

DESPERATION AND DARKNESS

INTRODUCTION

I begin by noting the triple use of the expression 'gathered together' in chapters 28 and 29 – (i) 'the Philistines gathered their armies together for warfare, to fight with Israel', 28. 1; (ii) 'the Philistines gathered themselves together, and came and pitched in Shunem', 28. 4; and (iii) 'the Philistines gathered together all their armies to Aphek', 29. 1.

For us to understand the sequence of events recorded in chapters 28 and 29 we need to consult a map which shows the key locations. (For details of the main locations, together with the biblical references, see Annex A – 'Movements of the forces of Israel and the Philistines'.)

It is clear that the Philistines first rallied – 'gathered together' – their forces at Aphek¹, 28. 1; 29. 1, from the region of which David and his men, reluctantly, left the Philistine armed forces to make their way south to Ziklag, 29. 11. For their part, the Philistines then headed for Jezreel, 29. 11, where the Israelites were pitched, 29. 1. The first, and main leg, of the Philistines' journey took them some 45 miles north to Shunem, 28. 4, a site near Jezreel and about five miles north of Gilboa.

We are explicitly told that the meeting between Saul and the woman at En-dor took place, not *before* the time when Philistine forces were at Aphek – about which we read in chapter 29 – but when the Philistines later 'pitched' ('camped') at Shunem, 28. 4 – En-dor being only about four miles from Shunem. We must conclude therefore that the meeting between Saul and the so-called 'witch of En-dor' actually took place several days *after* the events recorded in chapter 29. (I say 'so-called witch of En-dor' because the Bible never calls her that; the woman was properly a medium rather than a witch.) If therefore we wanted to trace the events in their strict chronological order, we would need to jump in our reading from 28. 2 to 29. 1, and to read 28. 3-25 at the close of chapter 29.

But it is probably easier to demonstrate *that* the incident recorded in 28. 3-25 actually took place chronologically at the end of chapter 29 than it is to offer a satisfactory explanation as to *why* the Holy Spirit recorded it where He has. Why, we may well wonder, does He position the En-dor section out of chronological sequence in this way?

I cannot pretend to know for certain but I think we can hazard a reasonable guess. As I see it there are two distinct strands to the question. (i) First, I suggest that it is placed where it is to stand over against what we considered in chapter 27. There we noted David's sad failure and the consequences of David's lack of faith in God and His providential care. I suggest the Holy Spirit is saying, 'If you think that is bad, then take a look at Saul. If you are tempted to question whether it is right that God should chose to replace King Saul with *a man who can turn to God's human enemies for refuge*, let Me point out that *the man he is to replace turned to God's real and spiritual enemies for assistance* – yes, to the very powers of darkness'. In other words, I believe it is important to the Lord that we assess the undisguised failure of David against the background of the total apostasy of Saul. And that is why, I think, the Holy Spirit interrupts the account of David's exchanges with Achish about David's involvement – or otherwise – in the forthcoming battle – which account covers first Achish's insistence that David accompany him, 28. 1-2, and then those things which happened later when David and Achish paraded with the other Philistine forces at Aphek.

(ii) My second suggested reason for the En-dor section being inserted where we find it is that, if it had been placed at the point in the narrative where it fitted chronologically, it would have come at the very end of chapter 29 – where we would have read something like, 'And the Philistines went up to Jezreel. On the way there, they came and pitched in Shunem. Now Samuel was dead ... ' and so on. But this would have had the effect of sharply dividing the narrative of chapter 29 from that of chapter 30, and we would therefore have lost the connection between (a) the successful objection of the Philistine lords to David's presence with them, and (b) David's successful recovery of all that which the Amalekites had taken away following their raid on Ziklag. In other words, we would most likely have failed to notice the demonstration of the Lord's gracious providence which compelled David, against his own judgement, to return home to Ziklag – just in time to pursue and catch up with the Amalekites and so to recover his wives and the families of his men.

I suggest that the Lord wanted us to make that connection and to appreciate something of His care for His servant – even though His servant had taken a wrong step in going down to the Philistines in the first place – and so the Lord preserved the link unbroken by inserting the narrative about Saul and the spiritist medium at an earlier point.

