

I Samuel ch.28
“Desperation & Profound Wickedness”

Introduction:

This chapter records the account of the culmination of Saul’s self-destructive choices, it tells the story of the darkest moment in Saul’s life, his deliberate violation of one of the most serious prohibitions in God’s Law. Less than twenty-four hours after he did so, he was dead, which gives the reader a sobering reminder of the swiftness and certainty of God’s punishment for any who violate the Divine Word. Chronologically speaking, the incident recorded in verses three through twenty-five in this chapter took place after the events chronicled in chapters 28-30.

I. The Setting of the Incident: (vs.1-5)

In verse one we read, *“Now it happened in those days that the Philistines gathered their armies together for war, to fight with Israel. And Achish said to David, ‘You assuredly know that you will go out with me to battle, you and your men.’”* The words *“now it happened in those days...”* implies that the events recorded in the first two verses of this chapter took place sometime after what is described in chapter twenty-seven.

There is no reason given why they decided to do so, but this account begins by informing us that the Philistines had made the decision to launch a new and massive assault against Israel. The timing of this new assault put David in a serious dilemma. The Philistines had accepted David into their nation, and by doing so had given him and his men a refuge from Saul’s murderous pursuits. However, if there was going to be war between them and Israel, David would be forced to choose between two loyalties, facing the prospect of needing to prove his loyalty to his new lord by going to war against his own people.

The name *“Achish”* was probably a general title of royalty (like Abimelech). He was the king of the Philistine city Gath. Achish had come to consider David to be a valuable asset due to the successful raids that David had executed against Israel during his time among the Philistines, and so here we read that, under the assumption that David was his faithful vassal, Achish forcefully reminded David that he and his men would be expected to join with the Philistines in their upcoming conflict with Israel.

In verse two we read, *“So David said to Achish, ‘Surely you know what your servant can do’. And Achish said to David, ‘Therefore I will make you one of my chief guardians forever’”*. The Hebrew grammar of the verse implies that the conversation between Achish and David was a tense exchange between the two men, indicating the importance of the interchange between them in light of the Philistines going to war against David’s people. In essence this is where David would need to demonstrate his loyalty to his new people. David’s response to Achish was intentionally ambiguous. It did not include any specific promises regarding what David would do for the Philistines in their war with Israel. David’s precise words were more literally translated as *“certainly you will come to know for*

yourself what your servant can do". The ambiguity lay in whether Achish would see what David could do for Israel's enemies or what he could do to Israel's enemies. But exactly which of these two was David conveying through these words? Based on his response, Achish obviously heard in these words something different from what David actually meant. Achish obviously took the words to mean that David would fight on behalf of the Philistines and would win them a great victory. That Achish took David to mean this is indicated by the fact that upon hearing this Achish stated that David would be elevated to the position of the king's bodyguard for life. Though the narrator leaves the matter uncertain at this point, the later narratives will show that David would not participate in a defeat of his people Israel. When David referred to himself as Achish's "*servant*", he was not making a direct statement of loyalty to that king, he was simply using the ordinary form of address when speaking to one's superior in the ancient world. There is also an ironic sense in Achish's promise to David. The Hebrew term translated as "*chief guardian*" (i.e., personal bodyguard), literally means "*keeper for my head*". The ironic aspect of this is that David had already kept the head of one man from Gath (17:54), but he did so only after he removed it from Goliath's body! The reality was that Achish was continuing to misjudge David's loyalty. He failed to see that David and his men constituted a dangerous fifth column inside Philistine territory.

In verse three we read, "*Now Samuel had died, and all Israel had lamented for him and buried him in Ramah, in his own city. And Saul had put the mediums and the spiritists out of the land.*" This verse continues to set the scene for the reader regarding the episode that is recorded in the latter portion of the chapter. Here the narrator transitioned to a dilemma facing King Saul. The first detail recorded in relation to Saul was that Samuel the prophet had died. The point of this observation was not to announce to the reader the fact that Samuel had died, for the reader had already been informed about this earlier in the book (25:1). Furthermore, he had been dead long enough to have been buried and to have had an appropriately long mourning period. Rather, this detail is repeated here because knowing this fact will prove to be essential to understanding the following narrative. The dilemma facing Saul was the fact that the Philistines had assembled a large force and were about to launch an attack on Israel, and the prophet who had guided Saul earlier in his conflicts with the Philistines was now dead. The question was how would he gain the information from Yahweh that he needed in order to defeat the Philistines without Samuel?

