

1 Samuel 28:1-25

Saul and the Witch of Endor

1 Samuel 28:1-2 - "And it came to pass in those days, that the Philistines gathered their armies together for warfare, to fight with Israel. And Achish said unto David, Know thou assuredly, that thou shalt go out with me to battle, thou and thy men. And David said to Achish, Surely thou shalt know what thy servant can do. And Achish said to David, Therefore will I make thee keeper of mine head for ever."

"keeper of my head" = Achish's bodyguard. It was common for rulers to have their palace guard made up of mercenaries from elsewhere, who would not be susceptible to homegrown conspiracies to rebel. For instance, the Cherethites, a people who were settled alongside the Philistines in southern Palestine around Ziklag, along with the Pelethites, formed David's elite private bodyguard during his reign. They remained loyal to him during Absalom's rebellion.

This was no ordinary raid or border incursion, it was a major invasion from the combined Philistine forces. There was now no way for David to avoid fighting against Israel. In fact, Achish might have hoped David would take the kingship from Saul and rule as a vassal of the Philistines. But David responds to him ambiguously - "Surely thou shalt know what thy servant can do."

1 Samuel 28:3 - "Now Samuel was dead, and all Israel had lamented him, and buried him in Ramah, even in his own city. And Saul had put away those that had familiar spirits, and the wizards, out of the land."

One of the good things Saul had done as king, probably at the instigation of the prophet Samuel, was drive out those who practiced the occult arts. This was in obedience to God's commands: See **Exodus 22:18, Leviticus 19:31, 20:6, 27** and in **Deuteronomy 18:9-14**.

1 Samuel 28:4 - "And the Philistines gathered themselves together, and came and pitched in Shunem: and Saul gathered all Israel together, and they pitched in Gilboa."

Shunem was 20 miles deep into Isrealite territory.

1 Samuel 28:5 - "And when Saul saw the host of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart greatly trembled."

Formerly a courageous warrior, Saul began to lose his courage when the Holy Spirit withdrew from him (**1 Samuel 16:14**).

1 Samuel 28:6 - "And when Saul enquired of the LORD, the LORD answered him not, neither by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by prophets."

This gives an ascending progression of the quality of modes of inquiry.

Saul himself had prophesied before, and there were prophets among Samuel's school. But Saul got no answer from them. God was silent.

Like Israel later in its history, Saul was experiencing a famine of hearing the words of the Lord:

- **Amos 8:11** - "Behold, the days come, saith the Lord GOD, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD"

Saul then tries to get information from a forbidden source:

- **Deuteronomy 18:10-15** - "There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, Or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For all that do these things are an abomination unto the LORD: and because of these abominations the LORD thy God doth drive them out from before thee. Thou shalt be perfect with the LORD thy God. For these nations, which thou shalt possess, hearkened unto observers of times, and unto diviners: but as for thee, the LORD thy God hath not suffered thee so to do. The LORD thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken."

Deuteronomy 18:18-19 - "I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him. And it shall come to pass, that whosoever will not hearken unto my words which he shall speak in my name, I will require it of him."

Jesus was that prophet Moses referred to.

For believers now, with Christ in us, we have a "more sure word of prophecy" than this through the Holy Spirit.

Jesus Himself is the Word, the *Logos*.

It's important to contrast Saul's illegitimate seeking for guidance from a sorceress, with the ultimate source of truth that we contain.

Peter identifies the promised Prophet as Jesus:

- **Acts 3:22** - "For Moses truly said unto the fathers, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you. And it shall come to pass, that every soul, which will not hear that prophet, shall be destroyed from among the people. Yea, and all the prophets from Samuel and those that follow after, as many as have spoken, have likewise foretold of these days. Ye are the children of the prophets, and of the covenant

which God made with our fathers, saying unto Abraham, And in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed. Unto you first God, having raised up his Son Jesus, sent him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities.."

Later Peter describes hearing the very voice of God on the Mount of Transfiguration, saying "This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him" (**Luke 9:35**).

But Peter here adds:

- **2 Peter 1:19** - "We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts"

Saul did not really inquire of the Lord (see **1 Chronicles 10:14**), in the sense of seeking direction from Him, and of being willing to be guided by Him. His interest was utilitarian - a means to an end. That's why his next step was inquiring through a pagan medium.

