

# Episode 212

## Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions Podcast. Today, Jeff, the Managing Editor of BibleRef.com, and Kevin, the Managing Editor of GotQuestions.org are joining me to continue our series on difficult passages in the Bible. This one's an interesting one. Even in studying, preparing ahead of time, and having a brief conversation with Jeff and Kevin beforehand, it's an interesting one. Today we're going to be talking about the passage where the witch who lived in Endor apparently summoned the prophet Samuel from the dead. This is interesting in that, by and large, the Christian view is that psychics, mediums, those types of things, are not actually communicating with the dead that they're being demonically deceived. But then we have this passage in the Bible where it sure seems like somehow this witch in Endor successfully conjures the spirit of Samuel from the dead.

## Shea Houdmann

So to jump in, let me go ahead and read the passage. It's fairly long, but I think reading the passage gives us a good context. So this is 1 Samuel 28 :7-20, it says, 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. So Saul disguised himself and put on other garments and went, he and his two men. And they came to the woman by night, and he said, Divine for me 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 trying to trap me, trap my life to bring about my death? But Saul swore to her by the Lord, as the Lord lives, no punishment shall bring upon you for this thing. Then the woman said, whom shall I bring up for you? He said, Bring Samuel up for me. When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out in a loud voice. When the woman said to Saul, Why have you deceived me? You are Saul. The king said to her, Don't be afraid. What do you see? 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. And Saul knew that it was Samuel, and he bowed with his face to the ground and prayed 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 to 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 also give the army of Israel into the hand of the Philistines. So 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.

### **Shea Houdmann**

Just briefly, the context, Saul was at war with the Philistines, God wasn't answering him anymore by, as he said, visions or dreams, the Urim and the Thumim had gone silent. So Saul's like, I don't know what to do, God's not answering me. I know. I'll go to this witch who's located in Endor and get her to inquire of Samuel to me.

### **Shea Houdmann**

And just one quick important background, also be aware of, Leviticus chapter 20 verse 27 says, a man or a woman who is a medium or a necromancer shall surely be put to death. They shall be stoned with stones, their blood shall be upon them. And then also Deuteronomy chapter 18 verses 10 to 11, there shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices a divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead.

### **Shea Houdmann**

So what Saul was doing here was strictly forbidden. God forbade this type of communication and the death penalty was commanded for anyone who participates in it, whether the conjurer or whether the person who was asking someone to be conjured. So Saul was approaching the wrong person with the wrong desire. His heart was completely wrong in this, but that still doesn't answer the question. So Kevin, what in the world is going on in this passage? And did this witch at Endor truly summon Samuel from the dead?

### **Kevin Stone**

I think basically we can say that Saul was making yet another huge mistake. This one, this mistake caps all the other mistakes that he had made throughout his reign. And it's just a tragic story, the life of Saul. But yeah, what was actually happening here in this seance or this visit with the medium, whatever you want to call it, that has puzzled commentators and Bible

students for centuries. And people have come up with several different theories as to what has happened. And so I'll share several of these here just briefly.

### **Kevin Stone**

One possibility, one theory that's been put forward is that this was just trickery on the medium's part, that it was an illusion that she produced. It was just a fake. She was faking Saul out, just trying to deceive him. Whole thing was a scam. And probably, you know, that was her business model. She would just scam people. So this was another scam. So somebody was in cahoots with her that pretended to be Samuel, or maybe she just pretended to see Samuel or, you know, rigged up something. Who knows?

### **Kevin Stone**

But that is one theory. Another one is that it was just a hallucination of the medium. This woman was herself surprised, it seems, in the passage.

But she's reacting to a hallucination that she was having. So who knows what caused that? But that is one of the theories.

### **Kevin Stone**

Then another theory that maybe carries a little more weight is that this apparition was a demon that was masquerading as Samuel. And so the demon intimates that it was either Saul or the medium that brought him up, disturbed him. Why have you disturbed me, verse 15 says. And so the theory goes that this would be a strange thing for Samuel to say. It seems a little bit, a little bit crotchety, a little bit, a little grumpy. So was this the real Samuel or was this a demon masquerading as Samuel? And we do know from Saul's past history that he had been influenced by demons before, as evil spirits had come and had oppressed him. And so that was part of his history as well. So that's a theory.

