

THE WITCH OF ENDOR

COMMENTS ON SCRIPTURE PASSAGE

It is okay to send probes to our farthest planets and their moons, but it is not okay to explore the spiritual realms?

I pray every morning to a Spirit Being that I call “the Holy Spirit.” But I have no precision definitions or certain identification markers by which to know or control this Being. Is that not dangerous and irresponsible? If I truly believe there are spiritual dimensions beyond this world, do I not assume that there are many spiritual beings in existence – and not all of them friendly?

So am I a witch (or warlock) because I pray? I further proclaim that I have a higher allegiance to beings beyond this world than I have to any leaders, organizations, or structures in this world. From what I can tell, many of you do not believe in the spiritual realms very much, or you would pray with far more earnestness and regularity than you do.

In any case, the Bible does not forbid things that are considered to be false, powerless, unreal. They are no threat. The Bible forbids murder, adultery, and stealing because these things are very real and they do enormous damage. It is amusing how many modern people assume that the Bible forbids witchcraft and sorcery because such things are false and have no power. But if they have no reality, why bother to forbid them?

In our story this morning, King Saul is desperate to make contact with Samuel. He needs advice, but Samuel is dead. And Samuel is the only prophet/seer that Saul trusts to help him know what to do next. Saul has made so many mistakes that he has cut himself off from any good choices. Can you identify with that? I certainly can.

To complicate things further – trying to be faithful without being thoughtful – Saul has killed all the witches and mediums he can find in his realm. Are there any left, now that he needs them? And if so, will they not flee if they know that Saul is looking for them? So we come to this story for the morning.

I Samuel 28:3-25 (REB):

By this time Samuel was dead, and all Israel had mourned for him and buried him in Ramah, his own town; and Saul had banished from the land all who trafficked with ghosts and spirits. The Philistines mustered and encamped at Shunem, and Saul mustered all the Israelites and encamped at Gilboa. At the sight of the Philistine forces, Saul was afraid, indeed struck to the heart by terror. He inquired of the LORD, but the LORD did not answer him, neither by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by prophets. So he said to his servants, "Find a woman who has a familiar spirit, and I will go and inquire through her." They told him that there was such a woman at En-dor.

Saul put on different clothes and went in disguise with two of his men. He came to the woman by night and said, "Tell me my fortune by consulting the dead, and call up the man I name to you." The woman answered, "Surely you know what Saul has done, how he has made away with those who call up ghosts and spirits; why do you press me to do what will lead to my death?"

Saul swore her an oath: "As the LORD lives, no harm shall come to you for this." The woman asked whom she should call up, and Saul answered, "Samuel." When the woman saw Samuel appear, she shrieked and said to Saul, "Why have you deceived me? You are Saul!" The king said to her, "Do not be afraid. What do you see?" The woman answered, "I see a ghostly form coming up from the earth." "What is it like?" he asked; she answered, "Like an old man coming up, wrapped in a cloak." Then Saul knew it was Samuel, and he bowed low with his face to the ground and prostrated himself.

Samuel said to Saul, "Why have you disturbed me and raised me?" Saul answered, "I am in great trouble; the Philistines are waging war against me, and God has turned away; he no longer answers me through prophets or through dreams, and I have summoned you to tell me what I should do." Samuel said, "Why do you ask me, now that the LORD has turned from you and become your adversary? He has done what he foretold through me. He has wrested the kingdom from your hand and given it to another, to David. You have not obeyed the LORD, or executed the judgment of his fierce anger against the Amalekites; that is why he has done this to you today. For the same reason the LORD will let your people Israel fall along with you into the hands of the Philistines. What is more, tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. I tell you again: the LORD will give the Israelite army into the power of the Philistines."

Saul was overcome, and terrified by Samuel's words he fell full length to the ground. He had no strength left, for he had eaten nothing all day and all night.

The woman went to Saul and, seeing how deeply shaken he was, she said, "I listened to what you said and I risked my life to obey you. Now listen to me: let me set before you a little food to give you strength for your journey." He refused to eat anything, but when his servants joined the woman in pressing him, he yielded, rose from the ground, and sat on the couch. The woman had a fattened calf at home, which she quickly slaughtered; she also took some meal, kneaded it, and baked unleavened loaves. She set the food before Saul and his servants, and when they had eaten they set off that same night.

