THE MEDIUM OF ENDOR AND SAUL: ANCIENT AND CONTEMPORARY VIEWS

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The medium of Endor is one of the Bible’s more intriguing figures. In the context of I Samuel 28, at Saul’s request she performs a séance that is expressly forbidden by Torah law. You shall not tolerate a sorceress (m’khasheifa; Ex. 22:17). Elsewhere we read, A man or a woman who has a ghost [ov] or a familiar spirit shall be put to death (Lev. 20:27). When you enter the land ... Let no one be found among you ... who is an augur (qoseim q’samim) ... a sorcerer (m’khasheif) ... or who consults ghosts (shoel ov; Deut. 18:9-11). “Biblical monotheism … ruthlessly and relentlessly fought to extirpate such beliefs and practices.”1

Given the biblical antipathy towards those who consult ghosts, this article considers how the medium is presented in Samuel, and in two other ancient sources, Josephus’ Judean Antiquities and Pseudo-Philo’s Biblical Antiquities – L.A.B. [Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum]. Is she condemned or is she portrayed as a sympathetic character? What do contemporary scholars say about her? Further, by what terminology is she referred to in contemporary Bible translations, and what does that mean? In like manner, how is Saul regarded and presented in the book of Samuel, in Judean Antiquities, and in Biblical Antiquities? What do contemporary scholars say about Saul?

Early in I Samuel 28, to his credit, Saul had forbidden [recourse to] ghosts and familiar spirits (heisir ha-ovot v’et ha-yidonim; I Sam. 28:3). Yet when he is unable to access God’s direction using dreams, Urim, or prophets (v. 6), he asks his aides to find a woman who can traffic with ghosts (eishet ba-alat ov; I Sam. 28:7, twice). In its context, such knowledge may well have been reliable but the “law nevertheless insisted that God and his messengers must be the exclusive transmitters of prophetic knowledge.”2 Although biblical religion fought against such beliefs and practices, according to the narrative in Samuel it is patently clear that the medium did what she was asked to do. Not only does Saul ask for the woman to practice her craft, but she

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successfully raises the deceased figure of Samuel, who then converses with Saul (vv. 15-19).

How the woman is described is a crucial matter. In this article, unless it comes in a direct quote, I avoid the term “witch” of Endor, employing instead the term “medium.” Cheryl Anne Brown explains that the woman is not a witch “for a witch practices black magic, that is, attempts to influence the future rather than just divine it. The [woman] of Endor is more properly a medium or necromancer (one who divines by means of the dead).”3

I SAMUEL 28

In the Bible, when Saul first approaches the medium he does so humbly and with respectful words. There is no sense of a power imbalance here. He politely says to her in v. 8, qasami-na li b’ov … “please divine for me a ghost.” A few verses on he swears to her by God’s name that she is not in danger (v. 10). When she is upset at seeing the figure of Samuel, Saul comforts her, “do not be afraid” (v. 13). Saul seeks her counsel as a supplicant, he does not reflect his status as king of Israel. He certainly does not command her to bring up Samuel’s spirit, rather he pleads with her to do so.

Contemporary scholars explain that the medium of Endor is part of the women necromancers living in Israel who are paired with a male group, the wizards. Vanessa Lovelace explains that the “necromancer is not condemned by Dtr [the Deuteronomist, the Deuteronomic Historian(s)] here.” Lovelace refers to Esther Hamori who contends that contrary to those interpreters who have referred to the Endor woman as a foreigner or idolater, that there is “no indication in the text that she is anything other than a Yahwistic diviner providing her services of religious access to the king.”4 Auld suggests that she “is presented very sympathetically. She is an engaging character.”5 Terming her as a “ghostwife” P. Kyle McCarter explains that it “is assumed that the deceased have access to information about the divine plans.”6