Then we are told something that might seem to have nothing at all to do with the present crisis, "*Saul had put the mediums and the spiritists out of the land*". The Hebrew terminology that is used here certainly did not refer to a "*witch*" as in some older translations, nor did it refer to a "*medium*" or "*necromancer*" in the modern sense (as reflected in more modern translations). Instead, the term referred not to a human being, but to a disembodied spirit from the realm of the dead that would speak to a living person who acted as a medium, or that would manifest its presence through an idol. In that culture the belief was not that the medium would contact any number of specific dead spirits, but rather they would be in contact with a

particular spirit with which they were familiar (in the sense of having a relationship with it) and that spirit would act as a guide to information from beyond the grave. We are told in this verse that Saul had expelled those who practiced these dark arts from the land of Israel. In the Law of God, the practitioners of spiritism and sorcery were condemned because of their association with Canaanite religion and because their divination was an attempt to circumvent Yahweh by seeking knowledge and power from what were in reality evil spirits. The very fact that God's Law forbade the Israelites from engaging in necromancy indicates that these were things that were widely practiced in Canaan at that time (Lev.19:31; Deut.18:11). Later revelations that cover periods centuries after the time of David reveal that these practices continued to exist among the Israelites for a long time (II Kings 21:6; 23:24; Isa.8:19; 29:4). Therefore, what Saul had done sometime earlier in his reign was in obedience to the Law of Moses, and therefore his expulsion of the mediums would have been a commendable act in itself. However, the narrator did not include this observation here to cast Saul and his present choices in a positive light. On the contrary, this observation only reinforces the narrator's indictment of Saul, for it establishes that Saul had a clear understanding that it was forbidden by the Law of God for Israelites to consult these individuals, a fact necessary for understanding the severity and speed of the punishment that would be meted out to him at the conclusion of the chapter.

In verse four we read, "*Then the Philistines gathered together, and came and encamped at Shunem. So, Saul gathered all Israel together, and they encamped at Gilboa.*" Here we are given more details about the Philistine forces that were poised to attack Israel. Their encampment was at Shunem, a town in the tribal territory of Issachar, some seventy-five miles north-northeast of Gath. Shunem was located on a hill next to the Via Maris, the major trade route passing through Canaan. The Philistines desired to control this region, which included the Valley of Jezreel, since it would provide them with considerable revenue from caravans using the highway. To oppose the Philistines, Saul gathered all the Israelites and set up camp at Gilboa, a mountain just south of Shunem that overlooked the Via Maris and the Valley of Jezreel through which it passed. The eastern end of the Valley of Jezreel is about ten miles wide from north to south. The north end is blocked off by Mount Tabor, while the south end is blocked off by Mount Gilboa. The ten-mile stretch between the two is broken into two passes by the smaller Hill of Moreh. The town of Shunem where the Philistines made camp is on the southwest side of the Hill of Moreh, just across from the Harod Valley (the southern pass from the Valley of Jezreel to the city of Beth Shan) from where Saul's camp was at Mount Gilboa. The two camps then were about five miles apart. The fact that the battle would take place so far north of Philistia indicates a strategic intent. This advance on the northern fringe of the plain of Jezreel would have threatened to cut Saul off from the Israelite tribes that were situated in the north. The Philistine position, some sixty miles north of the city of Ekron (the northernmost of their cities), shows the extent of their incursion into Israelite territory. Basically, they were threatening to cut Israel in two. This geographic reality perhaps explains why Saul was induced to

engage in battle with the enemy in a terrain that favored the Philistines (because it would allow the Philistines to use their chariots and cavalry, which would give them a distinct advantage over the Israelites. The Philistine army was resorting to a new strategy. In the most recent battles, the Philistines had engaged the Israelites in the hills where their more sophisticated weapons were not available to them, and therefore it caused them to lose their advantage over the Israelites. But now they were reversing this and were set to fight on level ground. Gilboa, a mountain ten miles south-southeast of Shunem, is referred to elsewhere in the OT only as the site of Saul's death (31:1, 8; I Chron.10:1, 8; II Sam.1:6, 21; 21:12).

The only other time that we find a reference to the Israelites and Philistines setting up camp at the same time in preparation for war is in First Samuel 4:1, just before Israel's defeat and Eli's death. Therefore, the parallel casts an ominous shadow over this occurrence. In the previous episode Israel had suffered a devastating loss to the Philistines, and history was about to repeat itself.

In verse five we read, "*When Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly.*" From his vantage point, Saul could view Philistine troop movements in relative safety. However, Saul was not prepared to cope with what he observed: when he saw the size of the Philistine army, it filled him with fear. We have in this verse yet another parallel with the account in chapter four of this book, because when we are told here that Saul "*was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly*" the narrator was repeating the wording that described Eli when he heard about the fate of the Ark, which led to his death (4:13).

