHCRAFT AND SPIRITISM

“The Old Testament makes reference to at least six forms of divination. All of these, however, were clearly condemned as inappropriate to the search of God’s will.” (1.) Hepatoscopy, which was the process of divining from the liver of a sacrificed animal (Ez. 21:21). (2.) Hydromancy, which was divining by water, (Gen. 44:5). (3.) Rhabdomancy, which refers to the use of a divining rod or the casting of arrows, (Ex. 21:21; Hos. 4:12). (4.) Teraphim, which were household images, (Ez. 21:21; Zech. 10:2). (5.) Astrology, which is the study of the stars, (Isa.

47:13; Jer. 10:2). And, (6.) Necromancy, which involves contacting the dead for purposes of finding the future, (Lev. 19:31; Deut. 18:11; Isa. 8:19; 19:3; 1 Sam. 28:3). (Davis)

A. Mediums “those who had a familiar spirit” (KJV)(28:3,9)(Hebrew “obot”)

(1.) “These were illicit substitutes for prophets, mediums, who consulted the dead.” (Baldwin)

(2.) Mediums were “Those who communicated with the dead, necromancers.” (Merrill)

(3.) “The basic meaning of [the Hebrew] ‘ob’ is spirit and was rendered ‘ghost’ in the KJV, Isa. 29:4.” (Youngblood)

(4.) “Prophecy by the [Hebrew] ‘ob,’ the term ‘ob’ may be related to an extra biblical word ‘ab’ denoting a ritual hole in the ground and related to the spirits who ascended from this hole or those people who operated such holes.” (Klein)

(5.) Scholars think they can connect the Hebrew “oboth” meaning “familiar spirits” to the Hebrew “ob” meaning ‘to be hollow’ and ‘ob’ is then ‘the hollow thing’ or ‘bag;’ and so it came to signify, “one who speaks in a hollow voice.” It hence appears to mean the distended belly of the “ventriloquist.” (Spence)

(6.) “Prophecy by the [Hebrew] ‘ob’ was probably performed by calling up a departed spirit from Sheol and obtaining prophecies... The ‘ob’ was some special spirit devoted to the service of the mistress of the ‘ob.’” (Keil)

B. Spiritists “wizards” (KJV)(28:3,9)(Hebrew “yidde’ onim”)

(1.) “...Wizards, ones who ‘chirp and mutter (Isa. 8:19) as they speak on behalf of the dead.” (Baldwin)

(2.) “Spiritists’ or ‘soothsayers’ are ‘those who contacted the spirits.’” (Merrill)

(3.) “Spiritist” is ‘one who had occult knowledge is always associated with ‘obot.’” (Youngblood)

(4.) “Wizards” literally are “the wise people.” “These are connected with the [Hebrew] ‘oboth’ those who had familiar spirits. The name seems to have been given in irony to these dealers in the occult and forbidden arts.” (Spence)

C. Contacting the dead, (28:8)

“Samuel’s comment expresses agitation caused by Saul’s efforts to contact him since living humanity was not allowed to seek out discussions with the dead (Deut. 18:11; Lev. 20:6).

Witchcraft puts the seeker in contact with demons impersonating those who are being sought, since the dead person cannot ordinarily be contacted except in this unique case.” (MacArthur)

D. “Divine unto me by the familiar spirit” (KJV)(28:8)

The NKJV translates it “Please conduct a séance,” the NASB translates it “conjure up for me,” the RSV translates it “divine for me a spirit,” and then NIV translates it, “consult a spirit for me.”

“The woman doubtlessly began her customary preparations for her control to take over, entering into a trance-like state to be used by her control or divining demon, who would then proceed to impersonate the individual called for.” (Unger)

E. “Bring up” (28:8,11,12)

“The popular idea has always been that Sheol, the place of departed spirits, is somewhere beneath the ground or earth on which we live, just as heaven, the abode of God and His holy angels, is in a region above the earth.” (Spence) Remember the witch thinks there are “portals”

through which she tries to contact the departed from below. “Prophecy by the ‘ob,’ the term ‘ob’ may be related to an extra biblical word ‘ab’ denoting a ritual hole in the ground and related to the spirits who ascended from this hole or those people who operated such holes.” (Klein)

F. “She cried out with a loud voice” (28:12)

“So startled was she by Samuel’s appearance that she immediately realized that the work was of God and not herself. ... This implies that she did not really expect to raise Samuel but only a satanic imitation. ... Samuel’s appearance, even in visionary form, was not the expected result clearly teaches that necromancers or mediums have no real power over the deceased, especially the righteous, but can only produce counterfeits.” (Merrill)

“These words imply most unquestionably that the woman saw an apparition which she did not anticipate, and therefore that she was not really able to conjure up departed spirits or persons who had died, but that she either merely pretended to do so, or if the witchcraft was not mere trickery and delusion, but has a certain demonical background, that the appearance of Samuel differed essentially from everything she had experienced and affected before, and therefore filled her with alarm and horror.” (Keil)

“God miraculously permitted the actual spirit of Samuel to speak (28:16-19). Because she understood her inability to raise the dead in this manner, she immediately knew (1.) that it must have been by the power of God, and (2.) that her disguised inquirer must be Saul.” (MacArthur)

G. “A spirit ascending out of the earth” (28:13)

The “spirit” (Hebrew “elohim”) which is in the plural form, could not only refer to “gods” but also, “mighty ones, judges, prophets.”

