

SAUL AND THE "WITCH OF EN-DOR"

SHAUL BAR

In I Samuel 28, Saul, the king of Israel, sought the help of a medium to raise up the dead prophet Samuel. Although he had previously exorcised mediums, Saul now felt a profound lack of confidence in regard to his upcoming battle with the Philistines and a need to speak to Samuel. When the medium beheld Samuel rising from the grave, she cried out and then rebuked Saul for deceiving her. What did the medium see? Was it the spirit of the dead, a shade? Why was Samuel angry with Saul and what was the nature of Saul's transgressions? In this paper we will show that the medium saw a "godlike being" whom she described as *an old man wrapped in a cloak* (I Sam. 28:14). Samuel reacted with anger: he saw Saul's act as desecrating his grave and disturbing his rest. The Talmud, by contrast, sees Samuel's reaction as fear of Judgment Day. According to the plain meaning of our chapter, Saul's transgressions were disobedience and violating a sacred ban in the war against the Amalekites. In contrast, the talmudic homilists enumerated five transgressions on account of which Saul died.

In his distress, Saul seeks a woman to bring up the spirit of the dead Samuel. This is because the Lord has failed to answer him, whether by dreams, by the *Urim ve-Tummim*, or through prophets. The entire incident is set at night: Saul departs from the camp after dark and returns before morning (I Sam. 28:8, 25). According to Ehrlich,¹ this is because witches engage in their magical practices only in the dark. Josephus explained the timing by the king's desire to conceal his absence from his army.² Abravanel offered a similar interpretation: "They went at night so that no one would see them and no one in the camp would know that he was gone." Both reasons may be true: darkness was essential for the medium and also for Saul to get away unseen, especially because he was now violating his own edict against mediums. Another explanation is that the episode's nocturnal setting alludes to the fact that the dead are in darkness (Ps. 88:13, 143:3; Job 10:21).

The Midrash describes Saul's adventure as follows: Then Saul said to his courtiers, "*Find me a woman who is a medium*" (I Sam. 28:7). R. Simeon ben

Levi said: "Whom did Saul resemble? A king who entered a city and said, 'Slaughter all of the roosters in this city.' At night, wanting to leave, he said, 'Is there no rooster here to crow?' They said to him: 'Did you not order us to slaughter them?' Here, too, Saul destroyed the *ovot* and *yiddonim* and then said, 'Find me a medium.'" ³

It is ironic that Saul, who had exterminated the *ovot* and *yiddonim*, found himself needing the services of a medium. The very fact of his request reflects his sincere belief that the dead know what will happen in the world of the living.⁴

THE MEDIUM AND THE SPIRITS OF THE DEAD

When the medium sees Samuel rising from the grave, she cries out and then rebukes Saul for deceiving her. Readers have long wondered why she did not recognize Saul before Samuel appeared. According to the talmudic sages and traditional commentators, including Rashi and David Kimḥi, the dead rise feet first. Samuel, however, arose in the normal upright posture, out of respect for the king. Seeing this, the woman now realized the identity of her visitor.⁵ In v. 14 the Septuagint, evidently based on this midrash, has her telling Saul that she sees ἄνδρα ὄρθιον = "a man upright" (reflecting a Vorlage of *zkf* instead of the MT *zaken*, "old"). According to Josephus, it was Samuel himself who revealed Saul's identity.⁶ Budde believed that some gesture that Samuel made toward Saul spoiled the latter's incognito.⁷

It is unclear what rites the medium employed to raise Samuel. The Midrash reports laconically that "she did what she did, and she said what she said, and raised him."⁸ Of course, it is possible that she was a fraud, but the Lord worked a miracle and Samuel really did rise from his grave. When Samuel appears, the woman is taken aback and cries out. One explanation is that she knew she had done nothing and was consequently astonished to see an actual spirit rise up.⁹ Several manuscripts of the Septuagint have "the woman saw [i.e., recognized] *Saul* and cried out," instead of the MT "Samuel"; some scholars would adopt this reading. However, the emendation seems to be ruled out by Saul's question, "What do you see?" and the woman's response, which describes Samuel's appearance (vv. 13–14).