II. Saul Seeks Divine Guidance Through Illicit Means: (vs.6-11)

In verse six we read, "*And when Saul inquired of the LORD, the LORD did not answer him, either by dreams or by Urim or by the prophets.*" In general, during this time in history, a king or general leading his army into battle would prefer to do so after having consulted a divine oracle in order to seek out strategy and to find reassurance in advance that his army would be victorious in the upcoming battle. However, the means by which one could do this that involved the God of Israel were now unavailable to Saul. We are told that Yahweh refused to answer Saul's pleas for insight and support. The basic idea here is that Yahweh refused to reveal His will to Saul. And in verse sixteen a reason for this is given, it was because Yahweh had turned away from him because of his previous sins. Saul was rightly concerned about the upcoming battle with the massive forces that the Philistines had assembled on the other side of the valley. Seeking a response from Yahweh, Saul employed the methods that God had given to Israel when they needed to consult Him and seek His aid. These methods included incubation rituals in which the inquirer slept within or near a sanctuary or sacred object in order to receive a dream from a God, the use of the Urim and Thummim to cast lots, and the visions of prophets (I Sam.10:10-11). However, none of these inquiries was answered by Yahweh, and it is becoming increasingly clear to Saul that he had been abandoned by God. This verse plays a part in the contrast that we are given between Saul and David that runs throughout this book. Here Saul inquired of Yahweh and received

no response (just as he had received no response the previous time he had inquired of Yahweh-14:37). However, David, when he inquired of Yahweh, he received a quick response (23:1-4). The note that Saul did not hear anything from the prophets might mean one of two things; either there were no prophets of Yahweh in Saul's court, or those who were there were not hearing from Yahweh when they called upon Him in service of Saul.

In verse seven we read, "*Then Saul said to his servants, 'Find me a woman who is a medium, that I may go to her and inquire of her'. And his servants said to him, 'In fact, there is a woman who is a medium at En Dor'*". Having cut himself off from Yahweh through his personal disobedience, as well as his abuse of both the priestly and prophetic institutions in Israel, Saul turned to seek spiritual guidance elsewhere. Saul ordered his attendants to find a woman who practiced divination. Therefore, Saul broke his own royal decree that had banned mediums and chose to consult one despite what was commanded in God's Law

Since Saul's servants could immediately direct him to a medium (despite the purge that Saul had previously launched against them) it shows that the purge had not been entirely successful, and that such practices were still being tolerated by high officials in Saul's court.

The town of Endor was located in the middle of the northern pass (between the Hill of Moreh and Mount Tabor), about six or seven miles north of the Israelite camp (about a two-hour trek). To get there, Saul would have to make a difficult and arduous trip around the eastern side of the Hill of Moreh. He would have needed to do this so he could avoid the Philistine camp. The town of "*Endor*" was behind the Philistines' lines, and was a place noted in the Book of Joshua (17:11-13) as a town that retained much of its Canaanite character, which may give the reader a hint here why this medium had made her home in that town.

The fact that Saul was willing to disregard Yahweh's commandments, and was willing to take that dangerous journey, demonstrates that he was desperate to get some sort of divine insight into what he could do in response to the Philistine threat. It reveals that with sufficient motivation, there was no evil that Saul was not willing to engage in to get what he wanted.

In verse eight we read, "*So Saul disguised himself and put on other clothes, and he went, and two men with him; and they came to the woman by night. And he said, 'Please conduct a seance for me, and bring up for me the one I shall name to you.'*" Apparently, Saul disguised himself so that neither the Philistines nor the medium would be able to recognize him as the king of Israel. He knew that the Philistines would kill him if he was discovered alone apart from his army, and (as will eventually be demonstrated later in the chapter) no medium would want to expose her involvement with divination to the man who might use that disclosure as justification for executing her. The absence of royal clothing and jewelry would most likely have insulated Saul from scrutiny by Philistine soldiers patrolling the roads in the area, and doing this shielded his true identity from the medium. In order to reduce the journey's risks even further, Saul waited until after the sun had set to begin the trip, and he was accompanied by two bodyguards. Ironically, the

information Saul received through (or in spite of) the medium's efforts was hardly what he wanted to hear (vs.17–20). Centuries later King Ahab of Israel and King Josiah of Judah would reap similarly negative benefits from disguising themselves in order to gain the anonymity that they hoped would protect them (I Kin.2:30, 34–35; II Chron.18:29, 33–34; II Chron.35:22–24).

The common belief of the people of the ancient Near East was that the spirits of the dead descended to the underworld known as Sheol. This was a nebulous region of continued existence, but it is not distinguished as a place of reward or punishment. This translation renders Saul's words to the medium as "*please conduct a seance for me, and bring up for me the one I shall name to you*". A more literal rendering of the Hebrew would be "*use your ritual pit to conjure up for me the one I name for you*" (NET). The reference to a "*ritual pit*" related to the belief of the time that there were magical portals that existed through which spirits could pass between the realms of the living and the dead. The practitioner was one who had special knowledge of the location of such pits and who was familiar with the procedures necessary to summon the dead. From the available sources there is no indication in these rituals that the practitioner was possessed by the spirit or that the spirit spoke through her, and so the actual practice of that time was not like that which is associated with a medium in the modern sense. This explains the language "*conjure up*" because it was believed that the medium summoned the spirit up from the heart of the earth where Sheol was. It is also possible that the cultural pattern of the time influenced Saul to approach the woman at night, for it was popularly believed that night was the appropriate time to consult the spirits of the dead.