“The most probable interpretation of this term ‘elohim’ is the ‘spirit’ of a deceased person. This implies an authentic appearance of the dead, but one that did not result from her witchcraft. Instead it was God’s final means of bringing a word to a king who insisted on going his own way.” (Kaiser/Davids/Bruce/Brauch)

“Indeed, the apparition of Samuel is seen ‘coming up out of the ground’ [Hebrew] ‘ha arets’ a word often used in the Near East to refer to the netherworld, the realm of the dead.” (Youngblood)

H. “What is his form?” (28:14)

The medium or witch states, “an old man wearing a robe.” Saul believes this is Samuel, but never really sees him. Only the medium or witch sees him.

“Saul is convinced that the apparition is Samuel, who in Saul’s mind has always worn the robe of the prophet (1 Sam. 15:27; 2:18-19).” (Youngblood)

I. “Why have you disturbed me?” (28:15)

“These words of Samuel suggest that Saul has interrupted a life of restfulness, which Samuel had been enjoying and had been reluctant to leave.” (Baldwin)

“Samuel’s appearance here is explained by the intervention of the Lord who graciously permitted Saul one last encounter with the prophet whom he had first sought so long ago...” (Merrill)

J. Eating afterwards, (28:22)

It is a common practice in witchcraft to eat something after being involved in their activities in order to replace the energy used in the ceremony.

Conclusion: What a sad commentary on Saul. Notice what God’s Word says about him, “So Saul died for his unfaithfulness which he had committed against the LORD, because he did not keep the word of the LORD, and also because he consulted a medium for guidance. But he did not inquire of the LORD; therefore He killed him, and turned the kingdom over to David the son of Jesse.” (1 Chronicles 10:13-14)

“Since some occultism and necromancy are again enjoying popular acceptance, it might be well to sound a note of warning at this point. There are many well-meaning persons who are being led into a very subtle trap regarding these practices.” (Davis; Geisler/Howe)

1. It is clear from Scripture that the believer is not to participate in any practice of this kind, (Lev. 19:26, 31; 20:6,27; Deut. 18:9-14; 1 Chron. 10:13). (Davis; Kaiser/Davids/Bruce/Brauch)
2. The Bible nowhere lists that witchcraft, sorcery, wizardry, or spiritism as legitimate ways of finding information from God on the past, present or future, (1 Sam. 28:6; Heb. 1:1-3).
3. The Bible explicitly instructs God’s people in the Old Testament to use capital punishment on witches, sorcerers, wizards, spiritists, and anyone practicing divination, instructing the community not to tolerate these practices, because they are the antithesis of the revelation that comes from God. (Ex. 22:18; Jer. 27:9-10). (Kaiser/Davids/Bruce/Brauch)
4. The Bible nowhere hints that individuals on earth can contact or communicate with those who have died, (Lk. 16:24-27). (Davis; Geisler/Howe)
5. The Bible teaches Satan has powers from God that allow him to produce illusionary images and deceptive forms of communication with the netherworld, (2 Thess. 2:9). (Archer)
6. Upon physical death, the separation of the soul from the body takes place, and nowhere in the Bible does it indicate that there is a “go between” the physical and spiritual realms.
7. After death, those believers in Christ, are in an intermediate state of “rest” and “comfort” in the presence of the Lord, (2 Cor. 5). This could hardly be said if they were capable of being disturbed at a moments notice by mediums calling them to return back to the earth, (Lk. 16:25; Rev. 6:11). (Davis)
8. After death, those who were not believers in Christ, are confined in prison in Hades and are awaiting judgment, (Heb. 9:27). The Bible teaches that there is a holding place with barriers that cannot be crossed (Lk. 16:28). It is also evident from the story that those who have departed are not able to return to earth for any reason, (Lk. 16:28-31). (Davis; Geisler/Howe)

9. Nowhere in the Bible has God said He has relinquished the control of the departed dead to the realm of the occult such as, witchcraft, sorcery, wizardry, or spiritism. Demons and witches cannot usurp God's authority over life and death (Job. 1:10-12). (Geisler/Howe)

References:

"1 Samuel," Eugene Merrill, The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Wheaton: Victor, 1985, p. 454.

"1,2 Samuel," Ronald Youngblood, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992, Vol. 3, Pp. 778-784.

Cults of the Dead in Ancient Israel and Ugarit, Theodore Lewis, Atlanta: Harvard Semitic Monograph 39, 1989, p. 115.

"Origen and the Witch of Endor: Toward an Iconoclastic Typology," Patricia Cox, AThR 61, 2, 1984, p. 139.

1 Samuel, Ralph Klein, Word Biblical Commentary, Waco: Word, 1973, Vol. 10, Pp. 269.

The Books of Samuel, Peter Lange, Lange's Commentary on the Holy Scriptures, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976, Vol. 3, p. 337.

Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1&2 Samuel, C. E. Keil and F. Delitzsch, Commentary on the Old Testament, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976, Vol. 2, p. 262.

"1 Samuel," H. D. M. Spence, Ellicott's Commentary on the Bible, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981, Vol. 2, Pp. 415-417.

The MacArthur Study Bible, John MacArthur, Nashville: Nelson, 1991, p. 420.

The Ryrie Study Bible, Charles Ryrie, Chicago: Moody, 1994, p. 476.

Biblical Demonology, Merrill Unger, Wheaton: Van Kampen, 1952, p. 150.

Unger's Commentary of the Old Testament, Merrill Unger, Chicago: Moody, 1981, p. 405.

Willmington's Guide to the Bible, H. L. Willmington, Wheaton: Tyndale, 1981, p. 107.

"The Birth of a Kingdom," John J. Davis, A History of Israel, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980, Pp. 253-258.

1 & 2 Samuel, Joyce Baldwin, Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1988, p. 158.

The Big Book of Bible Difficulties, Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992, p. 168.

Hard Sayings of the Bible, Walter Kaiser, Peter Davids, F.F. Bruce, and Manfred Brauch, Downers Grove: IVP, 1996, Pp. 217-218.

Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties, Gleason Archer, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982, p. 181.