THE WITCH OF ENDOR

I want to talk to you about the Witch of Endor. This is a really fascinating story with numerous dimensions. And it is in the Bible. Yet mostly it is ignored because its leading lady is shady. Not that kind of shady; Ruth and Esther and Tamar and others were hot in the shade, and we love telling their stories. But this woman from Endor was a necromancer, a medium, a spiritist – *yiddoni* (in Hebrew): a knowing or wise one, but in forbidden arts. She could contact the dead and talk with them. Therefore her gifts were forbidden by Torah, and if caught she would be executed. Information from the realms beyond has been eagerly sought throughout the ages. And it has been just as severely forbidden. Unless, of course, it is prayer. Contact with God is okay; just not with any of the lesser beings in the spiritual realms. Do you understand? I surely do not.

Maybe it was the fear that if you contacted lesser heavenly beings, you might be in danger of being influenced by one of the evil ones. But Catholics and others still pray to a whole host of saints. Why is that okay, yet talking with a medium or spiritist is so strict a “no-no”? Maybe it’s okay if you do it yourself, but not if you get help from a professional? Most people solve the problem by making sure that all the information is going from us *to* God, and then we close the channel before any information can come back to us *from* God. Prayer is fine, as long as we do all the talking. That must be it. Try to remember that.

Of course, in my line of work, I have known many people over the years who were in contact with beings from the realms beyond, at least at times. Some of them fairly regularly. I have rarely tried to discourage it. Usually it has been very beneficial. God has many faithful servants in this realm; why would we suppose there are none in the realms beyond? We think the borders between our world and the spiritual realms beyond are clear and certain? Such thinking comes from paying no real attention to our own stories. Or we reduce them all to metaphors: there was no Mount of Transfiguration; Jesus was only talking to Himself in the wilderness for forty days; no voice from Heaven came saying, “*You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.*” Some of us do not have any great problem with doubts; we do not give ourselves much chance to believe in the first place. It’s not very scary to trust in God if we never really try it.

In any case, there are those who have forbidden mediums, sorcery, witchcraft – any efforts to make contact with the realms beyond – on the theory that this would take our focus away from God. Clearly our world is more focused on God, since so many of us do not believe any of the nonsense about spiritual realities beyond our world. Therefore, kill all the witches, so there will not be any information to lead us astray. But what if the special spiritual gifts were given by God in the first place? What if it did not take trust away from God, but caused people to trust God even more? Of course, you have to get past a lot of fear to even consider such possibilities. Besides, what if some of the mediums are fakes? What if they only pretend to know what they say they know? That could be really misleading. Not like all the priests and prophets and teachers and preachers, who of course are all genuine, true, honest, and pure – as everybody knows.

Is it possible that I am actually suggesting that the Old Testament is wrong in its condemnation of witches and spiritists? But being wrong is not possible because it's the inspired "word of God." Jesus did make several remarks about such an attitude and approach: "*It was said to the men of old ... but I say unto you*" "[S]omething greater than *Jonah is here.*" "*No one puts new wine into old wineskins; if they do, the wine will burst the skins, and then wine and skins are both lost.*" But at the moment, I am thinking of a more scathing denunciation of such wooden ways of thinking. Jesus paraphrases the prophet Isaiah, who himself was no respecter of inerrant Scripture as a substitute for a real relationship with God.

Isaiah's comment is: "*[T]his people ... honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men*" (Isaiah 29:13)

Jesus' paraphrase is, if possible, even more alarming: "*[I]n vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.*" (Matthew 15:9)

Of course, there is also the problem of where do we dare to apply such teachings? Many places, no doubt. And there are penalties for applying them in the wrong places, thus losing the impact and importance of precepts that really *do* come from God. Of course, this implies that our world is not a safe and easy place to live; that we really can be wrong about a lot of things; that the Christian Path or WAY requires constant vigilance and prayer – not to keep us from all our blunders, but to keep us where the Holy Spirit can continue to reach us, teach us, forgive us, and deploy us afresh.