CHAPTER DIVISION

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EXPOSITION

Verses 1-2 David enlisted by Achish – a carefully-worded answer

Verse 1. *'And it came to pass in those days, that the Philistines gathered their armies together for warfare, to fight with Israel.'* It was probably inevitable that Saul's preoccupation with David would, at some point or another, result in military complications for Israel. For all I know, it may even have been that the transfer of David and his men from Israel to the Philistines – indicating *apparent* public rebellion against Saul – influenced the view of the Philistine lords that this was as good a time as any to launch their full-scale attack.

From now on, events move rapidly towards a climax, and each of the closing chapters of 1 Samuel focuses our attention on some aspect of the great battle between Israel and the Philistines – first, on the preliminary activities of the three parties involved – of Saul and the army of Israel, of the Philistine lords and the army of the Philistines, and of David and his much smaller, though not insignificant, 'army' of 600 men – and, then, of course, on the battle itself.

The opening part of our verse tells us that the Philistines initiated the action, mustering their troops in readiness for war, but without specifying where. We have to wait until the opening of the next chapter to discover that their initial gathering point was at Aphek, 29. 1.

'And Achish said unto David, Know thou assuredly, that thou shalt go out with me to battle.' In all likelihood, this conversation between Achish and David took place at Gath, Achish's capital, as he prepared his troops to make their way to Aphek for the massing of the combined Philistine forces. Confident that David had been regularly raiding territory in Israel – the south of Judah – Achish now assured David ('knowing you shall know', literally), not only that he and his men would have a role to play in the forthcoming battle against 'Israel', but that they would have the privilege of accompanying him into the fray.

'Thou and thy men.' Achish implied, of course, that he expected *all* of David's men to go with him. It was this which led to David's base at Ziklag being left entirely undefended – and therefore vulnerable to the Amalekite attack recorded in chapter 30.

Verse 2. *'David said to Achish, Surely thou shalt know what thy servant can do.'* It wasn't possible for David either to refuse to answer the king, or, when answering, to refuse to obey such a clear requirement. To have done either would have been to jeopardize not only his own life but the lives of his men. And in any case, as I understand David's view of life, what Achish told David he was planning provided David with just the kind of opportunity he wanted. And so David, in what must rank as one of the most carefully worded and deliberately ambiguous answers ever given, played back Achish's 'know thou' to him.

David's answer *could*, of course, be taken in two ways. On the one hand, it could be taken to indicate that he would most surely distinguish himself fighting *on the Philistine side* against Israel – which is exactly how he *meant* Achish to understand him – and how Achish did understand him! But it could equally be taken to indicate that he would most surely distinguish himself fighting *on Israel's side* against the Philistines. And I am convinced that this was what David really meant.²

To me, judging from everything we have seen of David – of his attitude and actions – it would not only have offended his conscience, but would have been diametrically opposed to all his principles, for David to fight against Israel. Not only was it inconceivable that a patriot like David could have been persuaded to engage in battle against his own countrymen – even viewed just as such – but he had made it clear from his early days that he had regarded the 'Israel' against who the Philistines were now massing their forces, v. 1, as 'the armies of the living God', 17. 26, 36. For David to have fought against them would therefore, in his own eyes, have been one and the same thing as for him to have fought against God!

We know also that David had always regarded Saul as 'the Lord's anointed', and had made it clear time and time again, both to his own men and to Saul himself, that, because Saul was that, under no circumstances would he ever lift his hand against him.³ Indeed, the final assurance David had given to Saul to this effect had been more or less the very last thing David is recorded as having said prior to his decision to go down to the Philistines, 26. 23. As I see it, it would have been unthinkable that David should now go back on that pledge.

And then we have watched David, throughout the whole time he has been based at Ziklag, operating as a very effective 'double agent' – fooling the king of Gath into believing that he was anti-Saul and anti-Israel, while, in truth, he had been attacking several of Israel's long-standing foes, vv. 8-12. Are we to believe that David is now to change sides and in reality to wage war against both Saul and Israel? No way!

Some time before, Saul had said to David, 'thou shalt do great things', 26. 25. And I don't doubt that David now sees a golden opportunity to do some 'great things' *for Israel* in the forthcoming battle. And what better way to convince Saul and all Israel of his loyalty than by from helping them trounce 'the uncircumcised' Philistines, as David consistently and scornfully described them – from the Valley of Elah in chapter 17 (vv. 26, 36) right through to his eulogy over Saul and Jonathan in 2 Samuel 1 (v. 20).⁴

And so, as I see it, knowing that he and Achish would attach *very* different meanings to his words, David replied with intentional ambiguity, 'You shall know what your servant can do'.