There is an ironic parallel in this verse related to the language of Saul's request. Previously, Samuel had rebuked Saul telling him that his rebellious posture before Yahweh was akin to the sin of divination (15:23). Here in this verse, Saul himself used a different form of the same Hebrew word translated previously as "*divination*" when he spoke of "*consulting*" a spirit. The irony then is that now Saul was going to engage in the specific sin that Samuel said characterized his general disobedience to God.

In verse nine we read the woman's initial reply to Saul's request, "*Then the woman said to him, 'Look, you know what Saul has done, how he has cut off the mediums and the spiritists from the land. Why then do you lay a snare for my life, to cause me to die?'*" The woman initially objected to the request made by these men. She suspected that her nocturnal visitors might have been agents sent by the king. She was clearly aware of Saul's earlier efforts to purge the land of those who engaged in divination in harmony with God's Law (Ex.22:18; Lev.19:31; 20:6, 27; Deut.18:10–11). She asked them why these men were asking her to risk her life by doing what a royal decree had forbidden. The expression "*cut off*" did not necessarily imply the idea of putting someone to death (it was used earlier in the chapter to mean expel from the land, vs.3). However, here, the context makes it clear that she feared for her life, thus implying that in this case "*cut off*" was used to refer to execution. Also, the execution of those who practiced divination was not

without precedent in Israel (Josh.13:22). The woman's final question "*why then do you lay a snare for my life*" was rhetorical, as it was intended as an accusation, not as an attempt to gain information.

It is impossible to miss the irony that Saul was here violating the law that he himself had earlier instituted, and that he had to be reminded by a woman practicing abominable sin that to do so was a crime.

In verse ten we read, "*And Saul swore to her by the LORD, saying, 'As the LORD lives, no punishment shall come upon you for this thing'*". To calm the woman's fears, Saul "*swore to her by the LORD*" that she would not be punished for her divination. For the informed reader, Saul's oath to the woman is yet another example of the lifelong spiritual incongruities that characterized the man. Literally, Saul said, "*by the life of Yahweh, there will not occur for you a transgression in this matter*". Therefore, Saul's oath invoked Yahweh to grant immunity to one who was being asked to violate God's commandment, and it suggested that God should curse Himself if He did not protect the sinner. This sort of oath was not only foolish, but it was also profoundly blasphemous. To say such a thing (with implied sincerity) indicated that Saul at this point was so spiritually blinded by his desperation that he didn't even recognize the degree of sin he was committing. This oath tragically represents the last time that Saul would speak the name of Yahweh.

In verse eleven we read, "*Then the woman said, 'Whom shall I bring up for you?' And he said, 'Bring up Samuel for me.'*" Based on literature from this period of history, the following things were involved in calling up a familiar spirit. First, this would (as noted above) be done at night. Second, after the medium identified the spot where the portal was, a pit would be dug with a special tool. Third, a food offering (such as bread, oil, honey) or the blood of a sacrificial animal would be placed in the pit to attract the spirit. Fourth, an invocation ritual would be chanted. Fifth, the pit would be covered to prevent a spirit from escaping from the realm of the dead after the ritual was concluded. In this ceremony, both the medium and the client had roles to play. The spirit who emerged would supposedly appear in human form and generally was able to communicate directly with the client. In Mesopotamian necromancy incantations, only the practitioner could see the spirit. This was accomplished through ritual ointments smeared on the face of the medium.

After the medium received Saul's solemn oath assuring her that she would not be punished for her actions, she proceeded with her task. She asked the disguised king whom she should "*bring up*". Saul's response to the medium's question was very specific: he wanted her to bring up Samuel. In the Hebrew text, the prophet's name is in an emphatic position, indicating stress on who it was that was being summoned. Although Saul and Samuel had worked at cross-purposes throughout much of their time together, the king now desired a final word from this prophet.

Over the centuries there have been various views about what this woman was actually able to do. Some have felt that she actually did commune with evil spirits,

others have felt that she was an imposter, and still others have believed that she merely deluded herself into thinking she could do these things.

The reader should notice that there is no description given here regarding the method of evoking the spirit. It is likely that this was not done since this was such an illicit activity that the author did not want to record the actual wording of this forbidden act, considering even the recitation of this to be sinful.

III. The Supernatural Encounter: (vs.12-19)

In verse twelve we read, “*When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice. And the woman spoke to Saul, saying, ‘Why have you deceived me? For you are Saul!’*” The Hebrew wording rendered above to indicate that the woman shouted implies some sort of surprise or shock, indicating that something about Samuel’s appearance surprised the woman, something that was therefore outside of her control. The grammar further suggests that this unknown thing happened prior to the shout. The implication of her surprise is that she did not actually expect to raise the spirit of Samuel from the realm of the dead. Since the text itself does not give a description of precisely what it was that the woman saw, it would be speculative to draw any conclusions about what the woman saw, except that she did somehow correctly perceive that it was Samuel. And the reality is that this particular incident was not recorded to give us any insight concerning how are to evaluate in general the veracity of claims that these mediums could consult the dead. The reason for this is that the text makes it clear that this was an extraordinary event for her, and a frightening one because she was not in control of it. Therefore, it is better to look for more general answers elsewhere. Other portions of Scripture imply the reality of supernatural powers exercised through those engaged in the occult, but this one does not do so clearly. Regardless of how the woman or Saul interpreted this event, the passage itself makes it clear that what took place was an act of God, not something accomplished by the medium.

