

The Witch of Endor: Reality Bites

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When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out at the top of her voice and said to Saul, “Why have you deceived me? You are Saul!” (1Sam 28:12)

A midnight rendezvous. A forbidden ceremony dabbling in the occult. Disguise, terror, criminality, and a death sentence. King Saul’s encounter with the Witch of Endor has all the components of a fantasy novel and yet, in reality, it is a poignant tale of a desperate king grasping for survival, and clutching only a thin, cold mist of despair. For all King Saul is rejected by God – and we must support the divine decision – it’s difficult not to sympathize with a soul so doomed. Surrounded by faithful warriors he may be, yet Saul cuts a lonely figure.

Many Bible readers are disconcerted by the details of this story, as the details seem to suggest sources of supernatural power other than God. In reality, no such implications exist; the tale actually reveals a palatable and believable truth.

King Saul is in dire straits; trouble that ultimately leads to his death. He is losing the kingdom of Israel. The Philistines, an itinerant people from Crete and related islands, have invaded Israel from the south. They have forged north, up the entire length of the country, keeping west against the coast, and have now circled around to attack inland Israel from the north. They are assembled in Shunem, in the hills of Moriah, and King Saul has mustered a counter-force in the opposing hills of Gilboa, with the plain of Jezreel lying between. Endor is just a handful of miles north of the front lines.

Saul’s former disobedience to God has cost him access to divine counsel; God won’t speak with him any more.¹ Panicking and despairing, Saul is prepared to dabble further in the illegal by seeking advice from a spirit medium.² He has banned them from the land on penalty of death, in

¹ 1Samuel 15:22-23

² Exodus 22:18; Deuteronomy 18:10

accordance with the law, but it's a signature of Saul's style – of his failure – that there is a witch nearby at Endor flouting the regal ruling, and Saul's men know all about it.

Saul decides to visit her and applies disguise since he's the King who has decreed witchcraft a capital offence. The witch is understandably nervous and suspicious that her visitor may be Saul. Saul has to go to the extreme of adjuring (swearing an oath in God's Name) that she will come to no harm before she trusts him.³ Saul requests that she "bring up" Samuel, Israel's last Judge.

Then the woman asked, "Whom shall I bring up for you?"

"Bring up Samuel," he said.

When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out at the top of her voice and said to Saul, "Why have you deceived me? You are Saul!" (1Sam 28:11-12)

Here is our first challenge. How does the witch know her visitor is Saul?

Some readers conclude, erroneously, that the witch must have supernatural insight to identify Saul. Not so. When we stop to consider what she does know, we can see she requires no special powers to identify him. For one thing, she must be an astute woman, because she's running a business which is punishable by death, meaning she has to somehow *advertise* her business, to obtain clients, and simultaneously *conceal* her activity, to preserve her life. Remarkably, she has achieved that impossible balance, so she's not a woman easily fooled or outmaneuvered. How then does she know her late-night visitor is Saul? Consider the facts she has in her possession:

- King Saul is unusually close by. Normally he would be in his tribal territory of Benjamin, more than a day's travel south, but currently he is just a couple of miles away, spearheading Israel's armed forces at Gilboa.
- King Saul is unusually tall: maybe 6 ft 10 (2.1 m) in modern equivalence (i.e. if we take the description "head and shoulders above other men" literally, which is our only clue), just as unusually tall as the visitor standing in front of her.
- King Saul has expelled all mediums from the land, so if he visits her he will doubtless be in disguise.

³ 1Samuel 28:10

- The unusually tall visitor has comrades with him, and she can likely detect that they are deferential to him, as servants would be towards a king.
- The unusually tall visitor requests to see Samuel! Samuel terrified the common people,⁴ and was usually only seen in the company of King Saul.⁵
- Samuel appears!

At this point the witch has more than enough cold, hard evidence to realize exactly who her visitor is, as others also conclude. Personally, I'd be more surprised if the witch, being an intelligent woman, was *not* able to realize it was Saul. After all, disguise can only achieve so much; at six foot ten, what's he going to do, put a flower in his hair? Of course she knows it's him.

The Evidence of the Scream

When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out at the top of her voice. (1Sam 28:12)

Witchcraft was a capital offence, so she has to practice her dark arts in maximum secrecy. Maximum secrecy certainly does not include screaming at the top of one's voice. That's a surefire way to attract maximum attention, in this case risking a death sentence. We can be clear: she never *normally* screamed.

So why scream this time? Logically, she must have been genuinely terrified because something shocking had happened; something that had never happened before. What was that? The appearance of Samuel.

We can therefore deduce that normally, when the witch 'summoned' the spirits of the departed, nothing happened. This is consistent with all other Bible teaching: humans do not possess supernatural powers (albeit the 'normal' powers of persuasion and deception are powerful indeed!). The witch's 'arts' were simply deception, and she made her money from the vulnerable and gullible; a practice that mediums continue to this day.

Smart Leading Lady she may be, but God chooses to involve Himself, and the witch is immediately caught way out of her depth. He who can raise the dead chooses to do so, and suddenly Samuel is there before her. She screams in genuine terror; having encountered face to face the power of the Living God.