Will such comments help us to become open enough to hear this story? Well, not everybody, but maybe a few of you.

First of all, we need to remember some things about King Saul. Saul was the first king of Israel, as most of you know, back in 1060 B.C. Israel had begged for a king because the twelve tribes could not seem to get organized well enough or fast enough to compete with the enemy peoples surrounding her, especially the Philistines. Samuel was a great seer and prophet, and the whole country looked to him for wisdom and direction in a nonstructured way. Yet nobody had the authority to call all of Israel to a united effort, even in times of emergency. No one had the authority to raise taxes or to call together, equip, and train an army. If there was a threat or some emergency, one tribe could ask the others to come help. But you know how that goes: people are busy with their own crops and problems and projects, and it's not always convenient to put the common good ahead of our own needs or opinions.

So it was a slow, awkward business for the twelve tribes of Israel to respond to the challenges and realities going on around them. They could do pretty well if the weather was good, the neighboring nations were all being nice, and no tribe got into a major dispute with any of the other tribes. But the other ninety-five percent of the time, things were pretty tough. The coalitions they did manage to put together were often too little, too late. More and more, people were realizing that without some central authority, they were not going to survive. So they begged Samuel to find them a king. Samuel did not much like the idea, and his prayers liked it even less. Still, he knew the problem was very real. (An ancient version of states' rights versus national unity.)

In one of those fascinating glimpses into the future, Samuel tells the people about the downside of having a human king ruling over them. And with an even more fascinating glimpse into an even more distant future, he tells them they would be much better off if they would all choose God to be their King. If all of them would pay serious attention to following God's guidance – actually and truly giving their allegiance and obedience to God – they would be far better off than with any human king. Samuel seems to have a vision of what we would call the Christian WAY – Life under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. If they would all pay attention and obey God's guidance – putting God's will ahead of their own interests, needs, and opinions – then God could deploy them, organize them, and direct them better than any human king could ever hope to do. But that seems like a crazy, impossible dream – a *New Covenant* way beyond our capabilities.

So even though Samuel lives his own life this way, he realizes that most of the people around him do not understand what he is talking about. Such awareness and obedience seem vague and misty to them. Perhaps a king is the best possibility for their present level of development. Sadly, Samuel and God acquiesce to the request. Israel shall have a king, but clearly it is Plan B – not the best choice – and much turmoil and travail will come from it. From this we learn that God does not always do the best he can for us, but only because *we* are not ready or willing to receive it. So God cuts back to what we *can* understand and cooperate with, hoping we will grow from there. In the meantime, the blessings and the possibilities get cut back too. We do not always think about that end of things, when we beg God to give us what we want.

Some people have a hard time following this logic, and God takes a lot of the blame for our shortcomings. Let's go over it slowly: If we do what God asks of us, does it benefit God or does it benefit us? If we spend time in prayer, is it to clear up God's ignorance or fear or confusion? If we study Scripture, is it to increase God's wisdom and awareness? If we tithe, is it because God does not know where the next meal is coming from? Even if in great magnanimity we decide to obey the commandments – desist from stealing, murder, bearing false witness, committing adultery – does that make God safer or keep God from heartbreak or harm? Such great sacrifices we make for God if we try to be faithful and obedient!

Only, it is for *our* benefit. It is for our benefit – even though we fight it, rail against it, gripe and complain about it, often act abused, and even flat-out refuse to cooperate. So the blessings are cut back. To refuse allegiance and obedience is automatically to refuse to receive the blessings that allegiance and obedience bring. To this day, the majority of members of any normal church we have ever been part of are unwilling or incapable of following this logic. Of course, most of them are wonderful people nevertheless. But their lives are cut way back, shriveled, bent, scrunched up, contorted – because they cannot or will not follow this logic. Trust God, or have it our own way. We like to think that everything is a matter of opinion, but this is a spiritual path, and true principles operate whether we like it or not.

