

October 30, 2022

1 Samuel 28: 3-25

The Witch of Endor

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In the spirit of spookiness, I've been thinking about witches and who my favorite TV or movie witch is. I wondered if any of you have opinions about this, so I decided to ask. If you are worshipping online, I hope you shared your favorite witch with us. Here are some of the responses here in the sanctuary.

(Read Responses)

So many witches, so little time. My favorite is Winifred Sanderson from Hocus Pocus, which is watched yearly as part of the Halloween tradition in the Becker house. In our family, we've generally made a big deal of Halloween because who wouldn't want to make a big deal of letting our imaginations run wild for a night while we eat all the candy?

Over the years, I've noticed churches respond to Halloween in a wide range of ways. Some ignore it all together, others host a fall event, but don't mention Halloween, some ministers even spend time in the pulpit imploring families not to engage in the Halloween merriment. I've always thought, why not celebrate? Everyone knows it's Halloween, even if we don't mention it. I don't see any sense in pretending we don't like it at church only to go home, put on our costumes and turn on our porch lights for trick or treaters.

Hallowe'en is a contraction of All Hallows Eve, which refers to a Christian festival known as All Hallows, that we have subsequently changed to All Saints Day, typically celebrated the first Sunday in November. There is a lot of speculation about Christianity's relationship to several festivals that have morphed into what we call Halloween, but the point really is, there isn't anything wrong with Christians celebrating Halloween.

It isn't as if the Bible doesn't include some pretty spooky, Halloween-esque stories, like the one we will read today.

In her book, *More Than a Womb: Childfree Women in the Hebrew Bible as Agents of the Holy*, Rev. Dr. Lisa Davison writes about the woman in today's spooky story:

*I am the Medium of Endor..., she writes,
I was once a respected ritual expert...but now you call me a witch.¹*

In her book, Dr. Davison talks about women in the Hebrew Bible whose stories indicate they were childfree. Unlike many, if not most, biblical women mentioned in scripture, the women in Dr. Davison's book were not known for their role as mothers, but for other ways in which they lived into who they were created to be. They were prophets, a judge, a scribe, and even a political strategist who saved her people. And there was a witch.

Throughout history, being a witch has been viewed with suspicion, despite Glinda the Good Witch in the Wizard of Oz and other friendly TV and movie witches. Historically, the word "witch" has been applied to a woman with supernatural powers, who is able to perform magic, often evil in nature. The Hebrew phrase that describes the vocation of the woman in this text, that has been rendered "medium," would be better rendered, "female specialist of spirits." According to Dr. Davison, this phrase isn't found anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible, but it seems as if this role is a recognized role within the context in which the story was written.² Nevertheless, many of us have chosen to refer to her as a witch. Throughout history, a woman accused of being a witch did not fare well. Even today, people who practice neo-pagan traditions such as Wicca, who self-identify as witches, are misunderstood, feared, and portrayed in a negative light, especially by Christians.

The ancient Israelites viewed people who engaged in practices involving the supernatural or magic negatively as well. This is funny as their own stories include elements like a talking donkey, skeletons that get up and walk around, and a bush that caught on fire but was not consumed. Their real objection to magic was not the actual magic, but its source. If the God of Israel or a representative of God was the one being magical, it was fine, but if it was part of another Near East tradition, it was bad. There was a hard line drawn between Israel and their neighbors who worshiped other gods, so rituals and practices associated with those traditions were a no-no.

¹ Davison, Lisa, *More Than a Womb: Childfree Women in the Hebrew Bible as Agents of the Holy*, Cascade Books: Eugene, OR, 2021, 114.

² Davison, 94.

The Israelites were especially skeptical of the practice of communicating with the dead. This is called necromancy. And that is precisely what the woman in today's text was known for. Here is her story, which I will try to read spookily. This is I Samuel 28: 3-25.

³ Now Samuel had died, and all Israel had mourned for him and buried him in Ramah, his own city. Saul had expelled the mediums and the wizards from the land. ⁴ The Philistines assembled and came and encamped at Shunem. Saul gathered all Israel, and they encamped at Gilboa. ⁵ When Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly. ⁶ When Saul inquired of the Lord, the Lord did not answer him, not by dreams or by Urim or by prophets. ⁷ **** (Urim was an unknown element that represented God's light and was usually part of the breast plate worn by the high priest. In ancient times, they believed Urim enabled the priest to determine the will of God.)**

Then Saul said to 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." ⁸ So Saul disguised himself and put on other clothes and went there, he and two men with him. They came to the woman by night. And he said, "Consult a spirit for me, and bring up for me the one whom I name to you." ⁹ The woman said to him, "Surely you know what Saul has done, how he has cut off the mediums and the wizards from the land. Why then are you laying a snare for my life to bring about my death?" ¹⁰ But Saul swore to her by the Lord, "As the Lord lives, no punishment shall come upon you for this thing." ¹¹

Then the woman said, "Whom shall I bring up for you?" He answered, "Bring up Samuel for me." ¹² 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!" ¹³ The king said to her, "Have no fear; what do you see?" The woman said to Saul, "I see a divine being coming up out of the ground." ¹⁴ 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 in reverence. ¹⁵ 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." ¹⁶ Samuel said, "Why then do you ask me, since the Lord has turned from you and become your enemy?" ¹⁷ 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 neighbor, David. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ 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.”