According to Kaufmann, we are dealing with a method of gaining foreknowledge of the future by getting dead souls to declare what they know.¹⁰

The spirits of the dead are referred to as *elohim*; as the woman tells Saul, *I see elohim coming up from the earth* (v.13; cf. Isa. 8:19). They have a mantic power to know and reveal what is concealed in the future, a revelation they express in human language just as prophets do. The spirit of the dead recounts what it sees or knows through its mantic power. This is a special form of prophecy, that of the Rephaim.¹¹ Kaufmann maintains that enchanters worked themselves into an ecstatic state and became mediums. That is, the medium's mind merged with or was taken over by that of the dead person. During the encounter, the medium was in a prophetic trance and had supernatural knowledge. When the woman raised Samuel's spirit, she was imbued with supernatural knowledge that enabled her to recognize Saul.

The problem with Kaufmann's reading is that if the woman was in a trance, how could she suspend it to accuse Saul of deceiving her? Furthermore, according to the biblical narrative the woman served only as an instrument to make the initial connection between Saul and Samuel, who then spoke directly to each other. She is not a party to the conversation. The implication of v. 21, *the woman came in* (or went up [*va-tavo*]) *to Saul*, is that she was not present during the dialogue of king and prophet, but returned from another room and noticed Saul's panicked reaction to the encounter. Kaufmann, however, believes that the entire conversation was conducted by and through the medium.

Another possibility is that it is not the dead *person* who is raised, but only his *shade*, which ascends from under the earth and speaks in a chirping voice (Isa. 29:4; 8:19). According to this scenario, the medium and the inquirer sat in separate rooms. The medium saw the spirit of the dead in smoke or as a silhouette rising from the earth and translated its chirps into human language. At En-dor, however, Samuel appeared in his full form, not as a silhouette or in smoke. The woman was startled and then realized that it was only because of Saul that she had been able to raise Samuel. After the two verify that it is indeed Samuel who was brought up by her enchantments, Saul and Samuel converse directly. The woman goes away and returns only at the end of their dialogue.

We have already noted that the woman describes Samuel as *elohim*,¹² meaning a shade or superhuman being, as in Isaiah 8:19. Some scholars, such as Spronk and Lewis, cite various extra-biblical texts as evidence for the use

of *elohim* to refer to the dead.¹³ One possibility is that the spirit is called *elohim* because it is the divine part of a human being. Here *Targum Yonatan* renders the word, as often when it cannot refer to God, as "angel": *I saw an angel of the Lord rising up*. This meaning is supported by *all elohim bow down to Him* (Ps. 97:7). David Kimḥi explains that here *elohim* means "a great man" (cf. Ex. 22:8, 27). This reading is plausible; when Moses hesitates to accept his mission to Egypt and the Lord promises to send his brother Aaron with him, He tells him, *he shall speak for you to the people; and he shall be a mouth for you, and you shall be to him as elohim* (Ex. 4:16; cf. Ex. 7:1).

As for the plural participle *olim* "coming up", it agrees in number with *elohim*, which is a plural form; compare *He is a holy God (elohim kedoshim hu; Josh. 24:19)* and *living God (elohim ḥayyim; Deut. 5:26; I Sam. 17:26, 36; Jer. 10:10, 23:36)*. In the next verse, however, the medium describes what she sees in the singular; perhaps the woman saw more than one spirit but Saul asked to speak only with Samuel. Such an interpretation is found in the Talmud: *Olim* implies two, one was Samuel, but [who was] the other? Samuel went and brought Moses with him, saying to him: "Perhaps, Heaven forbid, I am summoned to judgment: arise with me, for there is nothing that you wrote in the Torah that I did not fulfill."¹⁴ The Tosafists explain that "although Moses was not of [Samuel's] generation, he said, 'This is how I interpreted the text and what I practiced. Come and bear witness for me, for you too have learned.'"¹⁵