The account in this verse raises an interesting question, why was it that the appearance of Samuel enabled the woman to suddenly see through Saul’s disguise? There have been several suggestions (though nothing in the text reveals an answer):

- She discerned that Saul would be the only one who would be seeking to speak with Samuel at that troubled time
- It may have resulted because of heightened perception due to her participation in engaging an evil spirit.
- Somehow the spirit of Samuel conveyed this to her

In verse thirteen we read, “*And the king said to her, ‘Do not be afraid. What did you see?’ And the woman said to Saul, ‘I saw a spirit ascending out of the earth.’*” Undaunted by the fact that his deception had been discovered, Saul asked the woman not to fear, but to continue with her task. In this, the irony in the account continues. Saul was so filled with fear that he chose to violate a clear commandment of God and chose to seek that information by sneaking behind the lines of an enemy army, then he admonished the medium not to be afraid of the

unexpected appearance of God's prophet. The fact that Saul asked the medium what she could see indicates that Saul himself could not see Samuel.

When the woman explained what it was that she saw, she said "*I saw a spirit ascending out of the earth*". This statement raises questions because the Hebrew word that is translated here as "*spirit*" is "*elohim*". This word is most frequently translated as "*God*" or "*gods*". The form of this Hebrew word itself is plural. When it is used in a singular sense to refer to the one true God, it is normally accompanied by a singular verb (e.g.; Gen 1:1). In this verse, the verb is plural, indicating this noun here should be understood in its more usual plural sense. However, the title itself literally means "*mighty ones*", and at times it is used to refer to supernatural beings in general. So, what can we conclude regarding what it was that the narrator intended us to understand when he recorded that the woman said she saw "*elohim ascending out of the earth*"? In the present context it is reasonable to conclude that the narrator was saying that the woman's words reflected a paganized belief that in some way Samuel had become a god-like being. For the pagans of that day a spirit-being possessed capabilities beyond those of mortals. Although a living prophet could be compared to God in the sense that he was God's mouthpiece and therefore spoke with God's authority (Ex.7:1–2; Deut.18:17–18), here the situation is quite different. It is better to remember that in general, in ancient times, the deceased could be referred to as "*gods*" in that they lived in the realm of the supernatural. Since the woman did not expect to actually call up Samuel, she may have used this title in particular to him because she thought it was a manifestation of divine power exercised by Samuel. When the woman referred to Samuel "*ascending out of the earth*" this reflected the belief mentioned earlier that the realm of the dead was within the heart of the earth, and that if a spirit manifested itself, it was arising out of the pit that was dug to the surface. Once again there is an ironic sense to the wording of this verse. It was stated earlier that Saul had driven all the mediums and spiritists "*from the land*" (vs.3, 9), this medium was now seeing a spirit coming up "*out of the ground*". The Hebrew word for ground or earth is the same one in all three verses.

In verse fourteen we read, "*So he said to her, 'What is his form?' And she said, 'An old man is coming up, and he is covered with a mantle'. And Saul perceived that it was Samuel, and he stooped with his face to the ground and bowed down.*" In Saul's question, the Hebrew word translated as "*form*" means "*appearance*" or "*looks like*". Apparently, he was checking to see if what the woman saw was in fact Samuel or not (based on her description). Her somewhat imprecise answer (*an old man wearing a robe*) was nevertheless convincing to Saul. The Hebrew word used here to describe Samuel's garment is the same one used previously to describe the garment the prophet was wearing when Saul grabbed and tore its hem (15:27). Also, since clothing was often a status marker in the ancient world, it may be expected that prophets would have been distinguished from others by a particular garment.

Then we read that out of respect for the prophet who had provided guidance to him during previous times of confusion and crisis (9:19–20; 15:1–3), Saul bowed down and prostrated himself with his face to the ground.

In verse fifteen we read, “*Now Samuel said to Saul, ‘Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?’ And Saul answered, ‘I am deeply distressed; for the Philistines make war against me, and God has departed from me and does not answer me anymore, neither by prophets nor by dreams. Therefore I have called you, that you may reveal to me what I should do.’*” At this point, Saul ceased speaking to the medium and began speaking to Samuel (probably we are to understand that he was speaking to the woman physically, but that her voice was conveying the words of Samuel). Unmoved by Saul’s show of submission and humility, Samuel asked for an explanation of why Saul “*disturbed*” him, by causing him to come up to the sphere of the living. The Hebrew word used here is used elsewhere to refer to the spirits of the departed in Sheol being aroused at the arrival of another who is joining them there (Isa.14:9). This seems to reflect the idea that the realm of the dead is a place of rest, particularly for the righteous.