David Jobling points out that necromancers and wizards are in “business … to call up the dead.” He also notes that her presentation is absent of any negative overtones. “The Medium of Endor is a minister of religion, and a good one. She understands the need of the one who comes to her, she takes charge of the situation, she does what she can for him … All this she does for her bitter enemy, the one who would expel her and her colleagues from home and livelihood.”7 This non-judgmental approach in the book of Samuel is surprising given that later Saul is reviled for his turning to the medium (I Chr. 10:13-14). Still, not all scholars are so positive. Paul Evans terms her a
charlatan and “suggests that she did not achieve these … results.” On the other hand, Uriel Simon points out that in talmudic literature, the rabbis “accepted the testimony of the verses as given and did not question the ability of Mediums to create a real link with the dead.” In any case, the “woman’s efforts [to] produce an apparition that turns out to be the shade of Samuel himself … offers no more hope to Saul than he did in life. His words are no less dour and no more comforting than at the last meeting of the two men at the altar in Gilgal.” The narrative concludes with the empathetic and kindhearted response of the medium of Endor, offered to a hopelessly distraught Saul.

The Bible’s Saul is a tragic figure in this chapter. “He has no future, only a past. . . He is simply a frantic man with no resources … He is a failed, pitiful character … All of Saul’s nobility is gone, robbed by forces beyond him.” He is rightfully fearful of the coming day’s battles. He feels forsaken and deserted. That he himself is responsible for this sad state of affairs only magnifies his feelings of helplessness. Saul is described as a “convinced Yahwist … [who turns to YHWH] for guidance and assurance (v. 6.) [YHWH’s] heaven is, however closed to him …Saul is abandoned [and] … becomes more desperate … Saul, when approved religion will not reassure, goes elsewhere (v.7).” As the chapter closes, the “now-broken king [is] … left speechless to the point of collapsing on the ground, physically debilitated by Samuel’s merciless doomsaying” as well as his having failed to eat that day.

ANCIENT VIEWS

The document we now regard as the Bible was not the only version of “Scripture” in the period of the Late Second Temple and for some time thereafter. Before the first century in the Common Era there was a “textual plurality among Jews, with multiple text forms conceived of as ‘the Bible,’ or Scripture, including the Hebrew source upon which the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint (LXX), was built.” Before that time “only the proto-rabbinic (Pharisaic) movement made use of MT.” Two works which address the Medium of Endor and Saul are Flavius Josephus’ Judean Antiquities (The Antiquities of the Jews) and the pseudepigraphic work, Biblical Antiquities (Pseudo-Philo – Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum [L.A.B.])

JUDEAN ANTIQUITIES

In Judean Antiquities, Josephus writes a history and introduces midrash-like elements within that framework. Josephus may have consulted the Septuagint [LXX], but
we “must not discount the possibility that he is perhaps following a tradition independent of both the MT and the LXX.”

Put another way “Josephus preserves material that is or was ‘biblical’ but that no longer appears in our contemporary Bibles. That is, when the text of Josephus is compared with contemporary Bibles … there are words, phrases, ideas and even an entire passage that prima facie could seem classifiable as ‘non-biblical’… They were, however, biblical for Josephus, and he had actually derived them from a ‘biblical text.’”

Josephus essentially follows the biblical version of I Samuel 28. Yet, as is his wont, he enhances the text. The medium of Endor and Saul section is found in book 6.327-342.

“In contrast to his generally negative attitude toward women … Josephus portrays the witch [sic] of Endor … as an extraordinarily positive character … The historian devotes to the witch [sic] a tribute (Ant. 6:340-42) in which he highlights her friendly readiness to help Saul, despite the fact that Saul himself has outlawed necromancy and is a stranger to her. Moreover, he emphasizes her outstanding generosity in offering to the king her only possession (her calf); her absolute selflessness, expecting no reward for her action; and her loyalty to the king, though at first she is determined not to violate the king’s prohibition.”