'And Achish said to David, Therefore will I make thee keeper of mine head for ever.' As David had hoped, his ambiguity went right over the head of Achish – who generously, but rather foolishly, promised to make David 'keeper' of it from then on! In all probability, the expression 'the keeper ('the guardian/watchman') of my head' referred to the position of commander of the king's personal bodyguard.⁵ And David's promotion to such high rank over the king's crack troops was to be, Achish assured David, a lifetime appointment – the king would appoint him to that eminent status 'for ever'. Clearly David's ploy in 27. 8-12 had proved so effective that Achish now had

unqualified confidence in David's loyalty! I suggest there is no small irony in the fact that it was the king of *Gath* who now promised to give the position of 'guardian of his head' to the very man who had once severed the head of the great 'champion' from *Gath*, 17. 51– the more so, I guess, because David's exploit in the valley of Elah had been immortalised in the words of a popular song still remembered by the Philistine leaders, 29. 5. Talk about putting the fox in charge of the hen house!

Verses 3-6 Saul's predicament – the size of the foe and the silence of the Lord

Verse 3. 'Now Samuel was dead, and all Israel had lamented him, and buried him in Ramah, even in his own city. And Saul had put away those that had familiar spirits, and the wizards, out of the land'. At this point, the Holy Spirit inserts two pieces of background information to enable the reader to understand what follows – reminding us (i) that Samuel was dead – indeed, as we know, he had been dead for some time, 25.1, and (ii) that Saul had earlier launched a violent campaign against those who had 'familiar spirits'.⁶ I cannot help wondering whether the way in which these two flashbacks are linked together here is meant to suggest that Saul's zeal in 'putting away' the occult practices was due in no small part to the influence of Samuel. But, in any case, it is important for our grasp of what follows that we have these two facts before us.

'Those that had familiar spirits'. This expression translates just one Hebrew word (*'ōb*), which occurs 16 times in the Old Testament, and which means properly 'spirit of the dead'. Since it was held by those who practiced divination that the 'spirit of the dead' took control of the medium, and spoke through her, the distinction between the supposed 'spirit' and the medium became blurred and the word is sometimes used, as here, to refer to the medium. The word occurs here, as it does in vv. 7-9, in the feminine form, implying that a medium would normally – if not always – be a woman. This is consistent with the way in which, in v. 7, Saul instructed his servants to find for him 'a woman that hath a familiar spirit'.

The Septuagint translates the word by the Greek word for 'ventriloquist' – literally 'one who talks in the belly'. And it seems that in many cases the medium used some sort of ventriloquism – speaking in strange voices – whether the medium was possessed by a spirit or not. This interpretation is supported by the words of Isaiah in chapter 29 of his prophecy, 'thou shalt be brought down, and shalt speak out of the ground, and thy speech shall be low out of the dust, and thy voice shall be, as of one that hath a familiar spirit, out of the ground, and thy speech shall whisper ('chirp', 'twitter', 'peep', as a bird) out of the dust', Isa. 29. 4.

'Wizards'. 'Those who know', literally – that is, those supposedly acquainted with the secrets of the unseen world and of the future. This word, which, in scripture, is always found alongside the word translated 'those that had familiar spirits', is in the masculine form, which may suggest it describe the male counterpart of the female medium – just as in English, 'witch' and 'wizard' function as feminine and masculine descriptions⁷ – but with the probable distinction that, whereas the female medium would claim to be a channel of communication with the world of the dead, the male wizard would claim to have access to the mysteries of the unseen world and the ability to foretell the future. For some further comments on 'familiar spirits' and 'wizards' see Annex B, 'The Occult'.⁸

'Saul had put away'. Contrast the more violent expression used by the medium herself in verse 9, 'he hath cut off those that have familiar spirits' – when she employs the same word used of the 'cutting off' of Saul's head by the Philistines in chapter 31.⁹ 1 Chronicles 10 tells us, 'Saul died for his transgression which he committed against the Lord, even against the word of the Lord, which he kept not, and also for asking counsel of one that had a familiar spirit, to enquire (i.e. seek guidance), and enquired not of the Lord: therefore he slew him', 1 Chron. 10.13. Ironically, therefore, Saul died (and had his head 'cut off'), in part at least, because he consulted the very kind of occult practitioner that he had previously attempted to 'cut off'. Another possible irony lies in the words of Samuel to Saul back in chapter 15, 'rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft', 15. 23, in that Saul, who had been guilty for some time of 'rebellion', now adds to his guilt that he dabbles in witchcraft itself!