Saul seems to have assumed that the prophet was unaware of events occurring in the land of the living, because he proceeded to tell Samuel about the Philistine threat and the fact that God had “*turned away*” from him. Then Saul went on to explain that having failed to get a response from Yahweh he then decided he needed to seek out Samuel among the dead in order to get the Divine insight he needed. Saul’s claim to be in “*great distress*” reflected his desperate emotional state as he waited to hear what guidance the prophet would give him.

There are two observations that need to be made at this point. First, the text leaves no doubt that we are to understand that it was genuinely Samuel who was speaking to Saul. Second, it is significant that Saul used the generic title “*God*” as he spoke to Samuel, and that in his response Samuel used God’s covenant name, “*Yahweh*”. This language illustrated the different relationships these two individuals had with God.

Having made those observations, the next matter that the interpreter needs to focus on is how to interpret the event that is described in these verses. There are a number of questions that arise about this account that must be answered if a coherent interpretation is to be found. The issues that one must decide upon are the following:

- Was this a genuine appearance of Samuel, or was it something false?
- Did this medium and other like her actually have the power to conjure up departed human spirits?
- In what form did Samuel appear, physical or non-physical?
- If Samuel’s appearance was an act of God, how do we explain Him working through a practitioner of the occult?

First, as to the question of whether or not this was a genuine appearance of Samuel, it is the most prevalent view among orthodox commentators that this was a genuine manifestation of the deceased prophet. The main piece of evidence favoring this interpretation is found in First Chronicles 10:13-14, where in the Hebrew text

we read, *“Saul died because he was unfaithful to the LORD; he did not keep the word of the LORD and even consulted a medium for guidance, and did not inquire of the LORD.”* The Septuagint version of this text adds: *“Saul asked counsel of her that had a familiar spirit to inquire of her, and Samuel made answer to him.”* In addition, the text of this passage specifically says that the medium saw *“Samuel”* (vs.12). Beyond that the text makes it clear that the medium herself was shocked by Samuel’s appearance. This detail suggests that no fakery on her part was involved. Added to this is Saul’s choice to bow respectfully before Samuel, indicating that he was thoroughly convinced that he had an audience with the deceased prophet. Also, the speeches attributed to Samuel contained allusions to a prior interchange between the two, allusions that would have been appropriate only for the real Samuel to have made. Finally, the prophet foretold a future event which came true precisely as he said it would, something the OT points to as a sign of legitimate prophecy. There really is no question that the powers of darkness are able to produce illusionary images and communicate with the living by such means. However, at the same time it is certainly within God’s power to produce the phenomenon that is described in this chapter. Since both of these things are Biblical truisms, we must trust that as the Spirit inspired this account, He would have made it clear in the text if a Satanic illusion was in view, so the reader would not be misled. Instead, however, the Spirit inspired the narrator to present this account as a genuine post-mortem appearance by Samuel.

Second, is the question of whether or not this medium had the power to actually speak to the dead? Though the Scriptures indicate that the devil and his angels have power in this world to do miraculous things (that is when God allows it), there is nothing to suggest that they can summon the dead through occult means. Because of this, some interpreters would argue that all mediums engage only in illusion or fakery. However, that specific idea doesn’t make sense, for as was observed above, this text seems to clearly convey that this represented a real appearance by Samuel, and thus here no illusion was involved. The references elsewhere in Scripture to the evil of these practices implies that at least at times something supernatural does take place (specifically that demons masquerade as the spirits of dead people). Still others argue that Samuel’s statement in this verse about him being raised up by Saul implies that it was done by the medium. However, that general reference could simply point to Saul being the one who instigated the episode, it does not actually assert anything about the woman’s abilities. Those who argue for a psychological impression face two major problems. The first is the woman’s shriek of horror in verse twelve. She would not have screamed if the spirit had been merely Saul’s hallucination, produced by psychological excitement. The second objection is that the text implies that both the woman and Saul talked with Samuel. Even more convincing is the fact that what Samuel is purported to have said turned out to be a true prophecy of the future.

From a more general and straightforward reading of the biblical account we can conclude that divination (when it is not a hoax) involves a medium interacting with demonic spirits, not that they are actually in communication with deceased human

beings. The Law of God prohibited necromancy not because it was a hoax but because it promotes reliance on supernatural guidance from some source other than God. The confusion regarding this chapter started early in church history. The early church fathers, fearful of affirming in any way that the prophet Samuel was somehow involved in an occult practice, proceeded to undermine a literal reading of the text through the use of two arguments. One was that the whole idea of what Saul encountered was demonic deceit, and that it was not really an appearance of Samuel, but it was a demon in his guise. Another was that Samuel was not really in Sheol at all but had been sent by God to announce Saul's fate, thus ignoring the details of the narrative itself. Another popular approach was to deny the literal meaning and through tortuous allegorizing, it was taught that the story was typological of the mediating work of Christ, who voluntarily descended into hell and prophesied to souls there.

The third question is in what form did Samuel appear? As to whether Samuel appeared physically, in a body, it is best to remember that the text does not suggest that he did. Also, such an idea does not fit well into orthodox Christian theology. Therefore, the best conclusion is that he did not appear physically, but was only present as a spirit.