⁴ 1Samuel 16:4

⁵ 1Samuel 9:15-27; 13:8-10; 15:1-33

Samuel Speaks

Saul asks the witch to describe what she sees (implying he is not able to see Samuel himself – it may be customary for the witch to withdraw to a partitioned area of the night-darkened tent, so that the average client doesn't see that nothing happens during the 'summoning').

Samuel said to Saul, "Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?" (1Sam 28:15)

This sentence is pregnant with implications. We learn three things from Samuel's one statement.

- Samuel speaks directly to Saul, bypassing the witch, who has been rendered an irrelevant spectator by God's intervention. Samuel correctly claims Saul is responsible for his resurrection; he knows that the witch did nothing and God raised him per Saul's request. Humans can't raise the dead, only God's Spirit does that.
- Samuel also says he has been 'disturbed,' suggesting he was in an unconscious, quiescent state, as one would be in the ground, dead.
- Finally, he says he has been brought 'up', not 'down'. No-one would dispute that Samuel was one of the godliest men who ever lived, yet he clearly wasn't in Heaven, else he would have said: "Why have you disturbed me by bringing me down?" Again, he was in the ground, dead.

The language of these latter details – being "disturbed" and "brought up" – are suggestive of actual resurrection, rather than just a vision provided by God in the mind, or the tent, of the witch.

Samuel continues:

"The Lord will deliver both Israel and you into the hands of the Philistines, and tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. The Lord will also give the army of Israel into the hands of the Philistines." (1Sam 28:19)

This teaches that the evil (Saul's sons) and the good (Samuel) go to the same place after death. Saul's sons will indeed join Samuel, in the grave, and Saul's disastrous stewardship of Israel's throne is brought to a final, fatal end on the slopes of Gilboa, a tragedy for all Israel which David rightly curses.

The Witch of Endor's Story is often considered a 'problem passage', since it seems to speak of weird supernatural happenings, but it actually proclaims the same simple message concerning

life, death, and the after-life as the rest of the canon. One scholar, Frymer-Kensky, misses all these clues, however, and erroneously concludes that the witch does indeed possess supernatural power to raise the dead, adding somewhat cryptically, and without explanation: “The dead do not like to be disturbed” (a preference I share myself, without ever needing to depart from the land of the living).⁶

Saul is devastated by the pronouncement of his doom and, coupled with lack of sustenance, physically collapses. The dynamic that follows is haunted with pathos, which typifies his reign: whatever he tries, *fails*. With Saul unable to control the situation, unable even to control himself, the Leading Lady takes charge. Once terrified that her life was endangered by the King’s presence, she realizes he is literally more frightened than she is⁷ so she graciously, yet equally firmly, takes command of the situation, pressing him to eat and take sustenance.⁸

It’s fascinating to see how the dynamics of Saul and the witch develop. First, she is terrified of him: he is the King, and she is the capital felon who has violated his divinely sanctioned edict. As Saul reassures her he has no intention of enforcing the law, indeed he is complicit in violating it, we see an evolved dynamic: a fragile cooperation in the occult, albeit with him in command and her obedient. But now that he has collapsed before her, devastated in both body and spirit, we see the final dynamic of the witch *mothering* the stricken King. Throughout the story the woman has risen in authority and the King of Israel has gradually shriveled. Once restored, Saul slips away into the blackness, to embrace a bleak dawn where he falls one final time on Mount Gilboa.

What of the Witch?

Our principal character fades innocuously away. What is her fate and future?

We’re not told. But there are comparable characters in the scriptural narrative from whom we might draw parallels. She was an apostate who came face to face with God’s power and life-force; we’ve seen others in this position. With whom can we compare her?

⁶ *Reading the Women of the Bible*, Tikva Frymer-Kensky, Schocken Books, 2002

⁷ 1Samuel 28:21

⁸ 1Samuel 28:23-25

I think primarily of the Gentile sailors at Joppa, on the ship bound for Tarshish that Jonah boarded.⁹ They were evidently dedicated and diligent men in their religion; not only did they pray to their gods before Jonah prayed to his,¹⁰ they even prayed to Jonah's God before Jonah did!¹¹ They witnessed God's power, and were wholly converted to the God they saw was real and powerful.¹²

I think also of Rahab of Jericho. A Leading Lady herself, she is a woman who has the bravery and confidence to take control of a situation and act for good. Yet she is distant from the God of Israel, being a Canaanite citizen of Jericho. Nonetheless, as a perceptive woman, she is well aware of the power of Israel's God, and that His people are irresistible in warfare as long as He is with them. This translates into a direct, living faith in Israel's God.¹³ Consequently, she is delivered from the battle that her people lose, and converted to God's family. Nor does she remain a mere bit-part player, as an immigrant convert might, but rather takes such prominence as to be one of the five named mothers of Christ in the Messianic lineage.¹⁴

Given those parallels, we have cause to speculate that the witch of Endor, as a smart woman, would have immediately forsaken her idolatry; if for no other reason than she had been terrified by God's intervention and would not risk the ire of the living God again! We can't prove anything, but it's reasonable to suggest that, in similar vein to Rahab and Jonah's co-sailors, the witch of Endor finished as a faithful disciple.

Samuel may yet see her again.

⁹ Jonah 1:3

¹⁰ Jonah 1:5

¹¹ Jonah 1:14, c.f. Jonah 2:1

¹² Jonah 1:16

¹³ Joshua 2:9-11

¹⁴ Matthew 1:1-17