

THE GHOST OF SAMUEL: REAL OR IMAGINARY?

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In Chapter 28 of I Samuel, it is reported that Saul consulted a practitioner of necromancy, the witch of En-Dor, who evoked the deceased Samuel. King Saul then spoke to Samuel the prophet, who reconfirmed the end of Saul's kingdom and the defeat of his army in the forthcoming battle with the Philistines. This episode is preceded by a repetitious report of Samuel's death (I Sam. 28:3), which had already been recorded at the time it occurred (I Sam. 25:1); the place of his interment is also repeated. There is obviously a relationship between these two events, the death of Samuel and Saul's visit to the witch, as traditional commentators pointed out. Rashi's attempt to explain this repetition by claiming that Saul could have consulted Samuel in a natural way, had he been alive, appears to contradict the report in I Samuel 15:35 that the relationship between the prophet and the king had totally ceased even during Samuel's lifetime.¹

The idea that some human beings had the ability to raise deceased persons from the grave stretches our imagination. Rationalist commentators explain that this was all trickery: the sorcerers must either have pretended to raise the dead or they went into a trance that allowed them to believe in their own imagined supernatural power.² This is indeed implied in the account of Saul's experience. According to the text, Saul himself never saw the "resurrected" Samuel: the medium told him that a godlike figure was there and described his alleged appearance to Saul (I Sam. 28:12-13). The repeated mention of Samuel's death and burial, preceding our story, intensifies the belief that this whole episode was fraudulent. Had there been anything to it, Samuel would have appeared at his burial place in Ramah, not in far-away En-Dor.

Once we recognize that Samuel's ghost did not in fact rise up from the grave to speak to Saul, the latter's conversation with Samuel becomes a description of what Saul imagined Samuel was telling him. Rabbi Abraham, son of Rambam (Maimonides), explains that through trickery the necromancer would put the questioner into a dream-like state where he felt he was

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conversing with a ghost.³ Since the dead prophet Samuel was not actually present, Saul's conversation with Samuel in the text gives expression to two voices within his own mind. Samuel had predicted Saul's downfall, but his dire prophecy had not been fulfilled in his own lifetime. Saul was still king and enjoyed the respect, perhaps even the love, of his subjects. We can glimpse this from the actions of the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead, who later risked their lives to give Saul a decent burial after the Philistines put his remains on display (I Sam. 31:12-13). Saul may well have assumed that the prophet's curse was no longer valid after his death. Perhaps he had been forgiven for his past transgressions; perhaps God would once more come to his aid. This hopeful assumption was negated by the second inner voice, which affirmed that the great seer's prediction would be realized even after his departure. Haunted by these contradictory inner voices, Saul tried to find the answer.

Our attention is drawn to this inner conflict by the repeated mention of Samuel's death, which, after all, brought about this uncertainty. If only he could have a conversation with Samuel, the king thought, his hopeful expectations might be confirmed.

The ensuing "conversation" between Saul and Samuel is a fictional, symbolic portrayal of the struggle within Saul's mind. It starts with the medium describing the godlike form as old and wearing a robe (*me'il*; I Sam. 28:14). To the worried Saul, this recalls his last meeting with Samuel, when the prophet's torn garment symbolized the end of Saul's kingdom (I Sam. 15:27-28, 28:17).

While lying prostrate before the specter of the man who originally crowned him, Saul intuitively feels that the predictions of a true prophet are eternally valid. God has indeed *torn the kingship* from Saul (I Sam. 28:17), who remains unforgiven (I Sam. 28:18). Saul now realizes that he will die in battle against the Philistines (I Sam. 28:19). Losing his strength, he can barely rise. The witch then prepares a royal meal for him, symbolizing the loyalty of his people, and Saul understands that he must resume his kingly tasks. He leaves her home and, as the text so briefly but clearly states, he goes out into the night (I Sam. 28:25). Night stands for the absence of light and the accompanying sense of fear and doom. It is to Saul's credit that, despite the awareness of his impending

ing fate, he goes out to battle with the Philistines and leads the Israelites as their king for one final time.

NOTES

- 1. Radak and R. Yosef Kara also follow the interpretation of Rashi.
- 2. Maimonides, *Hilkhot Avodah Zarah*, 11:16. See also Radak on I Samuel 28:24.
- 3. Responsa of R. Abraham ben Moses ben Maimon, 27.



עשה תורתך קבע

THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR
DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ

April	Psalms	62 – 89
May	Psalms	90 – 117
June	Psalms	118 – 145
July	Psalms	146 – 150
	Proverbs	1 – 23
August	Proverbs	24 – 31
	Job	1 – 20