I have a feeling that many of you could tell the following story, with slight variations, if you were willing to. In any case, I have clear memory of living through a time when, as a young boy, it seemed to me that my father was a hard taskmaster. It seemed like I could never

please him. He was always demanding that I do my work, do it better, do it regularly, and even do it without being asked. I started feeling pretty sorry for myself. Other boys my age did not have all the chores and pressures and demands and punishments for failure that I had hanging over my head all the time. Feeding, watering, and milking twice a day I really did not mind much. But cleaning up all the pens and corrals was hard, and you could not keep up during the week, so every Saturday morning there was at least half a day of really hard, heavy, smelly work. My friends were playing ball, and I was mucking out the barns and pens. But my father was relentless. If we had animals, we had a responsibility to take care of them. They deserved clean stalls, clean straw, good food, and clean water. But it was a lot of work, and it never stopped. A few days would go by and it needed doing all over again. So I was abused and misused and it was not fair, and I started feeling really sorry for myself.

Then one day – I have no idea why or how, but it was not my father – a voice said in my head, “Hey Bruce, who rides the horse?” My father never rode the horse. My mother never rode the horse. My sister almost never rode the horse. But I loved that horse. My horse and my dog were the best parts of my life, and I loved them as much as my own life. But up to that moment, I had been cleaning the stalls and doing the work that went with having a horse *only* because my father made me. Not until that moment had I connected the obligation with the blessing – the commandment with the love and joy that the commandment made possible. Up until that moment, I was not doing it for my horse; I was doing it because my father made me. But that day it connected for me. And you can believe it or not, but from that day onward, I never complained again, and my father never again had to ask me to do those chores. Now I did it for my horse, and I loved my horse.

Well, I stray, as sometimes happens. But from time to time I hear complaints about one or another of the spiritual disciplines – about making a commitment to one or another of the basic disciplines of the Christian Life. And I wish I could say, “Hey, who rides the horse? Do you think this is for God’s benefit?”

Anyway, Samuel chooses Saul to be the first king of Israel. Having cut back to Plan B, neither Samuel nor God act like “poor sports” about it. They put their full energies and hopes into life as it is. So Samuel has a lot invested in his choice. And Saul is a very good king indeed, in most ways, in the beginning. Israel’s armies are stronger

and more effective than they have ever been before. Security, building projects, and prosperity are at an all-time high. Saul is nowhere near the king that David will become, nor can his achievements compare. But in his own time, Saul is incredible – for a while.

The Bible says Saul was king for forty-two years (1040 to 1000 B.C.). (I Samuel 13:1, NASB) That’s no flash in the pan. As time goes on, Saul’s inner character flaws begin to emerge more and more, among them the classic “pride” that plagues all humans who have power. Saul begins to go his own way, paying less and less attention to Samuel or to God – though he of course denies it. He seems to struggle increasingly with some form of depression, though as always it is impossible to tell how much of it is connected with his disobedience. And of course, he is famous for his uncontrollable jealousy toward David, despite all the proof that David is his most loyal subject and would not dream of lifting his hand against “the Lord’s anointed.”

Skipping over many fascinating pieces of the story, eventually Saul loses the support of Samuel, and even God has withdrawn his Spirit. (I Samuel 15:7-23) David, to save his own life, has fled from Israel and now (with his band of merry men) works for one of the Philistine kings (Achish). The Philistines, aware of the growing weakness of Saul’s rule, are planning a new war, and Saul knows they will attack soon. And then on top of everything else, Samuel dies. How inconsiderate. How inconvenient.

Saul knows he is in deep trouble, and all Israel with him. Suddenly it is very clear that he needs help and guidance, only now it is too late. And with that background, we get some understanding of why Saul would permit himself to go looking for a necromancer – or, as she is usually called, the Witch of Endor.