### **Kevin Stone**

And then the other theory is that this was actually Samuel coming back from Sheol. This was Samuel briefly rising, again, his spirit coming back and speaking to Saul. And what has this going for it is that the text really does seem to say it was Samuel, calls him Samuel. Samuel said this. The woman sees Samuel. And so it really, just from the text, a plain reading of the text would lead to this conclusion. This really was Samuel. And if this is the correct theory, then we have two options to consider under this. One is that the witch, the medium actually had the ability to conjure spirits. And she had the ability to conjure Samuel. And then the other one, the other possibility is that the Lord sent Samuel back. This surprised the witch. It surprised the medium. The Lord sent Samuel back for one more prophecy to predict the doom of Saul. And that's the one that I lean toward as the very last one that I

mentioned, that this was actually Samuel and that the Lord sent Samuel's spirit back for a special purpose, special mission, and that this was an exception to the rule.

### **Jeff Laird**

It's the exception to the rule thing that I find interesting in that because there are these different theories and these different ideas that come in there. And no matter how you look at it, it's just a bizarre incident. It's just a really strange thing to happen. I think I personally, I sort of lean towards the demonic illusion only because sort of of that, it seems to me to make a little more sense than the others. But like you said, there are good arguments for some of these and better arguments for some of them than for others.

### **Jeff Laird**

We see things in scripture that support the possibility of either one, including it actually being Samuel. There's verses in Ezekiel chapter 14 that suggest that God can respond to wicked requests, idolatrous requests with his own message. In other words, you're trying to get a message from this, but I'm going to answer and do it this way. So it's entirely possible that God could have taken what was a sincere request to divine a spirit and decided he was going to step in and intervene in this way.

### **Jeff Laird**

And it's also possible that this was some sort of some demon or something that was putting on the appearance of Samuel. And the fact that what it tells him is true doesn't disqualify that from being a demon. Yes, Satan's the father of lies and so on and so forth, but that doesn't mean that demons are incapable of telling the truth. And in this case, if it was some sort of demon, you can see that there's almost like you were saying it sounds sort of crotchety. It could almost be thought of as taunting where the demon is saying something like, I don't know why you're even asking because I'm dead and you're going to be dead. Just wait for it. And that sort of has that flavor of how if a demon can't stop something from happening, he may as well make you really unhappy about it.

### **Jeff Laird**

So all these different ideas and all these different options that come in there, it's hard to pin them down. I think that the two that are most reasonable is that it really was Samuel or that it was some sort of apparition. But it is difficult sometimes to figure out exactly what's going on.

### **Kevin Stone**

And another little fact to support what theory that you lean toward, Jeff, is that, in other words, that this was a demon masquerading as Samuel, is that the apparition condemned Saul for several things, including he did not take care

of the Amalekites like he was supposed to. He had rebelled against the Lord on that occasion. But in all of the listing of sins there, the sin that seems to be the most obvious is left out, and that is that Saul had been seeking advice from a medium, that he had been seeking after the dead. He'd been looking for answers from the dead, which is strictly forbidden in Scripture. And so the apparition does not mention that one. So that also maybe plays into supporting the theory that this was a demon masquerading as Samuel.

### **Shea Houdmann**

Kevin and Jeff, that's a great point. And I think, Kevin, what you said earlier about this kind of being the capstone of all of the sins in Saul's life. And there's a passage that actually specifically talks about that in 1 Chronicles 10, verses 13 to 14. It says, so Saul died for his breach of faith, broke faith with the Lord, and that he did not keep the command of the Lord, and also consulted a medium seeking guidance. He did not seek guidance from the Lord. Therefore, the Lord put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David, the son of Jesse. And I like that this verse, 1 Chronicles 10, verse 14, says he did not seek guidance from the Lord. So here's Saul saying, tried to seek God, but he wasn't answering me. This kind of passage says, no, you really didn't. That matches with Saul's previous behavior, like with the Amalekites. It's like, I did destroy all of the Amalekites. I'll accept the king and accept all these people.

