

VISITING THE WITCH OF ENDOR—  
REVISITING ADVENTIST THNETOPSYCHISM:  
NOTES ON 1 SAMUEL 28

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The story of Saul’s visit to the Witch of Endor (1 Samuel 28) is among the most difficult texts for Adventists to explain in view of their confessional com-mitment to thnetopsychism (the theological concept that no aspect of man survives physical death, though he will be raised in the resurrection). Catholics interpret this episode as a rare instance in which God permitted a dead man to communicate with the living, as the book of Sirach (an inspired text in in the Catholic canon) confirms:

Even when [Samuel] lay buried, his guidance was ought;  
he made known to the king his fate,  
And from the grave he raised his voice  
as a prophet, to put an end to wickedness. (47:20)

If accurate, this episode demonstrates that the dead continue to exist in some form after death. This survey will discuss indications within the text of 1 Samuel 28 itself.

*Survey*

The twenty-eighth chapter of 1 Samuel begins with news of the Philistines gathering a fearsome armies to fight against Israel (28:1,4-5). It proceeds to remind the reader that Samuel had already died (25:1), and (in an instance of foreshadowing) that Saul had also “expelled the mediums and the wizards from the land” (28:3).

Saul, now threatened with impending defeat, desperately seeks Yahweh, but has no means through which to speak with Him. Evidently, he tried fasting (28:20; Hoerth) but to no avail. The text records, “when Saul inquired of the Lord, the Lord did not answer him, not by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by prophets” (28:6), listing the three mediums of communication already inaccessible to Saul. Earlier, the Spirit of the Lord (who mediates divine communications in dreams) had departed from Saul as one disobedient (16:14). Likewise, having escaped Saul’s slaughter of the Yahwist priests at Nob, Abiathar had secret the ephod (with the urim) to the camp of David. Ironically, the urim was therefore is hidden within the Philistine camp opposing Saul (28:1-2; 29:2; cf. 30:7); Saul no longer had it in his possession to consult. Finally, Samuel had also abandoned Saul for

his unrepentant heart, mournfully refusing to see him to the day of his death (15:35). The author of 1 Samuel, recognizing Saul's meager efforts to inquire of the Lord (fasting), can accurately claim that he did "inquire" of the Lord (28:6). By contrast, the Chronicler, knowing that Saul could not have consulted God through the three primary modes of communication, could complimentary claim (with equal validity) that he "did not" (1 Chr 10:14).

Impatient, and frustrated by the barriers his own rebellion had erected, Saul again decides disobedience is his only course of action (compare chap. 28:6-7 to 13:2-9). If the prophets will not freely visit him, he will coerce their spirits through witchcraft. Saul instructs his servants, "Seek out for me a woman who is a medium, so that I may go to her and inquire of her." His servants said to him, "There is a medium at Endor" (28:7). Armed with this knowledge, Saul travels by night to the medium with two men (28:8). Entering the woman's house, and carefully disguised to conceal his identity, he implores her, "Consult a spirit for me, and bring up for me the one whom I name to you" (28:8). Having assured the witch that he does not intend to bring the penalties of the law upon her (28:9-10; especially once his identity is exposed in 28:12-13), the séance begins:

Then the woman said, "Whom shall I bring up for you?" He answered, "Bring up Samuel for me." When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice; and the woman said to Saul, "Why have you deceived me? You are Saul!" The king said to her, "Have no fear; what do you see?" The woman said to Saul, "I see a divine being [Hb. *'elohim*] coming up out of the ground." He said to her, "What is his appearance?" She said, "An old man is coming up; he is wrapped in a robe." So Saul knew that it was Samuel, and he bowed with his face to the ground, and did obeisance.

Then Samuel said to Saul, "Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?" Saul answered, "I am in great distress, for the Philistines are warring against me, and God has turned away from me and answers me no more, either by prophets or by dreams; so I have summoned you to tell me what I should do." Samuel said, "Why then do you ask me, since the Lord has turned from you and become your enemy? The Lord has done to you just as he spoke by me; for the Lord has torn the kingdom out of your hand, and given it to your neighbour David. Because you did not obey the voice of the Lord, and did not carry out his fierce wrath against Amalek, therefore the Lord has done this thing to you today. Moreover, the Lord will give Israel along with you into the hands of the Philistines; and tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me; the Lord will also give the army of Israel into the hands of the Philistines."