Josephus goes into a detailed description of the role of necromancers, describing them as a “class of ventriloquists [who] bring up the souls of the dead, and through them they foretell what will occur to those who ask” (6.330). No such details are in the Bible. The medium’s clear concern for Saul’s wellbeing is important for Josephus. He stresses her “exemplary character trait that he desires that his audience emulate (parenetic value) and … also presents the Jews in a positive light to non-Jews (apologetic value).”

Following Saul’s fainting spell at the conclusion of Samuel’s remarks, he revives. The medium “appealed to him to [to permit her] to set a table with food for him” so that he would have the strength to return to his camp. Initially Saul resists her request, but then capitulates (6.338). Josephus adds sympathetic details about the personal life of the medium, and her state of poverty. “She had a single tame calf that she had undertaken to look after and feed in her house – for the woman was a day-laborer and had to be satisfied with this as her only possession” (6.339). “Josephus may be alluding to Nathan’s parable [his cautionary image years later to then King David] of the poor man and his lamb, which is slaughtered by a rich man to provide a meal for a
traveler (II Sam. 12:3-4).” Josephus’ sympathetic description of the medium even exceeds the benevolent view of her in Samuel.

Perhaps as a former general himself, Josephus displays considerable sympathy for Saul. He devotes more space to him than does the Bible. Josephus’ Saul displays three of the Greek cardinal virtues, “great-souled,” “greatly daring,” and “despisers of terrors.” (See 6.343-350). In Judean Antiquities Saul becomes anxious and loses heart “foreseeing an inescapable calamity since the Deity was not present to support him” (6.329). This evaluation of Saul’s feelings is added by Josephus.

In Josephus the medium’s remarks are more detailed than that in the MT. Samuel is angry at being disturbed, and he not only criticizes Saul, he tells the monarch that he will die on the next day. Saul is devastated. Josephus suggests that Saul loses consciousness and “lay immobile, like a corpse” (6.337).

As Josephus’ medium is drawn even more sympathetically than in Samuel, so his Saul is a noble figure caught up in forces beyond his own ability to control.

**BIBLICAL ANTIQUITIES (PSEUDO-PHILO – LIBER ANTIQUITATUM BIBLICARUM [L.A.B.])**

Biblical Antiquities (Pseudo-Philo – Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum [L.A.B.]) [hereafter abbreviated as Biblical Antiquities (L.A.B.)] was likely written down somewhere between the Roman Army’s destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, and 150 CE. It is falsely attributed to Philo of Alexandria. Biblical Antiquities (L.A.B.) “is closer to Midrash in method, particularly in its propensity to quote verses from other portions of the Bible while expounding and expanding on a given passage.” Both Biblical Antiquities (L.A.B.) and Josephus focus on great leaders, but “the former is a popular history intended for Jews, whereas the latter is writing a history for a primarily non-Jewish audience, with a strong streak of the apologetic.”

Biblical Antiquities (L.A.B.) refers to the medium of Endor in chapter 64, the penultimate chapter of that work. “Although Pseudo-Philo follows the structure of the biblical text … his version deviates considerably and becomes virtually a new story.”

As with the MT, so here also Saul is frustrated at his inability to discern divine direction. In I Samuel 28 Saul speaks to his courtiers or his servants, presumably trusted advisors. He tasks them with finding a woman who consults ghosts so that he might make inquiry through her (v. 7). Biblical Antiquities (L.A.B.) features Saul’s search differently. He addresses “the people.” He says, “Let us seek out some diviner and inquire of him what I should plan” (64.3). Saul’s assumption is that the medium will
be a man. The text explains that at an earlier point Saul publicly staked his reputation on ridding Israel of mediums. “Saul thought and said, ‘If I remove the wizards from the land, Israel will remember me after my death’” (64.1). Now his seeking a medium shows him to be a hypocrite. The author of Biblical Antiquities (L.A.B.) paints a negative picture of the king. In that selfsame verse, in an aside God notes that Saul while rid the country of necromancers, he had done this not out of fear of God, but to make “a name for himself.” Consequently God predicts that Saul will end up going to those whom he has dispersed to seek “divination from them, because he has no prophets.” The Bible explains that Saul sees the Philistine’s army and so he is fearful (I Sam 28:5). Biblical Antiquities (L.A.B.) offers a different explanation, one which is more personal. “When Saul saw that Samuel was dead and David was not with him, he grew despondent” (64.3).