### **Shea Houdmann**

And then a few chapters later, there were enough Amalekites to raid David's camp and kidnap a whole bunch of people. So Saul's not exactly known for telling the truth. So not only is Saul consulting a medium, which is strictly forbidden, but then he's also lying about whether he actually even tried to truly consult the Lord. I don't know what the Lord's response would have been. I mean, clear at this point, Saul had been condemned. Saul was no longer the anointed king. That was David.

### **Shea Houdmann**

The whole thing just is an example of someone who had such a great start in Saul, humble beginning, had allowed power, who had allowed lust, who had allowed wanting to do everything his own way, not waiting for the Lord, not consulting the Lord, not obeying the Lord. How he had a downward spiral to here near the end of his life, short before his death. He's doing something that in the Old Testament law, Mosaic law, if you do this, it's the death penalty. And this is a horrible sin.

### **Shea Houdmann**

That then takes it to, like, why? Why is this sin forbidden? Why has it been the universal views of Jews and Christians throughout history to not consult

psychics, not consult mediums? To what degree is there any truth to what they're doing? And I don't know if this passage answers the question, because I read it, and it's like the medium seems surprised that it actually worked. And so one of the options, like Kevin mentioned, is previously all the times she had tried to do this before, she's basically deceiving the person. Your deceased loved one is telling me to tell you this, and then this time, like, whoa, something is actually appearing to me. It seemed like she wasn't expecting it to actually work for her to be able to summon Samuel. So is psychic tree or whatever the correct word is normally just completely deception, tomfoolery, or even demonic deception? And then this one time God allowed it to send Samuel to interlight, as Kevin said, one more prophecy was fulfilled truthfully and directly. I don't know. So this is another one of those passages, like, we can give, here's the view we think it's right based on the passage, but I don't know that answers all the questions that arise from Zakina's passage regarding psychics, regarding mediums, and why they were so strictly forbidden in God's Word.

### **Kevin Stone**

Paul You know, I called it an exception to the rule if this was truly Samuel spirit rising back from the dead and speaking to Saul. An exception to the rule, because it really does look in Scripture very clear that when a person dies, the soul goes to either a place of blessing or a place of torment. We see this clearly in Luke 16, as Jesus tells the story of the rich man and Lazarus. So there doesn't seem to be any wandering around of spirits or, you know, coming back from the dead or anything like that. And so if this was truly Samuel, it would be an exception to that rule.

### **Kevin Stone**

But we do have possibly another example of spirits of the departed making an appearance on earth, and that was at the transfiguration of Christ, where Jesus was there speaking with Moses and Elijah. And Peter, James, and John are there, and they see what's happening here. They hear the conversation. And this is not a resurrected Moses and Elijah. It was probably, you know, their spirits were there, but were visible and recognizable. And so possibly, this would be another occasion in which God did something unusual out of the ordinary to make a point to have something special happen.

### **Jeff Laird**

Something special happened. I think the reaction of the medium is telling. It's strange to say it this way, but I don't think the discussion of whether or not this was really Samuel is the ultimate point. It's the most curious point. It's the hardest thing to understand in this. But I think what you see happening with Saul is really a confirmation of why God says this is such a terrible idea,

because it starts with not trusting what God says, and it ends with not hearing what God's going to try to tell you anyway.

### **Jeff Laird**

In this case, he's getting the exact same information because there's nothing else to be said. That's essentially how this happens. And we are a question-answering ministry, and we know what it's like sometimes when you provide an answer to somebody, and then they come back and say, well, you didn't answer me. And the response is, well, we did. I don't think you didn't care for the answer, or that wasn't the one you were looking for. And those persons will then go and look for answers somewhere else.