Immediately Saul fell full length on the ground, filled with fear because of the words of Samuel; and there was no strength in him, for he had eaten nothing all day and all night... [After eating] they rose and went away that night. (28:11-20,25)

Saul appears to have engaged the departed spirit of Samuel, albeit through the medium of the witch, who alone could see and (likely) hear the apparition (28:12-14). Several indications within the text support this conclusion:

1. *References to the Apparition:*

The writer consistently, and without qualification, refers to this figure as Samuel (“Samuel said” in 28:15,16; “the words of Samuel” in 28:20). Jerry Gladson observes,

A disinterested reader of this story gets the distinct impression that the actual Samuel is intended here... Only in the initial phases of the séance, when the shadowy figure, the *'elohim*, materializes, is there any doubt.<sup>1</sup>

Of note, the author of the passage could have elected to continue referring to the apparition as the “*'elohim*” (“preter-natural being” as in 28:13) if he intended to distinguish it from Samuel himself; he does not. This term (variously used for the true God, false Gods, and angels) would especially foster the idea that Saul spoke not to Samuel but to a demonic power. However, the writer himself refers to the figure solely as Samuel. After Saul confirms the identity of Samuel (28:14), the term “*'elohim*” never appears again.

2. *Consistencies with Samuel:*

Consistencies in the messages delivered by the apparition and Samuel himself confirm their identification. The message recorded in 28:16-19 is a repetition of the words Samuel issues earlier in the book (cf. 16:26-29), prefaced by the words, “the Lord has done to you just as he spoke by me.” (28:17) Samuel observes the fulfillment of his dire predictions from beyond the grave, assuring Saul of his final doom (28:19).

The fact that the apparition only speaks judgment to Saul is also relevant. Yahweh (and his prophets) have rejected the king, abandoning him entirely and finally (28:16; 15:29) By contrast (and in brilliant irony), the witch alone shows kindness to Saul at the end of his life, hospitably preparing him a regal meal before his departure (28:22-25). Saul enjoys the company of those numbered among the outcasts and sinners of Israel, likewise condemned by God. Therefore, the attitude of the apparition towards Saul is consistent with that proper to a true prophet of Yahweh, rather than that displayed by the enemies of God.

### 3. *Absence of Contrary Textual Indications.*

Most indicting, the text provides *no* indication (explicit or implicit) that Saul conversed with any other than the prophet. All arguments to the contrary approach the issue from wider biblical concerns: the plausibility of communicating with the dead through necromancy, or the reality of an intermediate state. None examine the text itself to answer the all-important question: what did the writer himself believe, and how does the passage reflect his views? Upon review, all indications within the passage suggest that the writer believed that Samuel himself communicated with Saul in this unique episode.

#### *Counterarguments*

At this juncture, it is necessary to respond to the arguments Adventists submit to exclude this conclusion. Some are more viable than others:

#### 1. *Issues Surrounding Necromancy.*

The most ancient objection to the idea that Samuel himself truly communicated to Saul from the grave flows from the Judeo-Christian condemnation of necromancy and witchcraft in general (Ex 22:18; Lev 19:31; 20:6,27; Deut 18:9-13; Is 8:19,20). If one believes that the medium truly contacted Samuel, he has seemingly conceded to necromancy as an effective form of magic.

Certainly, Catholics believe that judgment rests upon all who engage in witchcraft; Saul's final destruction was only confirmed by this wicked act (1 Chron 10:13-14). However, the inspired record confirms that Samuel was truly made present in the house of the witch: of that we may remain certain. The New American Bible commentary notes then synthesize a Christian perspective on the episode: "If we are to credit the reality of the apparition to Saul, it was due, not to the summons of the witch, but to God's will; the woman merely furnished the occasion."<sup>2</sup> There, on the most degrading night of Saul's life, Yahweh allows Samuel to repeat the sentence of judgment.

The fact that the Lord had refused to communicate with Saul through prophets (as mentioned in 28:6) should not be charged as evidence that Samuel did not speak with Saul. As mentioned earlier, the plot of 1 Samuel 28 centers around Saul's desperate attempt to *force* God to speak to him by conjuring up a dead prophet. Ironically, God permits Saul the hearing he desperately seeks, only to reconfirm the king's impending doom.

## 2. *The Trajectory of Samuel's Emergence.*

Francis D. Nichol, the famed Adventist apologist of the 1950s, repeats this argument in the following (blunt) words, directed at Christians who believe in an intermediate state:

Saul uses the words, "bring up." The witch uses the same and similar expressions, "bring up," "ascending out of the earth," "comes up." And to Samuel are attributed equivalent words, "bring me up." How do you harmonize all these statements with your belief? You believe that the righteous dead are up in heaven, not down in "the earth." Can "ascending out of the earth" mean descending out of heaven?<sup>3</sup>

In Hebraic thought, the spiritual realm of the dead was subterraneous (as the grave itself is subterraneous). Catholic theology mirrors this idea when describing the place of the dead before the Resurrection of Christ. In the episode of "the harrowing of hell," Christ "descended" into the realm of the dead ("hell," as in the Apostle's Creed).