It's the difference between truly listening and hearing God and wanting to manipulate Him for our own advantage.

We don't even need to find out the future, because He is the future. We know how the story ends. Jesus, the Word, is the last thing God has to say to mankind.

1 Samuel 28:7 - "Then said Saul unto his servants, Seek me a woman that hath a familiar spirit, that I may go to her, and enquire of her. And his servants said to him, Behold, there is a woman that hath a familiar spirit at Endor."

"familiar spirit" = *ob* - from a baby babbling his father's name, mumbling. A water skin, from its hollow sound and the idea of something carried inside; a sheath for the evil spirit.

To inquire of them brought a curse:

- **Leviticus 20:6** - "And the soul that turneth after such as have familiar spirits, and after wizards, to go a whoring after them, I will even set my face against that soul, and will cut him off from among his people."

- **Isaiah 29:4** - "And thou shalt be brought down, and shalt speak out of the ground, and thy speech shall be low out of the dust, and thy voice shall be, as of one that hath a familiar spirit, out of the ground, and thy speech shall whisper out of the dust."

The Septuagint translates this word as *eggastri-muthoi* or ventriloquists, because the voices seemed to come from the belly or the armpit.

1 Samuel 28:7-8 - "Then said Saul unto his servants, Seek me a woman that hath a familiar spirit, that I may go to her, and enquire of her. And his servants said to him,

Behold, there is a woman that hath a familiar spirit at Endor. And Saul disguised himself, and put on other raiment, and he went, and two men with him, and they came to the woman by night: and he said, I pray thee, divine unto me by the familiar spirit, and bring me him up, whom I shall name unto thee."

This story is filled with ironies. Saul had driven out all the mediums. Now he needed one. But he had to keep his mission secret from the rest of his army, and also keep his identity secret from the woman, because if she knew it was Saul, she wouldn't meet with him for fear.

As an example of the kind of rationalizations we perform to justify our sins, the rabbis explained that Saul originally planned to only ask the woman to inquire of the spirit of Samuel for him, and in that way avoid actually breaking the law. But he ended up conversing with Samuel himself.

1 Samuel 28:9 - "And the woman said unto him, Behold, thou knowest what Saul hath done, how he hath cut off those that have familiar spirits, and the wizards, out of the land: wherefore then layest thou a snare for my life, to cause me to die?"

She is afraid this is a sting operation to ensnare her.

1 Samuel 28:11 - "Then said the woman, Whom shall I bring up unto thee? And he said, Bring me up Samuel."

Saul should have remembered that Samuel had broken off their friendship and told him the kingdom had been stripped from him. But probably Saul hoped he could induce Samuel somehow to tell him whether Israel would prevail in the coming battle.

But this seance immediately goes off the rails and out of control.

1 Samuel 28:12-13 - "And when the woman saw Samuel, she cried with a loud voice: and the woman spake to Saul, saying, Why hast thou deceived me? for thou art Saul. And the king said unto her, Be not afraid: for what sawest thou? And the woman said unto Saul, I saw gods ascending out of the earth."

"gods" = *elohim* - sometimes used as a general term for anyone from the spirit or supernatural world. Also judges, civil magistrates and other important people were sometimes called "*elohim*."

The Targum says, "I saw an angel of the Lord" The Talmud says the use of the plural "*elohim*" indicates a second person also appeared - Moses.

"Samuel (supposing that the Last Day had come) went and brought Moses with him. He said to him, 'Peradventure, though God forbid, we are wanted for the Judgment ; rise with me, for there is nothing that thou hast written in the Law, which I have not kept.'"

The medium was startled, and realized the apparition was not her doing. She feared the

Resurrection of the Dead had arrived and she was doomed (Pirke Eliezer, c. 33.). God Himself had brought Samuel back from the dead, appearing perhaps like Moses and Elijah appeared to Jesus at the Transfiguration (**Matthew 17:3**). The rabbis explain that Saul could hear but not see the vision, and she could see but not hear what Samuel was saying.

1 Samuel 28:14 - "And he said unto her, What form is he of? And she said, An old man cometh up; and he is covered with a mantle. And Saul perceived that it was Samuel, and he stooped with his face to the ground, and bowed himself."