Hutter offers the interesting suggestion that the location of the ritual and the ritual itself are evidence of Hittite influence. According to him, "gods rising" echoes an ancient Hittite incantation formula for conjuring up underworld gods, which was used by the pre-Israelite residents of En-dor.¹⁶ Inquiring of the dead is very similar to consulting with pagan deities, which is why it was banned in Israel. Later, when the denizens of the underworld were no longer considered to be gods, Samuel could be included in the category of *elohim* without being identified as a god. As Johnston noted, however, a link between En-dor and the Hittites is far from certain, and taking the term *elohim* to denote both forbidden pagan gods and licit non-divine beings seems to be contradictory.¹⁷ The best interpretation, then, is that mentioned above — "a great man" — since, as we shall see below, he is described as "an old man wrapped in a cloak," which can only go well with this interpretation.

SAMUEL'S APPEARANCE

When the medium raises Samuel, Saul asks her to describe what she sees; the implication is that Saul himself sees nothing. According to *Midrash Tanhuma*, Emor (quoted in *Yalkut Shimoni* 1:28), the medium does not hear what the dead person says, but sees him, whereas the inquirer does not see the shade, but hears its voice. Saul may be in the corner of the room or in the next room and does not see what is happening; this is why he must ask the woman whether it is indeed Samuel who has risen. The woman describes Samuel as *an old man wrapped in a cloak*, apparently the robe that symbolized Samuel's prophetic or judicial status.¹⁸ It may be the robe that Hannah made each year to bring to Samuel when she made her pilgrimage to Shiloh (I Sam. 2:19) or the cloak (it was Samuel's, see Rashi there) that was torn in two to symbolize the rift between the Lord and Saul (I Sam. 15:27). The reference to the cloak indicates that the dead in the underworld have the same appearance as they did in the world of the living.¹⁹ In any case, when he hears the woman's description, Saul knows that it is indeed Samuel who has risen and consequently bows low out of respect for the prophet.

DISTURBING THE REST OF THE DEAD

Saul is committing a grievous sin by inquiring of the dead, a practice that is abhorrent to the Lord (Deut. 18:12), instead of inquiring of the Lord. Raising up a prophet of the Lord by magical means, as a way of forcing the Lord to respond, is a detestable action. Samuel's reaction is to rebuke Saul: *Why have you disturbed me [hircgatzani] and brought me up?* (I Sam. 28:15). There is a bitter irony here, given that the next day Saul and his sons will join Samuel in the world of the dead.

We will understand Samuel's complaint more clearly if we compare it to Phoenician royal tomb inscriptions. For example, in the inscription of the tomb of Tabnit of Sidon: "Don't, don't open it, and don't disturb [*trgzni*] me, for such a thing would be an abomination to Astarte! But if you do open it and if you do disturb me, may [you] not have any seed among the living under the sun or resting place together with the shades!"²⁰ A similar description is found on the great sarcophagus of Eshmun'azar, discovered near Sidon: "Whoever you are, ruler and (ordinary) man, may he not open this resting

place and may he not search in it for anything, for nothing whatever has been placed into it! May he not take the casket in which I am resting, and may he not carry me away from this resting-place to another resting place!" There is also a curse against any ruler or man who opens the tomb or steals the casket: "May they not have resting place with the shades, may they not be buried in a grave, and may they not have a son and seed to take their place!"²¹ A comparison with these inscriptions demonstrates that Samuel views Saul's act as desecrating his grave and disturbing his rest, a transgression that is severely punished by Heaven. The grave should be a place where a person can rest in peace (see Job 3:13-19). Several passages in the Bible insist that the dead cannot be awakened from their sleep (II Kings 4:31; Jer. 51:39; Job 14:12).²² In fact, Saul has sinned twice, both by inquiring of the dead rather than of God and by disturbing the dead.