The fourth question is that if Samuel's appearance was an act of God, how do we explain God working through a medium? After all, a number of passages in the OT contain stern warnings against any involvement with or practice of divination (Ex.22:18; Lev.19:26, 31; Deut.18:9-12). These passages teach that those involved in divination are to be put to death, and that the community of God's people were not to tolerate them, for what they did was so heinous that it was unacceptable for the people of God to be involved in it (Jer.27:9-10). Because of this, some have suggested that we would not expect God to do something that might mislead His people to think that divination was in some ways or circumstances legitimate. This seems to make sense until one analyzes the objection more closely. First, all the instructions in the Law of God were designed specifically to restrict human involvement with occult practices because of our inclination to sin. God is in a completely different category. In His role as sovereign of all creation, He reigns over the powers of darkness. As it suits His Divine purpose, He allows the devil and his angels to engage in wicked acts. This in no way involves God in that evil. In this episode, the practice of divination is clearly condemned, so only a distorted view of the account would conclude that it could encourage involvement in the occult. The appearance of the spirit of Samuel had nothing to do with the activities of the medium, it was purely an act of God. That this act of God took place in the context of an occult ceremony was only because God used that circumstance to condemn the practice yet again through the pronouncement of punishment on Saul for his participation in it.

In verse sixteen we read, "*Then Samuel said: 'So why do you ask me, seeing the LORD has departed from you and has become your enemy?'*" We read here that Samuel did not provide Saul with the information the king desired. Instead, as Yahweh's spokesman, he rebuked Saul for his sinfulness. He continued to give the

same message he had during his earthly life, that Saul was experiencing punishment from Yahweh because of his earlier rebellion when he chose not to obey the specific instructions given to him by God (15:22-25). Then Samuel confronted Saul further by asking him why he would continue to engage in gross sin since he knew that his previous sins had already antagonized God. By making the choice to engage in divination Saul should have known that all he could accomplish was to make Yahweh even angrier. Samuel's confrontation here makes it clear that Saul simply refused to acknowledge the change that had taken place between himself and Yahweh despite the clarity of Samuel's earlier words of judgment (ch.15). The implication here is that Saul should not have expected any kind of revelation from Yahweh since Yahweh had rejected him and become his enemy.

In verse seventeen we read, "*And the LORD has done for Himself as He spoke by me. For the LORD has torn the kingdom out of your hand and given it to your neighbor, David.*" Then Samuel pointed out to Saul that what was happening was precisely what Yahweh had told him would happen because of his rebellion. Saul had been told when judgment was pronounced earlier (ch.15) that the kingdom would be taken from him, and that it would be given to his neighbor. But here, for the first time in a revelation to Saul, the forementioned "*neighbor*" who would replace Saul as king (15:28) was specifically identified as David. It was a Divinely decreed certainty that David would rule instead of Saul, despite Saul's relentless and bloody efforts to prevent David from ascending to the throne. The use in this verse of past tense verbs to describe an event that had not actually taken place yet (the removal of the kingdom from Saul and it being given to David) was done to stress that this event was so certain, it could be referred to as if it had already taken place.

In verse eighteen we read, "*Because you did not obey the voice of the LORD nor execute His fierce wrath upon Amalek, therefore the LORD has done this thing to you this day.*" Ironically, Samuel told Saul, who was supposedly seeking guidance from Yahweh, that the reason for the judgment upon him was because he had refused to listen to what Yahweh had told him previously. Specifically, Saul had lost the right to rule Israel because of his disobedience to Yahweh's instructions that he was to execute God's wrath on the Amalekites. And now Saul had repeated the same basic sin of disobedience to the Word of God by consulting the dead. This latest sin then would result in an even more severe punishment.

In verse nineteen we read, "*Moreover the LORD will also deliver Israel with you into the hand of the Philistines. And tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. The LORD will also deliver the army of Israel into the hand of the Philistines.*"

Saul's present sin was private and concealed in darkness; however, its consequences would be public and massive. In keeping with the seriousness of his most recent sin, Saul's punishment would be that he and his sons would lose their lives, and the nation would suffer a terrible defeat. The language pictures Yahweh announcing that He would wage war against Israel, using the Philistines as a weapon against them.

When Samuel told Saul that he and his sons would be “*with me*” he was conveying that they would join Samuel in the realm of the dead. This is to be interpreted in light of the Old Covenant idea that “*Sheol*” (the grave, or the realm of the dead) was both the abode of the righteous and the unrighteous dead.

This incident brings the story of Samuel the prophet to an end (he is not included in the narrative of Second Samuel). His importance and influence, however, continued to leave their mark throughout the rest of the Bible. His family tree appears twice in the Chronicler’s genealogies (I Chron.6:25–28, 33–38). Moses is rightly celebrated as Israel’s lawgiver par excellence. In a similar way, Samuel is justly heralded as the prototypical prophet (I Chron.11:3; II Chron.35:18; Ps.99:6; Jer.15:1), standing at the head of the prophetic line (Acts 3:24; 13:20; Heb.11:32). In his roles as priest, judge, prophet, counselor, and anointer of Israel’s first two kings, Samuel was one of ancient Israel’s greatest and most godly leaders.