Samuel's mantle was a reminder to Saul of Samuel's next words, that it was ripped as a sign of the removal of Saul from kingship (**1 Samuel 15:27**).

1 Samuel 28:15 - "And Samuel said to Saul, Why hast thou disquieted me, to bring me up? And Saul answered, I am sore distressed; for the Philistines make war against me, and God is departed from me, and answereth me no more, neither by prophets, nor by dreams: therefore I have called thee, that thou mayest make known unto me what I shall do."

Samuel was "disturbed" because he had been called out from a place of rest, in Abraham's bosom - the place of comfort in the biblical Sheol where the righteous dead abide awaiting the resurrection. See the story of the rich man and Lazarus (**Luke 16:19-31**) It derives from the custom when eating at a feast like Passover, where each guest leaned on his left elbow so as to leave his right arm at liberty, and as two or more lay on the same couch, the head of one man was near the breast of the man who lay behind, and he was therefore said "to lie in the bosom" of the other.

This appearance of Samuel is one of the strangest incidents in the Bible. Was this really Samuel, or an image of him, or a projection by the evil spirit, or maybe a hallucination?

The test of any supernatural occurrence is its faithfulness to scripture and what God has revealed as truth.

- **Galatians 1:8** - "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed."

In this case Samuel repeats what God had already told him about Saul.

The message Samuel delivers to Saul was devastating.

1 Samuel 28:16-20 - "Then said Samuel, Wherefore then dost thou ask of me, seeing the LORD is departed from thee, and is become thine enemy? And the LORD hath done to him, as he spake by me: for the LORD hath rent the kingdom out of thine hand, and given it to thy neighbor, even to David: Because thou obeyedst not the voice of the LORD, nor executedst his fierce wrath upon Amalek, therefore hath the LORD done this thing unto thee this day. Moreover the LORD will also deliver Israel with thee into the hand of the Philistines: and to morrow shalt thou and thy sons be with me: the LORD

also shall deliver the host of Israel into the hand of the Philistines. Then Saul fell straightway all along on the earth, and was sore afraid, because of the words of Samuel: and there was no strength in him; for he had eaten no bread all the day, nor all the night."

You never want to hear that God has become your enemy!

Strangely, Samuel makes no mention of his other sins, including the sin of consulting a medium, which is later said to be the cause of his death (**1 Chronicles 10:13-14**).

So Israel would fall in defeat, and Saul and his sons would die. But even at this point, there was still an opportunity for Saul to repent. God's long suffering toward Saul is amazing.

(An alternate view of all this: Many scholars have insisted this was not the real Samuel, because he would not have come up from the earth but rather down from Heaven. Also, all of Saul's sons did not die in the battle. Nor was the battle the next day but several days later.

Another question - would both the wicked, unrepentant Saul and the good Jonathan both join Samuel after death? The Babylonian Talmud solves this by saying Saul's sins were pardoned and he was saved, although there is no record of his repentance. Some rabbis explained that by Saul willingly going into battle with his sons, knowing they would all die, he redeemed himself and was pardoned, since death supposedly atones for even major sins (Yoma 86a). Thus he and they would end up with Samuel in Abraham's bosom. They add that because Saul had put the priests of Nob to the sword, he also had to be killed by the sword.)

But instead of repentance at this point in the story, Saul is immobilized and falls into even more despair.

The medium and his men convince Saul to eat, in sort of a weird inversion of the Lord's Supper or the parable of the Prodigal Son.

1 Samuel 28:25 - "And the woman had a fat calf in the house; and she hasted, and killed it, and took flour, and kneaded it, and did bake unleavened bread thereof: And she brought it before Saul, and before his servants; and they did eat. Then they rose up, and went away that night."

The picture of Saul eating unleavened bread here reflects back to God's redemption of Israel at the Passover, and what Saul by his continual slide into self-seeking, madness, paranoia and rebellion from God, was missing out on.

Perhaps this is why Paul exhorts us to examine ourselves as we take the bread of the Afikomen - to repent quickly and not eat like Saul did in despair:

- **1 Corinthians 11:27** - "Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of

the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord.

28 B"ut let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup.

29 "For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body.

30 "For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep.

31 "For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged.

32 "But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world."