The Talmud, by contrast, sees Samuel's reaction as fear of Judgment Day: "Samuel said to Saul, *'Why have you disturbed me and brought me up?'* Now if Samuel, the righteous, was afraid of the judgment, how much more so should we be!"²³ The Jerusalem Talmud is even clearer about Samuel's trepidation. It has Samuel tell Saul, "What is more, I thought that it was the Day of Judgment and I was afraid."²⁴ On that day Samuel will be judged like every other human being. According to *Leviticus Rabbah*, Samuel explains his candor to Saul as follows: "When I was with you I was in a false world and you might have heard untrue words from me, for I was afraid of you lest you should kill me; but now that I am in a world of truth, you will only hear from me words of truth."²⁵

SAUL'S TRANSGRESSION AND REACTION

Saul's punishment was harsh. According to verse 18, Saul did not obey God and had violated a sacred ban in the war against the Amalekites. The result is that he and his sons will join Samuel in the grave. In addition, God will deliver the Israelites into the hand of the Philistines. Not surprisingly, the language in our chapter is similar to that of chapter 15, which describes Saul's sin with the Amalekites. Samuel then declares: *The Lord has this day torn the kingship over Israel away from you and has given it to another who is worthier than you* (I Sam. 15:28). In our chapter he says: *The Lord has torn the kingship out of your hands and has given it to your fellow, to David* (28:17).

In addition, we read there: *Why did you disobey the Lord?* (15:19). In our chapter: *because you did not obey the Lord and did not execute His wrath upon the Amalekites* (28:18). "Obey" and "listen" are key words in chapter 15 and are repeated in the last part of our chapter: *Your handmaid listened to you ... So now you listen to me ... But when his courtiers as well as the woman urged him, he listened to them* (28:21-23). Ironically, in chapter 17, Saul did not listen to God and disobeyed him, but now he listens to the medium and to his servants.

As we mentioned before, Saul committed two sins: he did not obey God and he violated a sacred ban in the war against the Amalekites. In contrast, the talmudic homilists enumerated five transgressions on account of which died. Although all of them are mentioned in the Saul cycle, the Bible does not allege that they were the reasons for his death. We find in Leviticus *Rabbah*:

[Saul] was slain because of five sins; as it says, *Saul died for the trespass that he had committed against the Lord* (I Chron. 10:13), because he slew the inhabitants of Nob the city of the priests, because he spared Agag, because he did not obey Samuel: for it says, *Wait seven days until I come to you* (I Sam. 10:8), and he did not do so, and because he inquired of the ghost and the familiar spirit, *and did not seek advice of the Lord; so He had him slain* (I Chron. 10:14).²⁶

It is not entirely clear how the homilist is counting five transgressions or what the fifth transgression is. The introductory verse, *for the trespass that he had committed against the Lord*, is probably included in the number; the printed editions add the word "and" before *he slew the inhabitants of Nob*.²⁷

According to the biblical account, when Saul learns that he will fall in battle on the morrow, he falls powerless to the ground (I Sam. 28:20).²⁸ Saul collapses both because of the terror inspired by the prophet's words and because he has eaten nothing for a whole day and night. Here the biblical narrator turns the spotlight on the woman, whose merciful and kind nature is revealed when she slaughters her fatted calf to feed Saul.²⁹ Josephus, too, took note of her positive qualities, despite the fact that biblical law condemned her to death:

Now it is but just to recommend the generosity of this woman...She still did not remember to [Saul's] disadvantage that he had con-

demned her sort of learning, and did not refuse him as a stranger, and one that she had had no acquaintance with; but she had compassion upon him, and comforted him, and exhorted him to do what he was greatly averse to, and offered him the only creature she had, as a poor woman...It would be well therefore to imitate the [woman's] example and to do kindnesses to all such as are in want and to think that nothing is better, nor more becoming mankind, than such a general beneficence, nor what will sooner render God favorable, and ready to bestow good things upon us.³⁰

CONCLUSION

It is unclear what rites the medium employed to raise Samuel. The Midrash reports laconically that "she did what she did, and she said what she said, and raised him." When the woman tells Saul, *I see elohim coming up from the earth* she meant "a great man" since later we find that the woman describes Samuel as "an old man wrapped in a cloak." The reference to the cloak indicates that the dead in the underworld have the same appearance as they did in the world of the living. Samuel views Saul's act as desecrating his grave and disturbing his rest, a transgression that is severely punished by Heaven. The Talmud, by contrast, sees Samuel's reaction as fear of Judgment Day. Saul's punishment was harsh. The talmudic homilists spell out five transgressions that explain why he died. Although all of them are mentioned in the Saul cycle, the Bible itself does not allege that they were the reasons for his death.