There is an ironic twist to the way that God would judge Saul. Saul had tried to use the Philistines as a way of killing David, but now God was saying that He would employ the Philistines to kill him.

IV. Saul’s Reaction to the Revelation: (vs.20-25)

In verse twenty we read, “*Immediately Saul fell full length on the ground, and was dreadfully afraid because of the words of Samuel. And there was no strength in him, for he had eaten no food all day or all night.*” At this point the language indicates that the author was quickening the pace of the narration to bring a rapid conclusion to the story. The English words “*immediately*” (vs.20) and “*at once*” (vs.24) are both forms of the same Hebrew verb which means “*to make haste*”.

Based on Saul’s reaction to what he heard, the message from Samuel overwhelmed him, for we read that immediately after hearing it Saul fell flat on the ground, fully stretched out, overcome with fear. Apparently, Saul’s collapse was also due to the fact that Saul “*had eaten nothing all that day and night*”. It seems likely that Saul had been continuing his foolish practice of fasting in anticipation of and during battle (14:28). The stress associated with confronting the Philistine threat, in addition to the effort he had expended in making the risky six-mile trip to the medium’s house, had sapped him of energy. Saul had sought out Samuel because of his fear of the Philistines, but now that fear has been replaced with a new and greater one, a fear of the impending judgment of God. It would seem that this time Saul was resigned to his fate. The evidence for this is that he did not try to avoid the battle the next day.

In verses twenty-one and twenty-two we read, “*And the woman came to Saul and saw that he was severely troubled, and said to him, Look, your maidservant has obeyed your voice, and I have put my life in my hands and heeded the words which you spoke to me. Now therefore, please, heed also the voice of your maidservant, and let me set a piece of bread before you; and eat, that you may have strength when you go on your way.*” When the medium witnessed the king’s collapse, she immediately tried to assist him. Referring to herself as “*your maidservant*” and identifying herself as one who had already risked her life to help the king. She

offered to prepare him a meal so that he might “*eat and have the strength to go on*”. The Hebrew verb “šm” (translated as “*hear*”, “*obey*”, “*listen to*”) plays a prominent role in this section. For we read that the medium “*obeyed*” Saul (vs.21) when she “*heeded*” what he told her to do. But now she wanted him to “*heed her voice*” (vs.22) and eat some food. Although at first he refused, he finally “*heeded*” her (vs.23) when his men joined her in urging him. To meet Saul’s acknowledged need for food, the woman deftly used the tactic of demanding reciprocity (I took so let me give). The medium was determined that Saul respond to her on a quid pro quo basis. Her offer to give him “*a piece of bread*” belied her intention to serve him a more sumptuous meal (vs.24–25).

In verses twenty-three and twenty-four we read, “*But he refused and said, ‘I will not eat.’ So, his servants, together with the woman, urged him; and he heeded their voice. Then he arose from the ground and sat on the bed. Now the woman had a fattened calf in the house, and she hastened to kill it. And she took flour and kneaded it, and baked unleavened bread from it.*” Saul initially refused the woman’s offer, apparently because it would mean breaking a vow associated with his fast. However, his men joined the woman in urging him to take some nourishment, and eventually he listened to them. He got up and sat on the bed, which was probably a platform running along a wall. At that time something like this served as a bed at night and a place to sit during the day, particularly when eating (Esth.7:8).

It is unlikely that the woman owned more than this one animal, and so she was truly doing Saul a great honor. Any meal that included meat was special in ancient Israel, but one that included meat from a stall-fed animal was truly exceptional. Saul’s reluctance to accept her invitation might have also been due to his depression over Samuel’s words of doom. His eventual acceptance follows the pattern of indecisiveness and contradictory behavior so often found in his career. There is also a sense of resignation in eating what was essentially a last meal.

There is another touch of irony here, because the description of what the woman served Saul was akin to a royal meal, but it was served to him having just learned that he was about to lose his sovereignty over the kingdom.

In verse twenty-five we read, “*So she brought it before Saul and his servants, and they ate. Then they rose and went away that night.*” After the meal was prepared, which most likely took a considerable amount of time, Saul and his men ate it. Then, sometime before dawn, the men left Endor to slip past the Philistine lines and returned to their camp on Mount Gilboa.

Conclusion:

Saul’s visit to the medium at Endor was cited by the Chronicler as evidence that Saul deserved the judgment that fell upon him at Gilboa (I Chron.10:13). This reinforces a message that is often repeated in the Old Testament; that God’s people suffer because of their choice to sin, not because God is not able to provide for them.

There are also two general principles that are revealed in this chapter. First, disobedience to what God says will result in Him closing off the lines of communication that one has with Him. Second, when God announces unconditional judgment upon an individual, the fulfillment of that decree is certain.