In the Bible the medium is anonymized, but here she is named. She is Sedecla, “the daughter of the Midianite diviner who led the people of Israel astray with sorceries” (64.3). That the people who speak of her to Saul frame their answer in a negative manner, that Sedecla’s Midianite father led many Israelites astray, suggests that they do not approve of Saul’s request. In the Bible Saul asks the medium to bring up someone whom he shall name. She then retorts that the king has forbidden such activity, and suggests that her visitor is trying to entrap her. Saul then swears by God, “an ironic contrast with spirits of the dead he wanted to invoke—that no guilt would accrue to the woman because of her actions.”

At that point Saul names Samuel as the figure he wishes to see (vv. 8-11). In Biblical Antiquities (L.A.B.) Saul tells the medium directly to bring up Samuel, and she responds by saying that she fears King Saul. He then promises her that she will not suffer harm by Saul in this matter. Next, Biblical Antiquities (L.A.B.) offers totally new material, matters only found there.

Saul said to himself, “When I was king in Israel, even people who had not seen me, they knew nevertheless that I was Saul.” Saul then asked the woman, saying, “Have you ever seen Saul?” She said, “I have seen him often.” Saul went outside and wept and said, “Behold now I know that my appearance has changed, the glory of my kingship has passed from me” (64.4).

It is likely that Saul’s statement about his appearance is an allusion to the idea that the face of the king shone. “Saul means that the radiance that had marked his face is no longer present. As this radiance is said to have been of celestial origin … Saul recognizes that he has lost God’s favor.”
The medium explains to Saul that for four decades she has successfully raised spirits for the Philistines. Nonetheless, never has a sign been seen like this, nor will it in the future (64.5). Nothing like these words are found in the Bible. In her description of the figure raised, she explains: his “appearance is not that of a man. He is clothed in a white robe with a mantle placed over it and two angels are leading him.” (64.6).

Samuel is upset at being disturbed. He clearly tells Saul and the medium that it was not she who brought him up, but rather God who had told Samuel while he was still living that he would come up to tell the monarch that he had doubly sinned against God. Furthermore he tells Saul that he and his sons would be delivered into the hands of the Philistines and die. At the close of the chapter Saul acknowledges that he will die the next day, and he states that he hopes that his death “will be an atonement for my wickedness” (64.9).26

In Biblical Antiquities (L.A.B.) both the figures of the medium and of Saul are more negatively drawn than in the Bible, and considerably more disapprovingly than in Josephus’ work.

MEDIUM, NECROMANCER, OR WITCH? WHAT’S IN A NAME? QUITE A BIT.

Bible translations as well as scholarly articles differ on how most accurately to refer to the occupation of this woman in verse 7. NJPS employs the term “consults ghosts.” A number of standard Bible translations such as the New International Version (NIV), the Roman Catholic New American Bible (NAB), and the Roman Catholic Jerusalem Bible (JB) offer explanatory descriptions prior to certain sections. All three refer to the “witch” of Endor. The word “witch” also is used in scholarly works such as in the Josephus section in the Jewish Publication Society’s multi-volume, Outside the Bible: Ancient Jewish Writings Related to Scripture. As mentioned earlier in this article, a witch “practices black magic, that is, attempts to influence the future rather than just divine it. The [woman] of Endor is more properly a medium or necromancer (one who divines by means of the dead).” The term “witch” is used as a pejorative. Yet as noted earlier, in her role the “Medium of Endor is a minister of religion, and a good one.” The editors of these various Bible translations and scholarly works felt that they had some discretion as to the wording of the titles for the subsections. In the actual text translations they were much more circumspect. NIV and NAB employ the word medium; and JB, necromancer. The New English Bible (NEB) translates that as a woman who has a familiar spirit. (v. 7). In v. 9 when the woman herself addresses Saul she uses the term one who uses ghosts and familiar spirits (ha-ovot v’et ha-yidoni –
NJPS). NIV has mediums and spiritists; NAB uses mediums and fortune-tellers; JB features necromancers and wizards. NEB features those who call up ghosts and spirits. NRSV translates these words as mediums and wizards. Nowhere in the translations from the Hebrew do these sources use the word “witch.”

