

1 Samuel 28: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0:00] 1 Samuel chapter 28 In those days the Philistines gathered their forces for war to fight against Israel. And Achish said to David, Understand that you and your men are to go out with me in the army.

David said to Achish, Very well, you shall know what your servant can do. And Achish said to David, Very well, I will make you my bodyguard for life. Now Samuel had died, and all Israel had mourned for him and buried him in Ramah, his own city.

And Saul had put the mediums and the necromancers out of the land. The Philistines assembled and came and encamped at Shunem. And Saul gathered all Israel, and they encamped at Gilboa. When Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly. And when Saul inquired of the Lord, the Lord did not answer him, either by dreams, or by Urim, or by prophets. Then Saul said to his servants, Seek out for me a woman who is a medium, that I may go to her and inquire of her. And his servants said to him, Behold, there is a medium at Endor.

[1:01] So Saul disguised himself and put on other garments and went, he and two men with him. And they came to the woman by night. And he said, Divine for me by a spirit, and bring up for me whomever I shall name to you.

The woman said to him, Surely you know what Saul has done, how he has cut off the mediums and the necromancers from the land. Why then are you laying a trap for my life to bring about my death? But Saul swore to her by the Lord, As the Lord lives, no punishment shall come upon you for this thing. Then the woman said, Whom shall I bring up for you? He said, 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, Do not be afraid. What do you see? And the woman said to Saul, I see a God coming up out of the earth. He said to her, What is his appearance? And she said, An old man is coming up, and he is wrapped in a robe.

[2:00] And Saul knew that it was Samuel, and he bowed with his face to the ground and paid homage. 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.

Therefore I have summoned you to tell me what I shall do. And 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 as he spoke by me, for the Lord has torn the kingdom out of your hand, and given it to your neighbor 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 this day. Moreover the Lord will give Israel also with you into the hand of the Philistines, and tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me. The Lord will give the army of Israel also into the hand of the Philistines. Then Saul fell at once 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. And the woman came to Saul, and when she saw that he was terrified, she said to him, Behold, your servant has obeyed you.

[3:16] I have taken my life in my hand and have listened to what you have said to me. Now therefore, you also obey your servant. Let me set a morsel of bread before you and eat, that you may have strength when you go on your way.

He refused and said, I will not eat. But his servants together with the woman urged him, and he listened to their words. So he arose from the earth and sat on the bed. Now the woman had a fattened calf in the house, and she quickly killed it.

And she took flour, and she kneaded it, and baked unleavened bread of it. And she put it before Saul and his servants, and they ate. Then they rose and went away that night. In 1 Samuel chapter 28, the Philistines are on the offensive again.

They're going to cut Israel in half through the Jezreel Valley, through the territory of Issachar. If they were successful in cutting the nation in two, they would be able to dominate and defeat Israel much easier.

We should note the presence of fear throughout the passage. Saul, even though he is the king, has become characterised by fear since his early rebellion. He fears Goliath. He fears David.

[4 : 19] He is afraid of the Philistines. And then he is afraid of his own death. As Peter Lighthouse observes, in this chapter there is a movement in Saul from being afraid, to very afraid, to terrified.

Saul's fear is a very important trait to understand what drives him. And most especially as we see that trait in contrast to the courageous faith of Jonathan and David. It is Saul's fear that drives much of his violence.

Faced with the threat of the Philistines, Saul looks for guidance. However, Samuel has died, and the Lord isn't answering him in any way. The Lord isn't answering Saul by dreams, he's not answering him by prophets, and he's not answering him by Urim and Thummim.

These are the three main forms of counsel from the Lord. Dreams are especially associated with the king, prophecies with the prophet, and the Urim and the Thummim are associated with the priest and the ephod.

The story of Samuel's life began in a period of lack of revelation, and with a man lacking in spiritual perception, Eli. And it ends that way too. 1 Samuel chapter 3 verses 1 to 3 tells of a threefold darkness, the lack of the light of the word of the Lord, the dimness of the high priest's eyes, and, by implication, his spiritual perception, and the lamp of the Lord that was about to go out.

[5 : 33] Something of this theme resurfaces in verse 6 of this chapter. Saul's robes are an important part of the story too. Saul's robes, along with his spear, are weapons or garments that symbolise his status and his office.

