

The Witch*¹ of En-Dor / אִשֶּׁת בְּעַלְת־אֹב בְּעֵין דּוֹר

Saul saw the Philistines' encampment. He was afraid and his heart trembled greatly. Saul inquired of God, and God didn't answer him, not by dreams, not by Urim and not by prophets. Saul said to his courtiers, "Find me a woman who consults ghosts, so that I can go to her and inquire through her." And his courtiers told him that there was a woman in En-dor who consulted ghosts.

Saul disguised himself; he put on different clothes and set out with two men. They came to the woman by night, and he said, "Please divine for me [with an *ov/ghost*] and bring up for me the one I will tell you."

The woman said to him, "Look! You know what Saul did, that he banned [the use of] ghosts and familiars in the land. Why are you ensaring my life to cause my death?"

Saul swore to her by God's name: "As *Adonai* lives, no punishment will fall upon you about this matter."

The woman asked, "Who shall I bring up for you?" He answered, "Bring up Samuel for me." She saw Samuel, and she cried out very loudly. She said to Saul, "Why have you deceived me? You are Saul!"

The king answered her, "Don't be afraid. What do you see?" And the woman said to Saul, "I see a divine being coming up from the earth."

"What does he look like?" he asked her.

"It is an old man coming up," she said, "and he is wrapped in a robe."

Then Saul knew that it was Samuel; and he bowed low in homage with his face to the ground.

Samuel said to Saul, "Why have you disturbed me, bringing me up?"

Saul said, "I am greatly distressed, and the Philistines are fighting me, and God has left me and doesn't answer me anymore even by prophets or dreams, so I called you to tell me what to do."

Samuel said, "Why do you ask me, seeing that *Adonai* has turned away from you and has become your adversary? And God will do for him as God said through me: God foretold through me: *Adonai* has torn the kingship out of your hands and has given it to your fellow, to David, because you did not obey God, and did not execute God's wrath upon the Amalekites. That is why *Adonai* has done this to you today. Furthermore, God will deliver the Israelites who are with you into the hands of the Philistines. Tomorrow your sons and you will be with me; and God also deliver the Israelite forces into the hands of the Philistines."

Saul hurriedly fell to his full length on the ground and was very frightened by Samuel's words. He had no strength, for he hadn't eaten food all that day and all that night.

The woman went up to Saul and, seeing how greatly disturbed he was, she said to him, "Your servant listened to you; I took my life in my hands and heeded the request you made of me. So now you listen to me: Let me set before you a piece of bread. Eat, and then you will have the strength to go on your way." He refused, saying, "I will not eat."

But when his courtiers as well as the woman urged him, he listened to them; he got up from the ground and sat on the bed. The woman had a fatted calf in the house. She hurried and slaughtered it. She took flour and kneaded it, and baked some unleavened bread. She served Saul and his servants. They ate, they arose, and left the same night.

(I Samuel 28:5-25)

Saul died for the trespass that he had committed against *Adonai* in not having fulfilled the divine command; moreover, he had consulted a ghost to seek advice, and did not seek advice of God - so *Adonai* had him slain and the kingdom transferred to David, son of Jesse. (I Chronicles 10:13)

Companion Texts:

Do not turn to ghosts and do not inquire of familiar spirits, to be defiled by them: I, *Adonai*, am your God.
- Leviticus 19:31

And one of [Saul's] servants told him that there was such a woman in the city En-Dor, but was known to nobody in the camp; hereupon Saul took off his royal apparel, and took two of those his servants with him...whom he knew to be most faithful to him, and came to En-Dor to the woman, and entreated her to act the part of a fortune-teller, and to bring up such a soul to him as he should name to her.

- Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*

*witch, medium, necromancer, lit. woman with power over the 'ov'

Classical Midrash

CHARMERS [Hebrew: *'ovot*] as in “jugs” [Hebrew: *'ovot*] [Job 32:19] — this being a major tool of their trade. **WIZARDS** [Hebrew: *yidd'onim*], from “knowledge” [Hebrew: *da'at*]. They seek knowledge of the future. Certain empty-headed people have asserted that Scripture would not have forbidden charmers as a form of witchcraft if they were not true. I declare the exact opposite of their words: Scripture has forbidden only that which is false, but has not forbidden the truth. This is borne out by the prohibitions against idols and graven images. Were it not for my unwillingness to enter into a digression, I could elucidate definitive proofs against this practice. - Ibn Ezra

Whosoever believes in these matters, and their like, and suppose that there is wisdom and truth in in them, save that the Torah disallowed them, such are none other save from among the foolish and ignorant and are to be included among women and children whose mind is not sound. Wise and sound-minded people know that all these matters which the Torah disallowed are not matters of wisdom, but formless nonsense followed by senseless people for the sake of which they abandoned every path of truth.

- Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Foreign Worship and Customs of the Nations* 11:16)

THE WOMAN SAW...there are many commentaries on this...Ra'Bag says that usually the witch excites the imagination of the person to believe they saw something, meaning it is fake magic. This explains why she shrieks - because it was usually fake, except for this time. - Malbim on I Samuel

She screamed loudly, for she saw [the ghost of Samuel] ascending in an unusual way. Radak suggests that the moment the woman saw the way in which Shmuel came up, she realized that the man who had come to her was Saul, and that is why she screamed. For those who ascend [through the *עץ אֵל*], ascend upside down (with their feet upward), while this one ascended right side up, in honor of Saul.

- Vayikra Rabbah 26:7

She exposed Saul's hypocrisy

Reish LaKish taught: there is a parable of a king, who one day made a decree that all the roosters in his realm should be slaughtered. That evening, the king, who needed to rise early the next morning for travel, said, “Is there a rooster that can crow to wake me up tomorrow morning?” They said to him – No! Aren't you the one who made that decree yesterday?! They have all been slaughtered! In this way, Saul sought out the destruction of witchcraft and necromancy, but then sought them out for his own purposes.

- Leviticus Rabbah 26

She exposed Saul's nobility

After Saul heard that he and Israel would fall into the hands of the Philistines, he asked Samuel: “Is it not possible for me to flee?” And Samuel replied: “If you flee, you will be saved.” Upon hearing this reply, Saul fell to the ground. When Abner and Amasa asked the king what had happened, he lied to them, saying: “Samuel told me that tomorrow when I go forth to battle I shall be victorious, and my sons shall become princes.” Then God summoned the ministering angels and told them: “Come and see the being that I have created in my world. In the way of the world, when a person goes to a *bet ha-mishteh* (tavern) he does not take his sons with him, for appearance's sake. But this one, Saul, goes forth to war, knowing that he will be killed, yet he takes his sons with him, and rejoices at the divine justice that strikes him” (Lev. Rabbah 26:7). In a different midrashic account, Samuel tells Saul: “If you heed my counsel, it would be worthwhile for you to fall on your sword. Thus your death will atone for you, and you shall be together with me.” Saul took the prophet's advice, and fell on his sword, together with all his sons. (Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer)

-Midrashic compilation by Dr. Tamar Kedari

Contemporary Midrash

So, what does this story tell us about women and the taboo power of witchcraft? Among other things, it highlights the (literally) unorthodox methods women have at their disposal to confront leaders they think are incompetent or corrupt — and the way these messages can come shrouded in mystery and mysticism. The woman in this story is often called “The Witch of Endor” but the Hebrew text describes her as a *ba’alat ov*, which could be more literally translated as a “controller of the spirit.” In the Torah, where women are typically described as wives, mothers, or prostitutes, it is significant that Saul seeks out a woman for advice, and not just any woman, but a woman who exercises unquestioned power and authority over others — she *controls* them. And, in this specific case, she is a woman who exercises power over two men: Samuel, in conjuring his spirit, and Saul, in forcing him to eat his last meal. This is no small thing. It suggests that perhaps part of the reason magic has been made so taboo is because it was seen by the rabbis as a competing and legitimate form of power and knowledge that can be directed by women over other people, including men.

