

Individual Report

The Witch of Endor: Toward a Literary Treatment

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The Books of the Kingdoms (1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 and Kings) are written in a literary fashion. The writer develops themes artfully, makes use of foreshadowing and subtext, highlights some details and omits others, and allows suspense to build. The art of the writer can be seen not only in what is said and how, but in the way some questions are allowed to remain unanswered. This approach requires the reader to grapple with the text, to take it personally, to identify with the characters portrayed, to apply it to him or herself. As a reader, I want to encounter the biblical text in this way and be changed by it. As a fiction writer, I desire that my readers also grapple in this way with my stories. In preparation to write a story inspired by Saul and the witch of Endor in 1 Samuel 28, I seek to explore some of the unanswered questions in this narrative.

Subtext relies on a shared narrative between author and reader. As modern readers, we lack this context. This paper will therefore look not only to Christian scholarship but also ancient Jewish rabbinical interpretations in exploring the questions this story raises. In particular, I will address the following: Who is this woman? How do Saul's men know where to find her? Why is it only when she sees Samuel that the witch recognizes Saul? Is this a good witch or a bad witch?

Jewish Rabbinical Readings

Who is this woman? While Christian expositors have not been interested in this question, Jewish rabbinical writings do not hesitate to name her explicitly. According to Rabbi Eliezer and David Kimhi¹, she is Zephaniah (or perhaps the wife of Zephaniah)², the mother of Saul's cousin

¹ Gerald Friedlander, trans., *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* (New York: Hermon Press, 1965), 244-6.

² Zephaniah is a masculine name, so it seems reasonable that this should be the woman's husband's name rather than her own. See Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, Complete ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Pub, 1994), 861.

and general, Abner.³ Pseudo-Philo⁴ agrees that she is the wife of Zephaniah, and gives her the name Sedecla, daughter of Debin (or Adod/Aod), a Midianite wizard.⁵ This name also makes sense of how Saul's men knew how to find a medium. If the rabbis are correct in this identification, however, this raises another question, one not immediately obvious to modern readers: Would the witch not recognize her own nephew? Likewise, should not Saul have known her and how to find her without the help of his retinue? Tradition is silent on these questions.

The rabbis also supply a curious answer to the question of how the woman identified Saul by the appearance of Samuel. The Aggadah as collated by Ginzberg reports that "in necromancy the peculiar rule holds good that, unless it is summoned by a king, a spirit raised from the dead appears head downward and feet in the air."⁶ Although this explanation seems arbitrary and "fanciful,"⁷ it, unlike the question of the witch's name, may be supported by the text itself.

Pigott, following McCarter, alerts her readers to the possibility of a misreading in the Masoretic

³ Abner's father, Saul's uncle, is named Ner in 1 Samuel 14:50. This might be explained by the fact that some biblical characters carry multiple names. It is certainly a canonical fact which the rabbis should have known, and they make no attempt to explain the discrepancy. However, Pseudo-Philo attempts to answer the question of why the witch didn't recognize Saul—the glory of his kingdom had left him. See M. R. James. Prolegomenon by Louis H. Feldman, *The Biblical Antiquities of Philo*, (New York: Ktav Pub. House, 1971), 240.

⁴ James, *Philo*, 239-42.

⁵ In a cursory study of Pseudo-Philo, I discovered that he has a reputation for inventing names in the effort to discover connections between narratives. The repeated association with Abner and the name Zephaniah seems more reliable, therefore, than the name Sedecla. See Frederick James Murphy, *Pseudo-Philo: Rewriting the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 216-8; Susan Docherty, *The Jewish Pseudepigrapha: an Introduction to the Literature of the Second Temple Period* ([Minneapolis]: Fortress Press, 2015), 24-28.

⁶ Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews Vol Iv from Joshua to Esther*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1913), 70; H, and Simon, M. (Editors) Freedman, *The Midrash Rabbah (Compact Edition)* (publication place: Soncino Press, 1977), 2:332.

⁷ Pamela Tamarkin Reis. "Eating the Blood : Saul and the Witch of Endor." *Journal For The Study Of The Old Testament* no. 73 (March 1, 1997): 3-23. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed April 16, 2015).

Text⁸; perhaps rather than זקן (“old”), the LXX’s reading of זקן (“erect”) is correct.⁹ If this is so, the woman may indeed have described Samuel to Saul as an *erect* man in a cloak. The cloak, therefore, identified Samuel to Saul, and Samuel’s posture identified Saul to the witch.

The traditions passed down in the Aggadah also tell us that “though the witch saw Samuel, she could not hear what he said, while Saul heard his words, but could not see his person—another peculiar phenomenon in necromancy: the conjuror sees the spirit, and he for whom the spirit had been raised only hears it. Any other person present neither sees nor hears it.”¹⁰ This also appears to be an attempt to divine from the text the experience of divination. As Saul does hear Samuel’s words, and as he requires a description from the witch in order to verify the spirit’s identity, it is reasonable to assume that he can hear but not see the ghost. This does not necessarily indicate that the witch was unable to hear the words Samuel spoke (some suggest she was not only able to hear, but was acting as a ventriloquist¹¹), and the text does not indicate what Saul’s attendants experienced. It is, however, an understandable attempt to explain and even systematize Saul’s experience, and modern attempts to explain this portion of the story,

⁸ Susan M Pigott. “1 Samuel 28—Saul and the Not So Wicked Witch of Endor.” *Review & Expositor* 95, no. 3 (June 1, 1998): 435-444. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 16, 2015); P. Kyle McCarter, *The Anchor Bible*, vol. 8, *I Samuel: a New Translation* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 419. Neither writer makes much of this difference, but it is curious given the rabbis’ explanation.