We are not told when Saul had conducted his crusade against the occult but it was almost certainly during the earlier – and more promising – period of his reign. We learn from a later passage, 2 Sam. 21, that this had not been Saul's only fierce campaign. We read there that, when David faced a three year famine and enquired of God the reason for it, 'the Lord answered, It is for Saul, and for his house of bloodshed, because he slew the Gibeonites', 2 Sam. 21.1 lit. In that case, Saul acted utterly contrary to God's will – hence the famine – because Joshua and the princes of Israel had long before 'cut' a solemn covenant of peace with the Gibeonites 'by the Lord God of Israel', Josh. 9. 15-27. But Saul had been on safer ground when 'putting away' those engaged in occult practices – for that was wholly in accordance with the law of God. Leviticus 20, for example, said, 'A man or woman that hath a familiar spirit, or that is a wizard, shall surely be put to death: they shall stone them with stones: their blood shall be upon them', Lev. 20. 27.¹⁰

Verse 4. 'The Philistines gathered themselves together, and came and pitched in Shunem: and Saul gathered all Israel together, and they pitched in Gilboa'. The Philistines, having left their initial assembly point at Aphek, had marched up the coastal strip and had now reached Shunem in the Valley of Jezreel, about five miles north of Gilboa. As we have noted before, Shunem was located more or less 45 miles north of Aphek. But, because the hill country to the east required the Philistine forces to keep to the coastal strip for much of the way before swinging to the east, the actual trek would have covered 50-55 miles – involving them in a hard march over several days. But Aphek was itself the most northerly of the Philistine cities, and Shunem was located well within the land of Israel. That the Philistines could move their forces so freely into Israel's territory as far as Shunem highlights the extent of Saul's neglect with regard to the defence of Israel's borders.

Most of the earlier battles between Israel and the Philistines had taken place in the southern part of the country, but the Philistines have now clearly changed their strategy and marshaled their forces farther north. In all likelihood,

they were hoping, assuming their victory in the forthcoming battle, to push right across to the Jordan in the far east. This would have the effect of dividing Israel in two – separating the main part of Israel from the five northernmost tribes of Issachar, Zebulun, Naphtali, Asher and Dan up in the Galilee region – tactics not altogether dissimilar from those used by Joshua some four hundred years before, although the Philistines were drawing their dividing line much further north than had Joshua.

But, altogether apart from any intention of splitting Saul's kingdom into two regions, the Philistines' chosen battleground consisted largely of level ground, where their iron chariots would give them a decided advantage.¹¹ I note that Saul, for his part, attempted to take advantage of the mountainous terrain around Gilboa so as to favour his lightly armed soldiers.

Saul knew that this was no mere border skirmish – the Philistines had marshalled the combined forces of their five-king confederacy for one decisive battle. Israel was therefore in a highly dangerous situation, and Saul desperately needed advice. And we should bear in mind that, though the following story is couched in very personal terms, Saul was really seeking guidance as the king of Israel and not as a private individual. But, as he was to find, this made no difference. God's door was shut.

Verse 5. *'When Saul saw the host of the Philistines'*. The town of Shunem, where the Philistines were camped, was on the southwestern base of the Hill of Moreh, just across the Harod Valley from Saul's camp at Mount Gilboa. From an elevation of about twelve hundred feet, Saul could plainly see the Philistine camp, only four miles distant, and quickly realized that the Philistine forces were much larger than he had ever expected – and certainly larger than any opposition he had faced since the two sides had squared up at the Valley of Elah back in chapter 17, when, as now, 'the Philistines gathered together their armies' to battle, 17. 1; 28. 1. It was obvious to Saul that the Philistine kings had now determined, as then, to break the back of Israel's military might once and for all. But Saul also knew that this time, through his own fault, he had no David to come to his rescue!