²⁰ 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. ²¹ The woman came to Saul, and when she saw that he was terrified, she said to him, “Your servant has listened to you; I have taken my life in my hand and have listened to what you have said to me. ²² Now, therefore, you also listen to your servant; let me set a morsel of bread before you. Eat, that you may have strength when you go on your way.” ²³ 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 got up from the ground and sat on the bed. ²⁴ Now the woman had a fattened calf in the house. She quickly slaughtered it, and she took flour, kneaded it, and baked unleavened cakes. ²⁵ She put them before Saul and his servants, and they ate. Then they rose and went away that night.

There’s a lot going on here. The Philistines were gathered for a major military offensive against Israel. This story records the final desperate hours of Saul, who had failed as the people’s king. He had hit rock bottom, was convinced that God was no longer with him, and essentially had nowhere left to turn. Samuel, who had been the bearer of God’s word to the people of God, and to Saul specifically, was dead. So, although he had kicked all the practitioners of magic out of the land, he went looking for one. If anyone would know what to do, it was Samuel.

When he arrived in his disguise and asked the woman to help him, fearful it was trap, she reminded this late-night stranger that wasn’t allowed, thanks to Saul. At that point, she didn’t know the stranger was Saul. He assured her she would not get in trouble. The woman did as he asked, and Samuel appeared to her. When he did, she shrieked and realized in that moment that Saul was Saul. Saul, though he could not see Samuel, showed his respect by bowing and then asked Samuel for help, and if I’m being honest, Samuel seemed super cranky, “Why have you disturbed me...?”

Saul didn't get what he hoped for. In fact, Samuel told him the same thing he told him before he died, only this time he filled in the details. The Philistines would take the kingdom away from him and he would be part of the victors' spoils. There was no way out for him. He had disobeyed God and there were consequences for that. After Samuel departed, seeing how distraught Saul was, the woman offered him hospitality in the form of a meal, though there are some scholars who think it was more than an ordinary meal. Based on the Hebrew word rendered "slaughtered" in verse 24, usually translated "sacrifice" or slaughter for sacrifice," Dr. Davison writes, "Some have suggested that the median prepares a 'sacred' meal as a conclusion to the séance experience." If this is true, she is very unique in that no other woman in the Hebrew Bible sacrifices alone.³

This story has captured the imaginations of Jews, Christians, and even pagans for centuries. Scholars and rabbis have argued about what this story means and whether there is any basis for it historically. I understand this story like I do a lot of the Bible. It lacks historical facts but contains truth, truth for the ancient Israelites and for us today and all the generations in between. The low hanging fruit for a lot of commentators and ministers, from an interpretation standpoint, has been that Saul's consultation of the medium is further proof that once you start disobeying God, it is a slippery slope. Some have gone so far as to accuse the woman of leading Saul astray in his final hours. I mean...of course. It has to be the woman's fault. As you can imagine, I don't read it that way.

If that was true, the woman would have been presented in a negative light. Yet, in the context of a careful reading of the story, this unnamed woman is a person of courage and compassion. Her vocation may have been outside the boundaries of acceptable Israelite religion, but I believe what the story illustrates really well is that her strength and caring is a stark contrast to the weak, pathetic, and unfaithful Saul. The story intentionally draws a comparison between the disgraced king and the forbidden woman and Saul comes up the loser.

Because of Saul, the woman had been cut off from the way in which she earned money to support herself. And yet, she helped him anyway. In addition to presenting the woman in a positive light from a moral perspective, we are treated to a story about a woman who does something noteworthy that is not connected to child-bearing. Dr. Davison celebrates this as she writes, "...modern interpreters

³ Davison, 99.

who find their piety offended by what is essentially a positive portrayal of this nonconforming woman, who is never condemned in the text, need to recognize her professionalism, courage, wit, power, and compassion. None of these characters require her to be a mother, and it might be that her childfree status allowed her to fulfill her vocation.”⁴ This story reminds us that women have been, in their own ways, smashing patriarchy for a very long time.

And the last thing I want to say about this story is that studying it this week gave me a window into a power dynamic that was present thousands of years ago and still exists today. It is worth some reflection, and this is how it goes: The person or persons in power pronounce something is wrong and forbid the general population from doing it, yet the people with wealth and power, the people who made that proclamation, still have access to it or continue to do it. Saul cast out the medians so they wouldn't tempt the Israelites by their presence, yet he, the king accessed the median's services, the very thing his subjects were not allowed to do.

It isn't hard to come up with examples of this playing out today. There was the Governor who closed his state's beaches to the public only to be seen sunbathing on one of them with his family. Or the medical procedures and medications that are not approved for everyone, but that people with wealth and power always seem to be able to access, while people without their privilege suffer and die, never having the chance to, with their doctor, make their own choice. In addition to being a reminder that a woman's place is anywhere she wants to be, I hope this story inspires us to look for places in which power is abused in harmful ways and work for equity and justice. Because the truth is, sometimes real life is spookier than our spookiest stories. Happy Halloween.

⁴ Davis, 100.