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Let me take a moment to document Israel's official position toward divination. It is not as absolute as some people try to make it sound. Joseph was a diviner, and no doubt Samuel and Solomon and Daniel, among many other sages, had their special skills. Nevertheless, there were some pretty clear guidelines. Let me quote:

“Do not practice divination or sorcery.” (Leviticus 19:26) “I will set my face against the person who turns to mediums and spiritists to prostitute himself by following them, and I will cut him off from his people.” (Leviticus 20:6) “A man or woman who is a medium or spiritist among you must be put to death. You are to stone them; their blood will be on their own heads.” (Leviticus 20:27)

“When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD, and because of these detestable practices the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you. You must be blameless before the LORD your God. The nations you will dispossess listen to those who practice sorcery or divination. But as for you, the LORD your God has not permitted you to do so.” (Deuteronomy 18:9-14)

As you already heard in today's Scripture reading, Saul himself had expelled all the diviners from Israel, apparently reinstating the death penalty of Leviticus 20:27. But now suddenly Saul is desperate, and he goes looking for someone who has escaped his decree – someone who can get him in touch with Samuel. It is always hard when we need what we have tried to destroy. And please note that the problem is not that all diviners are fakes. If that were true, we would not have this law in the first place. The problem is that some mediums really *can* get in touch with the dead. The laws against them are strict because some of them really can do what they claim they can do. There really are realms beyond this one. Among other things, the story of the Witch of Endor is biblical support for the existence and authenticity of witches and mediums – that is, despite forbidding association with them, the Bible sides with those who believe there really are authentic witches and mediums. Just thought I should mention that, since not very many people seem to notice this side.

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Okay, I have spent a long time getting ready to say the three things that make this chapter in First Samuel fascinating to me. I hope I do not say them so fast that you miss them.

1.) Saul works hard to find this lady. And it is not easy because she has every reason to believe that Saul will kill her for having her gift, never mind for using it. I think this is a very touching scene. This lady ends up risking her life to help Saul because she realizes his need is so great. Even then, she cannot be sure that he will not kill her the moment she admits that she is who she is and that she can do what she can do. So we have run into a very brave and gifted lady. I was not expecting that.

Pondering this story, I keep wondering: How many people have learned to hide their gifts? How many gifted people do we scorn and abuse, and why? Why is our fear so great? Is it this woman's fault that she has special awareness? Do the gifts not come from God? If we want to heap scorn, why do we not heap it on those who have special gifts and powers but do not train and use them?

But I dally. Point Number One: This woman calls up the spirit of Samuel so that Saul can talk with him. In all the interesting byplay of the story, do not neglect to notice that at least according to the Bible, communicating with the spirits of departed people *is possible*. It not only happens, but it is a clear, lucid, significant conversation. This lady does have the gift. And in some realm, Samuel is still alive, sentient, and aware of what is going on here and what is about to happen. Now, he may be grumpy about it; maybe he just did not want to be disturbed. More likely Samuel is sad about how Saul has turned out and about what is now going to happen as a result of Saul's faithlessness.

Oh to be sure: There are frauds and incompetents in every field – doctors, lawyers, ministers, astrologers, teachers, physicists, auto mechanics. That should hardly surprise us. But if you want to dump on diviners, necromancers, sorcerers, and witches, make sure it's because they are frauds or charlatans in their field, not because you are fearful of the realms beyond – and certainly not because you think there is no reality to the realms beyond. This woman is exceedingly good at what she does.

Mostly the Bible worries about us putting any technique, person, belief, or magic between us and God or in the place of God's authority over our lives. It is a subcategory of idolatry. Why consult "thus and so," when you should be consulting the Holy Spirit? Or at least keep watching for the Holy Spirit in the midst of all other consultings, and never let them be a substitute for your prayer time.

I suspect that if some of the biblical writers were watching us today, their warnings would be about how we consult the newspaper and the stock market, and how we run to "experts" every time the slightest thing troubles us about our health, our children, our mates, or our emotional pain. How many expert opinions does it take to get us out from under our responsibility for our own lives? And how many expert opinions does it take to add up to God? Nevertheless, we do not kill our news reporters, our weathermen, or our financial advisors, even though they do try to help us with "the future."

Personally, I do not have much interest in contacting the dead. Why work so hard now when you can just wait a little while? But many of you have had such experiences, and I have certainly known too many friends, stories, and circumstances to doubt the validity of such encounters. On occasion, something else may be going on – or perhaps too little may be going on. But then again, some encounters with flesh-and-blood people are not worth very much either.

In any case, this lady is the real McCoy. This lady's art is real. Samuel has died but is still alive in another realm. And this woman knows how to reach him.

