

SAUL AND THE WITCH OF EN-DOR

(1 SAMUEL 28:3-25)

STUDIES IN THE HISTORICAL BOOKS

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## **Background and Backdrop of I Samuel and I Samuel 28:3-25**

The books of 1 and 2 Samuel cover the closing of the period of the judges (1 Sam 1-7), and the rise of the monarchy in Israel (chap. 8-12). It details the reign of Saul (I Sam. 13-31).<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this paper, the background will only cover 1 Samuel 28. We enter this chapter with the Philistines tightening their grip on the vital arteries throughout Jezreel Valley, threatening to cut off communication with the northern Israelite tribes. Moving into Jezreel Valley, the Philistines force encamped at Shunem, beneath the slopes of the hill of Moreh. Saul gathers his forces on Mount Gilboa in a futile bid to stave off disaster. Desperate for help, Saul sought out the services of a medium from Endor, who brings forth the spirit of Samuel, whose words foretell disaster for Saul and his sons.<sup>2</sup>

It is evident that Saul has not functioned as the legitimate anointed one, considering Israel's perennial threat, the dreaded Philistines. The Philistines threat once again comes to the foreground as the most important historical context for the turn of events. This time the conflict serves as the backdrop for the defeat and death of King Saul and his sons. Many would agree that this text tops the list for most controversial text in the bible as it involves an encounter we find nowhere else in the bible. In a desperate attempt to hear from God, Saul goes to a necromancer, or spiritual medium, in order to conduct a séance in which he converses with the spirit of Samuel. With the Philistine army facing off in Jezreel Valley, the place known for battle, Saul is seized with terror, with no word from Yahweh, he resorts to illegitimate and forbidden substitute for prophesy. In a way that surprises and even disturbs modern readers, the Bible describes the specter, or the ghost of the departed Samuel, in conversation with Saul. It is tempting even easier to explain this in light of the writers attempt to describe Saul's character, and having nothing to

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<sup>1</sup> David Freedman, *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 2000), 1163.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Brisco, *Holman Bible Atlas*, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishing, 1998), 101.

do with reality. But it is clear that the bible is unapologetically consistent in its assertion that the event described here is historical. It is vital to today's readers to humbly admit that there is much about death and the after life that we neither know nor understand.<sup>3</sup>

## Scripture Context

### Immediate Context

The account of David joining the forces of Achish (21:11-16, 10-15) covers all of chap. 27 and the first verses of chapter 28. Then interrupted by the story of Saul and the witch in Endor (which is the focus for this study), only to resume David's activities and Saul's death in chapter 29-30.<sup>4</sup>

### *Before*

The context before the main text I Samuel 28:3-25, records the account of David joining forces with a Philistine king, Achish. Fearing for his life, David takes his wife and his 600 men and joins forces with King Achish. Who in turn gives him the city Ziklag as a place of refuge. David's stay with the Philistines lasted six months. With in this time David made periodic raids against various southern peoples from which he took booty but left non alive, lest they report his engagements to King Achish. David though left the reports of his raids to Achish ambiguous, leading King Achish to believe that he (David) was making raids against his own people. When the war broke out between Israel and the Philistines, King Achish insist that David accompany him.<sup>5</sup>

### *After*

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<sup>3</sup>Terry Muck, ed., *The NIV Application Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 369-370.

<sup>4</sup> David Hubbard, Glenn W. Baker, eds. *Word Biblical Commentary*, (Waco: Word Books Publishing, 1983), 262.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 262-63.

After a brief, but significant tangent on Saul's encounter with the witch at Endor, the writer returns to David's dealing with the Philistines. I Samuel 29:1-11 is a self-contained unit, explaining how David was excused from participating in the Philistines war against Saul. During the military review the Philistine commanders questioned the presence of a Hebrew among them. Achish defends David's loyalty to no avail, as the leaders insist that he return least he turn against them in battle. They expected that David would do so judging from the songs of victory. King Achish then assures David of his own feelings of good will, but suggest that the opposition of the others left him no choice. Hence David is dismissed.

### Book Context

Looking at the selected text as it fits in the overall purpose of the book, it appears that the sole purpose of this text is to explain the nature of Saul's character. How awful Saul had become, to stoop so low as to consult the same mediums he had so zealously ban from the land. The text (I Samuel 28:3-25), appears almost as an interruption in the writers description of David's plight to the Philistine lands. In light of the over all book, the purpose of this text appears to be to explain the dept to which King Saul had fallen and the sad state of his character, that would lead to his death.

### **Summery 1 Samuel 28:3-25**

Overall the alleged purpose of the text is to show the extremity of Saul case. The same God anointed king has stooped so low as to turn to unconventional ways to seeking God, ways which he himself had condemned. Verse three through six set the essential background that is needed for reading the rest of the text. Verse seven through eleven records Saul beginning to walk into sin. Verses twelve through fourteen, Samuel is summoned. Verses fifteen through

nineteen Samuel speaks, and verses twenty through twenty five Saul responds to Samuel's message.

Verse three states off telling us that Samuel was dead, and that Israel had mourned his death. Hence he could no longer be consulted, except by necromantic means. The following statement explained that at some point Saul had expelled all the median's from the land and did this in accordance to the Deuteronomic law.<sup>6</sup> The Philistines gathered at Shunem, and Saul gathered the people at Gilboa. Shunem was hardly two hours form Gilboa, hence the camp of the Philistines could be seen from Gilboa. This explains how Saul could have seen them and the cause of his great distress.<sup>7</sup> Verse five makes it very clear the degree of Saul fear, the NIV puts it this way. "He was afraid, and terror filled his heart." Under these conditions it was understandable that Saul "inquired of the Lord"<sup>8</sup> Kiel and Delitzsch assert that Saul had once been more victorious in his conflicts with the Philistine's, but that his great fear at the sight of the Philistines was as a result of his feeling that God had forsaken him and thus was suddenly overwhelmed with fear.<sup>9</sup> Verse six indicates that Saul inquired of the Lord, the Hebrew translation indicates a pun: Saul "sauled" Yahweh. Hence God did not respond, just as Jonathans breach in God rules for war brought about silence from God. Saul had lost his opportunity for divine direction after Abiatha had defected with the Ephod to David. Now, God no longer responded to Saul neither by dreams nor by the Urim nor by prophets.<sup>10</sup>

Saul himself had ban the medians form the land, according to Deuteronomic law, but the kings servants were well aware that they still practiced their trade. Endor was a short distance

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<sup>6</sup>C. A. Briggs, S. R. Driver, A. Plummer, eds. *International Critical Commentary*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1969), 238.

<sup>7</sup> C. F Kiel, F. Deltzch, *Bible Commentaries on the Old Testament; The Books of Samuel*, (Michigan: Cushing-Malloy INC., 1968), 260.

<sup>8</sup> Frank Gaebelin, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: ZondervanPublishingHouse, 1992), 779.

<sup>9</sup> Kiel and Deltzch, 260.

<sup>10</sup> Klien, 271.

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