Yet, one should recall that this episode is, essentially, a vision. Christ did not "descend" from heaven to meet either Paul or Ananias in Acts 9:3-5,10; he simply appeared to them, and this despite the fact that he is truly enthroned in heaven (the vision was irrespective of his actual physical location). An apparition/vision is not subject to any physical realities.

## 3. *The Appearance of Samuel.*

Saul positively identifies Samuel by the fact that the apparition appears wearing a "robe" (Hb. *me'il*). Gladson notes in this regard:

The medium notices (v 14) that the apparition is wearing a "robe" (*me'il*), the same word used of the robe Hannah brought Samuel annually at Shiloh (2:19), and evidently the garment that distinguished Samuel throughout his career. Samuel wore this robe on the occasion of Saul's rejection (15:27).<sup>4</sup>

Surprisingly, many Adventist interpreters overlook the significance of this visual detail as a positive mark of identification. Neils-Erick A. Andreasen (ignorantly) belittles Saul's reaction to the robe:

The 'ghost' coming up out of the earth, described by the woman as... an old man wrapped in a robe, was identified by Saul on the basis of [the medium's] less-than-detailed description as the one he was seeking, namely Samuel. In short, the story bears no testimony to the actual presence of the prophet.<sup>5</sup>

To the contrary, the medium's mention of the *me'il* was more than sufficient to positively identify Samuel.

Another popular Adventist argument ridicules the idea that a spirit of one dead could appear clothed. Bacchiocchi contends: "If the spirits of the dead were disembodied souls, they obviously would not need to be wrapped around in clothes."<sup>6</sup> This argument again ignores the very nature of a vision; Samuel appears in an identifiable form. A vision may include whatever visual elements it requires towards its ends.

#### 4. *References to the Apparition as Phenomenological.*

A common counterargument suggests that the writer exploited the "language of appearances" (phenomenological description), describing the apparition as Saul and the medium perceived it, without intending to communicate the idea that Samuel had actually appeared to them.

However plausible, this argument suffers three weak-nesses: (1) As in my first contention, the witch had already assigned an alternative noun to denote the subject of the apparition ("*elohim*" tr. "preternatural being"; 28:13). Yet, the author never makes recourse to this noun; he uses the name "Samuel" corresponding to that used by Saul after he confirmed that the prophet was indeed present. The author likely agreed with Saul in his identification.

(2) Invoking my third contention, the text nowhere indicates that the author himself did not believe this figure to be Samuel. When considering the possibility that the author used phenomenological language in the passage, we must admit that the text itself provides no such indication; it reads quite naturally.

The idea that Saul and the witch instead spoke to a demon is a Christian supposition *read into* the text. In fact, the Bible never explicitly suggests that mediums speak to demons at all (rather than to the actual souls of the dead); this idea comes to us as a heritage of the Christian tradition, perhaps extrapolated from such texts as Acts 18:16-18. Consequently, it is impossible for us to read that idea into the mind of the text's original author. All indications suggest that he too considered Samuel present: he would have been as much "deceived" as Saul and the medium.

(3) My second contention is also noteworthy in refuting the identification of the apparition with a demon.

#### 5. *Samuel's Prediction.*

Many Adventists also cite Samuel's prediction "and tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me" along the lines of Objection 1:

If that were true, it would mean that God's prophets and apostate kings share the same living quarters after death. This

runs contrary to the popular belief that at death the saved go up to heaven and the unsaved down to... hell.<sup>7</sup>

Samuel predicts that Saul and his sons would join him in death—the grave. The LXX supports this reading: “and tomorrow you and your sons with you will fall.” There is no need to read cosmological destiny into this passage; Adventists refute a reading Catholics themselves do not embrace (straw man argument).

### *Conclusion*

1 Samuel 28 presents unique difficulties to the Christian interpreter. However, the textual evidence tends to support the conclusion that Saul indeed communicated with the spirit of the departed Samuel. This conclusion correlates with the words of the book of Sirach. In that case, some form of existence apparently survives physical death, excluding the theological position of thnetopsychism.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Gladson, Jerry. Re-thinking Life after Death: Confessions of a Troubled Conditionalist. Proclamation 2/3, 2001. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Note on 1 Samuel 28:12. The New American Bible. Wichita, KA: Fireside, 2000. 269.

<sup>3</sup> Nichol, Francis D. Answers to Objections. Washington: Review and Herald, 1952.

<sup>4</sup> Gladson 4.

<sup>55</sup> Andreason, Niels-Erick A. Death: Origin, Nature, and Final Eradication. Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology. Ed. Raoul Dederen. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000. 326.

<sup>6</sup> Bacchicchi, Samuele. Immortality or Resurrection? Biblical Perspectives 13. Coldwater, MI: Remnant, 1998. 168.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*