2.) Samuel says: *"Tomorrow you and your sons will be with me."* (I Samuel 28:19) What do you think? A casual comment on Samuel's part? A turn of phrase? Possibly he just means they will be dead. I strongly suspect that Joseph, Samuel, Moses, and many others would agree that the phrase comes out of a much deeper awareness than that. Tomorrow Saul and his three sons will be with Samuel – *wherever* that is. But Samuel is alive, and he is one of the Lord's most distinguished servants of all time. Saul has had a pretty hard time, in fact a bad time – a wrong, faithless, paranoid time. Clearly Saul is a failure, and a great deal of it is his own fault, though one should remember that being king of anything is no easy task, even in the best of times. Nevertheless, Saul is going to be with Samuel. And Saul's sons will be too. Jonathan, maybe, would not surprise us. But Saul? It is almost a forerunner of *"This day you will be with me in paradise."* Undeserved, unexpected – surprise! It is not over. God is not quitting

on them. It is over “here,” but that is a very small part of the larger story. Why do so many people want to insist that if you are not awake, aware, and perfect by the time you leave this planet, then it’s all over for you? How small-minded and shortsighted, especially when people die at different ages, with different experiences, and under so many different circumstances.

Clearly Samuel’s message is no “Christian rejoicing” in eternal life with Christ Jesus; it’s too early for that. But still, one more day and it will be over – in this world – for Saul and his sons. It will be a hard day, but still: one more day and it will be over. And they will not be in some worse or lower place; they will be where Samuel is. Do we remember Jesus’ argument with the Sadducees? “*God is not God of the dead, but of the living.*” Do you ever wish you could hear that it will only be one more day? (Most of you are too young still.) Last Sunday we sang one of my favorite hymns, “O Jesus, I have promised to serve Thee to the end.” I was a young boy when I first started loving that hymn. But I had no idea at the time how long it would be before that end would come. I certainly do not want to break my promise, but when is enough enough?

Anyway, the next day Saul and the armies of Israel go into battle, and sure enough, they are no match for the Philistine army. On Mount Gilboa they die. Not just Saul, but thousands of them. Is it all over for them because they “did not believe on the Lord Jesus Christ”? I don’t think so. Or did the Lord Jesus Christ come to reveal and invite us into truth and LIFE vastly beyond our tiny little creeds? Saul falls on his own sword when he realizes there is nothing left but the torture of the Philistines. What was he thinking? Was he remembering Samuel’s words? If so, he was half glad to be out of it – out of this harsh and hopeless realm where, at least for him, nothing had gone right for a very long time. He has a lot of learning and growing and repenting and obedience yet to learn and do and go through. If that is not true for me also, then there is no hope for *me*. Oh how we hate and fight against the mercy, though it is our only hope.

In any case, in this unlikely and rarely told story, we find huge assertions about life beyond this one – and about mercy and welcome and God’s love for the failures, the suicides, the rejects, and the blunderers. And we are not even in Matthew or the Gospel of John. We are in First Samuel and 1095 B.C. I like that. Do you like that? Let us wake up, and rejoice!

3.) Finally, just a comment about the Witch – the Medium – of Endor. Why don't we know her name? Why don't we have monuments in her honor and name our daughters after her?

Though understandably cautious at first, she risks her life to help her king and country in an hour of great peril. She is greatly gifted and very, very good at what she does. And on top of it all, she turns out to be a person of exceptional compassion. Though no one ever treats her with honor or appreciation, she puts her life at risk by using the gifts God has given her. Beyond that, all through this encounter she has great empathy and compassion for Saul. At the end, seeing his weariness and knowing he has not eaten in a long while, she prepares for him a wonderful meal, without request beforehand or thanks afterward. And it is no can of Campbell's soup, either; it is a lovely meal – another fatted calf for another prodigal – and the last meal Saul ever eats. Why does this woman treat Saul this way – Saul, who has tried to banish or execute her and all of her kind? If we were to meet this woman at any other time, under any other title, or under any other circumstances, we would say she is an exceptional woman of grace and forgiveness and wisdom and love.

All through this story I keep asking myself: Are we in the Old Testament, or the New? In any case, this must have been a woman whom Jesus would greatly appreciate, love, and approve of – this Witch of Endor.