That the Witch of Endor has no name deepens the mystery around her power. She does not advertise her services. She cannot be traced or tracked. Unlike Saul, a king, whose power is made visible through ceremony, war, and sacrifice, the Witch of Endor’s power is in her invisibility. Perhaps that is part of what makes her, and others like her, so dangerous — and so remarkable. The underground nature of her power makes one think of the countless ways throughout history that women have fought the patriarchy in these hidden ways: through whisper networks, through unconventional methods like charm and deceit, and, yes, through magic....

What is most fascinating, most revealing, about this story is the simple fact that Saul couldn’t actually *see* Samuel’s spirit. He had to rely on the woman’s word that Samuel was there. But, let’s recall the woman’s reluctance. Did she really do a spell? Or could it be that it wasn’t truly Samuel’s spirit, but actually the woman herself speaking? In fact, perhaps, in that moment, there wasn’t really any magic at all, but simply a nameless woman speaking truth to power. And what could be more taboo — or more desirable — than that?

- Minrose Straussman

Whatever the necromancer does, it works. Even though she is reluctant to risk her life by breaking the law, she succeeds in raising a “divine being,” (*elohim*) – a spirit. At this point, she does not know what otherworldly being is approaching her: it could be a demon, an angel, or a ghost. But somehow, seeing this spirit, she knows who Saul is....the necromancer now channels the words of Samuel’s ghosts, a speech that predicts Saul’s death....Samuel does not do the one thing that Saul asks of him: he does not tell Saul what to do. This omission echoes in the words he does say: Saul’s fate is sealed and there is nothing he can do. Saul is devastated. He lies there defeated as the necromancer approaches him....And now an amazingly flattering portrait emerges of a woman who was, after all, involved in an outlawed activity. She, unlike Samuel, will give him something concrete to do: he can at least eat. Twice she calls herself “your servant,” a term often used by women in petition....

She reminds him that his job is not finished, that he needs his strength....and she won’t take no for an answer.

The necromancer becomes the very model of Israelite hospitality....giving her guest what might be her only fatted calf. Like Abraham, she *hurries* to prepare the meal...the bread is prepared absolutely fresh and new for the visitors....At the beginning of Saul’s career, Samuel entertained him at a festive meal and announced that he would be king. Now, at the end of Saul’s reign, [the necromancer’s] meal resonates with [Samuel’s].

This is not an evil woman. Quite the contrary, the necromancer is presented as good and generous. Her ability to communicate with spirits does not make her evil. Her craft is outlawed because it is an uncontrollable and ungovernable access to divine knowledge. But it is effective, and it can be benevolent. Like the more legitimate prophets, the necromancer is a channel for contact with divine power...[she] has the terrible task of channeling and announcement of doom, but she can at least give Saul the courage and strength to face it.

- Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* pp. 312-314



Illumination from the Gumbertus Bible (12 cent. Bavaria)

While the Witch of Endor was typically denied agency in representations of the summoning created prior to the fifteenth century, this illumination is unique in that it shows the Witch in a position of great power. In other pre-fifteenth century illuminations, the Witch of Endor was typically depicted behind Saul, or off to the side with Saul being the main focus of the image. In this illumination, her position with outstretched arms behind Samuel indicates a role of direct, autonomous action in the resurrection. She is one of the main actors of the image, rather than being sidelined as an onlooker. Additionally, describing the Necromancer of Endor as a “witch” was not actually popularized until the sixteenth century. The word is used in this entry to offer an easy colloquial reference; the actual historical transition to using the word “witch” is part of a less innocuous narrative. Prior to the sixteenth century, the Witch of Endor was often referred to as a necromancer, sorceress, medium, diviner, or *phitonissa*. These terms did not carry an inherently negative or accusatory connotation. During the period of witch hunting and persecutions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the word “witch” was popularized in order to inextricably link the sorceress to demon worship, evil, and deceit.

- Feminae: Medieval Women and Gender Index, Univ. of Iowa



The witch of Endor conjures the ghost of Samuel; Saul bows before him on the right. Etching, 18th Century England



Saul and The Witch of Endor, James Tissot (1836-1902)