'He was afraid, and his heart greatly trembled'. This is the first reference in the chapter to Saul's distraught emotions, which come again to the fore later – when the same word 'greatly', then translated 'sore', resounds like some loud refrain; 'I am sore distressed', v. 15, 'Saul ... was sore afraid', v. 20, 'he was sore troubled', v. 21. Our chapter paints a dark picture indeed of Saul – a miserable, wretched man – greatly trembling, greatly distressed, greatly afraid and greatly troubled, as he could see his predicted doom preparing, in spite of his every effort to prevent it. 'Scared to death', we might say. Saul must learn, as must we all, that God's governmental working is invincible. It is an immutable law that 'whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap', Gal. 6. 7.¹² 'God is not mocked'; Saul had sowed – and he must reap.

Verse 6. *'Saul enquired of the Lord'*. We need to set these words alongside what is said, paradoxically, in 1 Chron. 10; 'Saul died for his transgression which he committed against the Lord ... for asking counsel of one that had a familiar spirit ... and enquired not of the Lord: therefore he slew him', 1 Chron. 10. 13-14.

Given the apparent contradiction between the two passages, it is worth spending a few moments looking at what is actually being said. The first point to note is that there are two distinct Hebrew words (*shā'al* and *dārash*) being translated 'enquired' in the two passages. The one word (*dārash*) which appears in the statement of 1 Chron. 10. 14 that Saul 'enquired not of the Lord' is the more technical word and is used predominantly in the Old Testament of asking counsel either of the Lord Himself or of some other god. The other word (*shā'al*) is the more general word and means properly to 'ask'. Indeed, the word is closely akin to the name 'Saul' ('asked' – and forms part of the name 'Samuel' – 'asked of God'). This is the word we find in 1 Samuel 28. 6 – 'Saul asked', literally – which is perhaps a mild pun on the meaning of Saul's name. So 1 Samuel 28 says that Saul 'asked (*shā'al*) of the Lord', whereas 1 Chronicles 10 says that he 'enquired (*dārash*) not of the Lord'.

So far so good. But it has to be said that the difference in meaning between the two words and their use through the Old Testament is not that great. For example, we find the more general word (*shā'al*) used consistently (six times in all) through the books of Samuel of David 'enquiring' of the Lord.¹³ We should note also that both words are used of Saul's seeking counsel from the woman – the expression at the close of 1 Chronicles 10. 13, translated literally, reads 'for asking (*shā'al*) of a medium to enquire (*dārash*)'. Based on the underlying Hebrew words, the most that can be said therefore is that Saul 'asked' (*shā'al*) of the Lord, as he did also of the medium, but he didn't enquire (*dārash*) of the Lord, which he did of the medium.

For my part, I believe that the real explanation to the seeming contradiction lies deeper. As we know, the prophets of the Old Testament had much to say about religious activities conducted in a merely formal way. And there is one passage in Isaiah 58 which I find particularly relevant to what we are considering.¹⁴ In verse 2 of that chapter, the Lord, through Isaiah, says of His people, "they ask (*shā'al*) of me the ordinances of justice", v. 2. That is, the people showed *outward* signs of wishing to know what God wanted them to do, in all likelihood by consulting His prophets. Yet it was all one big sham – their hearts were far from God and their attitude towards others cruel and unjust – they weren't 'asking' sincerely – and God renounced their empty enquiring of Him along with all their other merely external forms of religious performance.¹⁵

From Saul's statements in v. 15 concerning his need to know what he should do in the face of the Philistine threat, I take it that Saul's real concern here in v. 6 lies, not with his spiritual condition, not with the recognition of his former sins and long years of impenitence, not with any genuine desire to know the will of God for him at the personal and moral level, but with his immediate need for counsel to avert military disaster and, by implication, to avert the fulfilment of the prediction of judgement which has long hung over him. Such a defective and wrongly motivated 'enquiry of the Lord' hardly warranted the name at all. It wasn't a genuine enquiry or asking. It was simply Saul's desperate attempt to get God to bail him out of the trouble in which he had landed himself.

There is then no contradiction between the statement in 1 Chronicles 10 and what we read in 1 Samuel 28 – Saul asked of the Lord in a formal way but he did not enquire of Him sincerely. We can rest assured that we can always trust our Bibles!

Albert Edersheim expresses the meaning of the text well in his book on Bible History¹⁶: ‘As the event proved, Saul did not *really* enquire of the Lord, in the sense of seeking directions from Him, and of being willing to be guided by it. Rather did he, if we may so express it, wish to use the Lord as the means by which to obtain his object. But that was essentially the heathen view, and differed only in detail, not in principle, from the enquiry of a familiar spirit, to which he afterwards resorted’. And so, hardly surprisingly ...