### **Jeff Laird**

And sometimes we do the same thing with God. There's something we want to know. And sometimes God really does not give us an answer. He doesn't give us any information. Sometimes he gives us information we don't like, and we go looking for other answers or looking for answers in other places. And the reason that's so dangerous is because once you get beyond humanity, you've only really got two sources. You've got sources aligned with God, and you've got sources who are opposed to God.

### **Jeff Laird**

So in a military context, if I was the commander of a group in war, and I told my group, I'm going to communicate with you only through this particular radio frequency on this style of radio. That's how I'll communicate with you. That's how I'll give you the orders. That's how I'll talk to you. And there's something that they want to know, and they're using that frequency, and I'm not answering, or they're not getting a response. If I find out that they went to text messages or emails or a different kind of radio or somebody sent a carrier pigeon or something like that, and they said, well, it had your signature and it was your name. I'm going to be furious with them because I'm going to tell them, look, I made it very clear that this is how I'm communicating with you. And I told you don't use any other reasons because if you use anything else, it's a guarantee that you're going to be talking with the enemy or you're just going to be making noise into air.

### **Jeff Laird**

And that's where most of this stuff falls down. As Christians, we don't really believe generally that everybody who claims to be a psychic or a medium really is communicating with spirits. The vast majority of the people who do that are at least fooling themselves. And a lot of them are taking advantage of hurting and desperate people, especially the people who claim that they're going to talk to your dead loved ones for you to give some sort of message from beyond the grave. And I won't name specific names or shows or

whatever, but that's gross because you are not actually communicating with the dead and probably those people know it.

### **Jeff Laird**

But this medium is surprised, just like I think a lot of people would be that they go to do their usual thing. And all of a sudden they're getting an actual answer that they weren't expecting. And that is where the danger comes in. So when God says no mediums, no necromancers, no divination, do not do these things. It's because most of it is just a waste of time. You're ignoring God and you're trying to get answers from somewhere else. But if you do happen to communicate with something or someone, it's not going to be God. And that's going to be a really, really terrible thing.

### **Jeff Laird**

And that applies to all these different methods. Scripture uses different words, medium, diviner, omens, necromancy, sorcerer, and there's no real value in trying to nail those down. They all have subtly different meanings, kind of like we would distinguish between somebody who's doing palm reading versus tarot cards versus a psychic medium versus somebody who's using hallucinogenics. The point is you're trying to get information that God has not given you and you're trying to get it in a way that he has said is not a good idea. And this is exactly what happens.

### **Jeff Laird**

So ultimately what we see is that Saul is moving so far away from God that he's going to violate basic principles of what it means to believe in the Creator. And I would say in a sense what Chronicles then is telling us is not so much that God decided to condemn Saul because he went to see a medium, but that that was a representation of you can see because he did this, that was a way of saying that you can see how far Saul fell when he went and he did this.

### **Kevin Stone**

Jeff, you always have the best illustrations. I love that military communication illustration that you just shared. There is one other thing that I find very interesting about the whole book of 1 Samuel, actually, because here at the end of 1 Samuel, we have Saul trying to seek out wisdom from Samuel, and Samuel just tells him the same thing that he had told him previously. You know, God's judgment is still on, hasn't changed. The message is still the same. Your kingdom has been taken away from you.

### **Kevin Stone**

But at the very beginning of the book, 1 Samuel, we have Samuel's mother who was childless and was desiring a child, and she prayed to God, and God granted her request and gave her a son whom she named Samuel. And then



in chapter 2, 1 Samuel chapter 2, Hannah, Samuel's mother, prays this prayer of thanksgiving and prays to the Lord for this gift of Samuel. And I want to read just part of this. As Hannah prays, she says in verses 6 through 10, the Lord brings death and makes alive. He brings down to the grave and raises up. The Lord humbles and he exalts. He raises the poor from the dust. The wicked shall be silenced in the place of darkness. It is not by strength that one prevails. Those who oppose the Lord will be broken.