NOTES

1. Arnold B. Ehrlich, *Mikra Ki-Peschuto* (Ktav: New York, 1969) p. 169.
2. Josephus, *Antiquities* 6, 14, 2.
3. *Yalkut Shimoni: Midrash al Torah Nevim u-Khetuvim* (Jerusalem: Levin-Epstein, 1966-1967), 2:730.
4. On the other hand, according to Ecclesiastes 9:5, the dead know nothing.
5. Leviticus *Rabbah* 26:7; *Tanhuma* Leviticus 21:1; TB *Sanhedrin* 65b.
6. Josephus, *Antiquities* 14, 2, 333.
7. D. Karl Budde, *Die Bücher Samuel* (Tübingen and Leipzig: J. C. B. Mohr, 1902), p. 180.
8. Leviticus *Rabbah* 26:7.
9. T. J. Lewis, *Cults of the Dead in Ancient Israel and Ugarit* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989) p. 115.
10. Y. Kaufmann, "On the Story of the Medium," in *Mi-kivshonah shel ha-yetzirah ha-mikra'it: kovetz ma'amarim* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1966) p. 210 (Hebrew).

11. Ibid.
12. Other instances of *elohim* with a plural adjective are Joshua 24:19; Deuteronomy 5:23; I Samuel 17:26, 36.
13. Klass Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East*. (Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1986) p. 163; T. J. Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, pp. 49–51, 115; See also Arnold, who says *elohim* "denotes the ancestral dead and not simply ghost or spirit of the dead." Bill T. Arnold, "Necromancy and Cleromancy in I and II Samuel," *CBQ* 66 (2004):203.
14. TB *Hagigah* 4b; *Tanḥuma* Leviticus, Emor 2.
15. *Tosafoṭ* TB *Hagigah* 4b, *D'leika*.
16. M. Hutter, "Religionsgeschichtliche Erwägungen zu 'elohim' in I Samuel 28, 13," *BN* 21 (1983): 32–36.
17. Johnston, Philip S, *Shades of Sheol* (Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 2002) p. 146.
18. Similarly, King Ahaziah identified the man who met his messengers as Elijah from the leather girdle he wore (II Kings 1:8).
19. Isaiah 14:9; Ezekiel 32:27; TB *Sanhedrin* 90b.
20. "Tabnit of Sidon," transl. Franz Rosenthal, *ANET*, p. 662.
21. "Eshmun'azar of Sidon," transl. Franz Rosenthal, *ANET*, p. 662.
22. For the subject of disturbing the rest of the dead see: William W. Hallo, "Disturbing the Dead," in *Minhah le-Nahum: Biblical and Other Studies Presented to Nahum Sarna in Honour of his 70th Birthday*, ed. Marc Brettler and Michael Fishbane (JSOTSup 154; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993) pp. 183-192.
23. TB *Hagigah* 4b.
24. TJ *Hagigah* 2a.
25. Leviticus *Rabbah* 26:7.
26. Ibid; see also *Tanḥuma* Emor 2.
27. On the uncertainty of commentators on the Midrash in regard to the five transgressions, see Hanan'el Mack, "Three Parables of R. Shimon b. Lakish Concerning King Saul's Inquiry of the Spirits," in *Studies in Bible and Exegesis*, ed. Moshe Garsiel et al. (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2000), vol. 5:186, n. 28.
28. The verb *npl* occurs four times in chapter 31 (vv. 1, 4, 5, and 8).
29. On the character of the medium, see Uriel Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives*, transl. Lenn J. Schramm (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 73–92.
30. Josephus, *Antiquities* 6, 14, 4.