CONCLUSION

As David will later lament, “How the mighty have fallen” (II Sam. 19:25, 27). Saul, once the hope of Israel comes to a bitter end. In his final days, through his own actions he is cut off from divine support. He finds it necessary secretly to seek out the counsel of a necromancer. When she brings up the spirit of Samuel, he learns of his own tragic fate on the coming day. The episode of the encounter between Saul and medium of Endor is as dramatic as it is sad. For someone whose livelihood is thoroughly condemned by biblical law, the presentation of the necromancer is surprisingly sympathetic in the Masoretic Text, especially in light of the clear condemnation of Saul in the later book of Chronicles (I Chr. 10:13-14).

In the early years of the first millennium of the Common Era, two sources, Flavius Josephus’ Judean Antiquities, and the pseudepigraphic work, Biblical Antiquities (Pseudo-Philo – Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum [L.A.B.]) each offers a variation of this powerful narrative. Josephus both admires and praises Saul, and devotes more space to him than is found in the book of I Samuel. Josephus, often characterized as misogynistic in his descriptions and treatments of women figures, is surprisingly complimentary and sympathetic to the medium. The pseudepigraphic work Biblical Antiquities (L.A.B.) adds, embellishes, and revises the narrative in I Samuel 28. The medium is given a name, Sedecla. Where Saul is treated sympathetically in Josephus, his figure in Biblical Antiquities (L.A.B.) is not heroic, and his hypocrisy is highlighted. Samuel’s condemnation of Saul in this latter work is even more dismal and dark than in either Josephus or the Bible.

Contemporary scholars comment on the figures of the medium of Endor and Saul. As Halbertal and Holmes point out, while such knowledge [by the medium of Endor] may well have been reliable, nevertheless biblical religion insisted that God and his messengers must be the exclusive transmitters of prophetic knowledge. Simon suggests that the rabbis “accepted the testimony of the verses as given and did not question the ability of Medium to create a real link with the dead.” In the view of contemporary writers, Saul is described as a man broken, abandoned and rejected by God.
He collapses to the ground, debilitated by the news of his impending death the next day. He is a tragic figure, and like the medium herself, Saul deserves our empathy.

NOTES
9. Uriel Simon. *Reading Prophetic Narratives*. Lenn J. Schramm, trans. (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1997), 287, n. 7. TB *Shabbat* 152b end takes at face value that the necromancer brought up Samuel’s ghost. See likewise *Leviticus Rabbah* 26.7; *Tanhuma Leviticus (Buber)* 8.4, 21.1 ff Part IV.
10. McCarter, 422.
13. Halbertal and Holmes, 64.

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24. Klein, 271.


26. This explanation, death-as-atonement contrasts with Josephus’ understanding. There “Saul’s motive in meeting death at the hands of the Philistines is his desire for sheer glory and renown thereafter, reminiscent … of an Achilles or a Hector in Homer’s *Iliad.*” Feldman, “Josephus’ *Jewish Antiquities*/Pseudo-Philo’s *Biblical Antiquities*”, 73. Although this final statement by Saul about atonement has no basis in the Bible, it is also referred to in the Midrash collection, *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, chapter 33.