Saul, having given up seeking guidance from the Lord, turns to a medium, and he takes off his robes to disguise himself. Earlier, in chapter 19, there was another story of Saul taking off his robes, as he lay naked before the Lord, and prophesying.

Both of these events foreshadow Saul's loss of his kingly authority, his divestiture. The fact that everything happens at night is also significant. The night is a time of doom and foreboding, a time when judgment falls and fates are sealed.

In various other parts of scripture, we see darkness and night, and the coming of light, used as significant pointers to the character of particular periods. The sun goes down upon Jacob at Bethel, and doesn't truly rise on him again until he limps away from the encounter with the angel at the Jabbok.

Similar patterns occur at the Exodus. The sun rises as Israel finds itself on the other side of the Red Sea, and the waters come down upon the Egyptians. The woman, as a medium, was supposed to be expelled from the land.

[6 : 46] She was under the ban. And this should help to clue us in on some important themes that are being introduced. Saul comes to the woman with two men in disguise. The woman declares the report of what Saul had done in cutting off the mediums and the spiritists from the land, much as Rahab declared the news of the victories of Israel, and the fear that they occasioned to the two spies who came to her in disguise.

Like the spies who came to Rahab, Saul declares that no harm will come to the woman. However, the Joshua story is inverted. The disguised visitors side with the person under the ban, rather than the person under the ban siding with the faithful people of God.

Saul has been associated with the king of Jericho already in the narrative, as his daughter Michael delivers David from his hands in much the same way as Rahab delivered the spies from the king of Jericho.

However, now he seals his union with the doomed Canaanites in the eating of the medium's meal. Just as the Rahab story has various Passover themes, so the story of the woman of Endor brings such themes to the fore.

There is a meal of unleavened bread at night, which will be followed by the death of the firstborn of Israel, Saul the king. This is a table of demons, and there is ominous foreshadowing of Saul's death, not merely in Samuel's announcement.

[8 : 01] It is also important to notice that David's story is being purposefully juxtaposed with that of Saul. Saul suffers a great defeat and will die, whereas David, after initially suffering a great loss, wins a great victory.

The dialogue between Saul and the woman replays the story of Genesis chapter 3 and the fall in a number of ways. In a crafty disguise, Saul challenges the divine command that he had been entrusted with as the husband of Israel.

The woman repeats the command, but then Saul, like the serpent, flatly denies it. You will not surely die. Samuel then appears to Saul, literally a god ascending out of the earth, and questions him.

Why have you done this thing, Saul? You will surely die as a result, returning to the dust from which you came. You will be driven forth from the garden of the kingdom, and someone else will take your place.

The woman then has a significant interaction with Saul. Saul, who started off as an Adam figure attacking the serpent Nahash, now ends up as a serpent-like figure, aligning himself with a rebellious woman and tempting her to further sin.

[9 : 08] This is pretty much the exact opposite of what we see in the story of David and Abigail, where Abigail is the faithful woman who delivers David from sin and temptation. The woman obeys the voice of the serpentine Saul, but now calls on him to eat of her food.

He initially refuses, but finally listens to the voice of the woman, and takes of the food that she gives to him. The repeated references to heeding and obeying voices in this context are charged ones. Samuel had said to Saul, in chapter 15, verses 22 to 23, In Saul's Nadia, in chapter 28, we hark back to the earlier events of his life.

In chapter 13, Saul's impatience for Samuel led him to disobey God's commandment. In chapter 15, he failed to destroy Amalek, but kept the fatted animals and spared Agag.

In chapter 28, Saul resorts to the sin of divination, to which his rebellion was earlier compared. The heeding and the obeying here is the woman's obeying of Saul's wicked request, and the rebellious Saul's heeding of the woman's voice, which seems to echo Adam's sin, in chapter 3, verse 17 of Genesis.

[10 : 35] The woman of Endor is a fallen Eve alongside the Adamic and serpentine Saul. The fact that the medium is simply the woman throughout allows for the accentuation of her archetypal significance.

Saul is then finally served the fatted animal, much as the gifts sent by Jesse to Saul were David, and David's music in chapter 16, verses 19 to 23, ironically recall the signs of the kingdom given to Saul in chapter 10.

Perhaps the fatted animal also recalls Saul's great sin. A question to consider. In the subtle allusions to the story of the garden and of the fall in the stories of 1 Samuel, what might we learn about the calling of Israel's kings?