### **Kevin Stone**

And I find it very interesting that she mentions life and death, the grave and being raised up, because when we get to the end of the book, this is kind of what we see. We see the proud Saul that is being brought down to the grave. He dies the next day. And we have Samuel, the righteous Samuel, who's being raised up and speaking the word of God to Saul. And so we have light and darkness and life and death and all the rest. And I just like how all of that kind of comes full circle in the book of 1 Samuel.

### **Shea Houdmann**

Both of you, I love our conversation today and that we're discussing the different views. And I think truly, like Jeff said, and like Kevin outlined, that the two views that seem to make the most sense are either this was a demonic deception, the medium and Saul were being deceived, or God made a one-time exception, actually allowing Samuel to be brought up in spirit form to communicate, basically to repeat a message of doom to Saul for all the violations of God's law that Saul had committed up until this point. Just repeating that, no, you are going to be killed and your kingdom is going to be handed to someone who will be a man after God's own heart. Not a perfect man, as we'll learn, but to the king that will rule in the way that God wants him to.

### **Shea Houdmann**

So I think those are the two views. I think both are biblically plausible. I lean more towards what Kevin does with actually Samuel being raised up in spirit form to communicate, to prophesy one more time, but that being an exception, not saying that this is something that can't happen, not saying that mediums are legitimately communicating with the dead. I think by and large, psychics, mediums are either purposefully deceiving or they themselves are deceived and thinking they're communicating with deceased people when they're actually being deceived by demons.

### **Shea Houdmann**

So difficult passage, exceedingly interesting passage, but one that I don't think there's a clear answer. But the point is what Jeff and Kevin and I have been saying is that this shows how far Saul had fallen, how far from God's

standard he had gone, how he would be willing to go to this depth, doing something that directly violates God's word, something that God's word commanded, the death penalty for anyone who participated in. And the very next day, he experienced that penalty, not just for this, but for his almost lifetime of disobedience.

### **Jeff Laird**

So I want to make sure before we wrap that is that we also mentioned that there's a few other minor things about this that I think people can get hung up on. When you were reading the passage, people will notice that the medium says something about, I see a God coming up. And people can get hung up on that. There's a term in Hebrew, Elohim, that actually works a little bit like the English word God. It can be uppercase or lowercase, it could be generic, it could be specific, and that's the word that she's using. So she's not saying that she sees an actual deity, that's the term that's used for that.

### **Jeff Laird**

It's also interesting from the Hebrew that there's a reference somehow when Saul asks them to find a medium, it has something to do with a bottle. And if I understand right, it's because the concept of a medium back then, just as now, is sort of like what we would think of in a seance, where a person empties themselves and then the spirit speaks through them. Like we noticed, if you really read the passage, Saul doesn't actually see anything. It's the medium who seems to be the one who's doing the seeing and the communicating. And then she makes a reference to a robe. And when she says, I see an old man in a robe, a robe is pretty generic in English. But here again, in Hebrew, she uses a term that refers to a specific kind of thing, like a mantle or a cloak. It was the sort of thing that you would specifically associate with a prophet. So if we were talking about it and they said, oh, I see somebody, I see an old man coming up and he's wearing a priest's robe, that's why Saul goes, oh, I know that that's Samuel.

### **Jeff Laird**

So it's just one of those passages where there's a lot of things in there that if you just sort of take it all in a fire hose kind of a way, there's plenty of stuff there to get hung up on. So it's neat to go through and actually pick some of these apart. And maybe you guys have convinced me that that really was Samuel. I don't know. It's still confusing.

### **Shea Houdmann**

I don't think we can come up with an explicit, definite answer on this. I can lean one way, but whatever the case, the main point of this passage is that how far Saul had fallen. So whether he's actually talking to Samuel or whether he's being demonically received, the answer is the same. He was doing

something God's Word expressly and strongly forbids, because I guess you said so well, Jeff, that there's a way to communicate with God and this is not it. I think that's the point of this passage. So Jeff, Kevin, thank you for joining me for a very interesting conversation on a very difficult and interesting passage. So this has been the Got Questions podcast on did the witch of Endor really summon Samuel from the dead? Got questions, Bible has answers, and we'll help you find them.