⁹ It must be noted that the root זקן appears only twice in the MT (and once more in its Aramaic form). In Hebrew it is used in the sense of raising up one bowed down (and in Aramaic indicates impaling), and as such can be contrasted with being prostrate. See Brown, *Brown-Driver-Briggs*, XXX; “2210. zaqaph” BibleHub.com, <http://biblehub.com/hebrew/2210.htm>, accessed April 18, 2015; “2211. zeqaph,” BibleHub.com, <http://biblehub.com/hebrew/2211.htm>, accessed April 18, 2015.

¹⁰ Ginzberg, *Legends*, 70.

¹¹ Pigott, “Not So Wicked Witch,” 438; Klaas A D Smelik. “The witch of Endor, I Samuel 28 in Rabbinic and Christian exegesis till 800 AD.” *Vigiliae Christianae* 33, no. 2 (June 1, 1979): 160-179. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 16, 2015).

while providing an admirable element of mystical horror to the story's tone, seem to be literal *deus ex machina*.¹²

Christian and Jewish Modern Readings

In contrast to the rabbis, the Christian fathers and other, modern interpreters focus not on the mechanics of necromancy or the witch's identity, but on the ethics of divination, the meal the witch provides, and her characterization in contrast to Saul's and Samuel's. Regarding the meal and her motives, various commentators perceive this as a covenantal arrangement whereby the witch intends to secure Saul's life (and her own) through forbidden ancestor worship,¹³ the motherly affections of a woman who perceives Saul's deep wretchedness and feels moved to help him,¹⁴ or even a practical stratagem intended to accomplish little more than moving Saul's considerable dead weight out of her house.¹⁵ Some read the text very literally, see a double entendre, and suggest she not only ministered to Saul's hunger but attempted to seduce him as well.¹⁶ Others paint her as the only source of mercy in this whole story, and as such, a minister on God's behalf to temper His judgment¹⁷—and Origen even calls her a type of Christ.¹⁸

¹² Reis quotes Beuken's and Fokkelman's explanation regarding Samuel's "energy field" or "aura" which dispels any "ambient deceit," including Saul's disguise. If this is so, the spirits, called "gods" (*elohim*) by the witch, appear and by their presence Saul is revealed. Reis, "Eating the Blood," 9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 13-16.

¹⁴ Uriel Simon. "A Balanced Story: The Stern Prophet and the Kind Witch." *Prooftexts* 8, no. 2 (May 1988): 159. Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed April 16, 2015), 159, 164; Smelik, "The witch of Endor," 161.

¹⁵ Simon, "A Balanced Story," 164.

¹⁶ Reis, "Eating the Blood," 13.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3; Simon, "A Balanced Story," 166.

¹⁸ Patricia Cox. "Origen and the witch of Endor : toward an iconoclastic typology." *Anglican Theological Review* 66, no. 2 (April 1, 1984): 137-147. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 16, 2015).

Literary Considerations

Uriel Simon, a modern Jewish scholar, noted that it is a “sharp contrast to didactic and moralistic literature” that the witch can be seen as kind and compassionate, while not being judged explicitly or implicitly by the text. “And owing to this truthfulness the reader will see that he must abhor necromancy and trust in God because it is his duty to do so, not because of the ‘factual’ assumption—which reality can disprove—that every witch is wicked and seeks the harm of those who approach her.”¹⁹ Such an approach allows the tragedy of sin and its effects upon the sinner to make a deeper impact on the reader than a simple condemnation of sin would achieve.²⁰

Brueggemann (who intentionally avoids nearly every textual question in this passage)²¹ agrees, saying,

[A]n artistic rendering of life is now an urgent responsibility, not only because of the character of the [Biblical] text but because of our social-cultural-moral circumstance. ...[O]ur attention to a ‘theological’ reading of the life process seduces us into certitudes that quickly become too convinced and end in a monopoly that is authoritarian, coercive, and occasionally totalitarian.²²

He is speaking of Biblical exegesis, but this problem also exists in Christian art-making. The dangers in a literary, rather than didactic, approach to story are obvious: That my readers

¹⁹ Simon, “A Balanced Story,” 167.

²⁰ Simon’s insight on this matter is well worth reading in its entirety. See *ibid.*, 167-9.

²¹ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, ©1990), 6.

²² *Ibid.*, 5.

will miss the truth amidst my sympathetic portrayals. Despite this danger, my hope is to follow the author of Samuel and shepherd my readers' affections through a subtlety which invites them into the text, rather than imposing the text upon them.

Conclusion

While the biblical author of this story intended to artfully depict the transfer of the kingdom from Saul to David, my story, centered on the witch herself, will have a different focus. The details and interpretations that these scholars, Jewish and Christian, have suggested are largely speculative. However, in order to tell a story based on this woman's life, I will need to name her, give her place in the world of the story, and develop her character and motives—and to do so in a way that reflects the reality of the complex and conflicted motives in every human heart, mine and my readers' included. These interpretations provide a way for me to weave my story into the tapestry of text and tradition—in a way, to join the midrashic conversation rather than simply retell an old tale. It is my hope that in so doing I might highlight the grace of God, who seeks to include sinners and foreigners in His Kingdom (Jonah 4:1-11, Isaiah 56:3-8, et al).

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