‘The Lord answered him not, neither by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by prophets’. The reference to these three forms of divine revelation – possibly ranked in ascending order from the less to the more spiritual – indicates Saul’s wide-ranging attempts to obtain information from God, and so makes the futility of all his attempts the more striking. Saul looked (a) to dreams, an immediate revelation to himself, (b) to Urim, a revelation communicated by means of the high priest and his ephod; and (c) to prophets, a revelation conveyed through one of God’s servants speaking by the word of the Lord. But it was all to no avail. The only thing Saul heard in response to his ‘much speaking’, Matt. 6. 7, was a resounding silence. Heaven was silent.

Since Saul had had no heart to obey God’s word to him in the past, God would not reveal more of His will to him in the present. This is the principle taught in Proverbs 1, ‘Because *I have called*, and ye *refused* ... then shall *they call* upon me, but I *will not answer*’, Prov. 1.24, 28. When God had given Saul opportunities to repent, he had ignored them. Alas for Saul then, he did not ‘seek the Lord while he may be found’ nor ‘call upon him while he is near’, Isa. 55. 6. And because Saul had consistently and wilfully chosen to follow his own will in the past, God now simply permitted him to reap what he had sowed.

I find the reference to ‘Urim’ interesting. Given that Saul had wiped out the priesthood at Nob, 22. 17-19, and since the surviving priest Abiathar, together with the high priestly ephod from Nob, was now with David, 22. 20-21; 23. 6, I think we have to assume that Saul had appointed another high priest (possibly Zadok) to serve the tabernacle and had equipped him with a reproduction ephod together with Urim and Thummim stones.¹⁷

Verses 7-10 Desperate words and desperate actions

Verse 7. ‘Saul unto his servants, Seek me a woman that hath a familiar spirit, that I may go to her, and enquire of her. And his servants said to him, Behold, there is a woman that hath a familiar spirit at En-dor’. With all orthodox channels of communication broken down, Saul’s fear and trembling¹⁸ of v. 5 turned to desperation. Having failed to obtain the desired information from the Lord, immediately he turned to that which he had previously himself condemned, not only – by ‘building again the things which’ he had ‘destroyed’ – in the language of the New Testament ‘Saul’, making himself ‘a transgressor’, Gal. 2. 18, but also indicating just how low he had sunk.¹⁹ In the words of one writer, he took ‘himself to hell for counsel since heaven was deaf. His thoughts ... of the wildest and gloomiest kind ... "God has cast me off, I will betake myself to Satan. Heaven's door is shut, I will see if hell's is open"’.²⁰

Saul felt that he must do *something*, and do it now! It is as almost as if we are watching a rerun of the events at Gilgal back in chapter 13. Then also ‘the Philistines gathered themselves together to fight with Israel’, 13. 5 – identical words in Hebrew to v. 1 of our chapter. The main difference being that this time it was Saul and not the people who is trembling – in chapter 13 ‘all the people followed him trembling’, 13. 7; now it was Saul’s heart which ‘greatly trembled’, v. 5. And now, as in chapter 13, Saul was panicked into doing that which was clearly contrary to God’s revealed will – then to take it on himself to offer a burnt offering rather than to await Samuel’s arrival – now to have recourse to the powers of darkness. Nor are these two sins unconnected, for, as 1 Chron. 13 says, ‘Saul died for his transgression which he committed against the Lord, even against the word of the Lord, which he kept not, and also for asking counsel of one that had a familiar spirit, to enquire of it’, 1 Chron. 10.13-14. It seems that in these ways the Holy Spirit ties together that incident, when things first went wrong for Saul and this, when we see the depths to which Saul sank in the end. In many ways therefore Saul was reliving the events of chapter 13.

Verse 8. ‘Saul disguised himself, and put on other raiment’. But, in a profounder sense, when going to consult the medium, Saul did not so much disguise himself as reveal himself!²¹

‘And he went, and two men with him’. En-dor was located about seven miles north of the Israelite camp – about a two-hour trek – but it was also just three or four miles northeast of Shunem, and therefore, though accessible, was perilously close to the Philistine camp. It was a sign of Saul’s desperation that, to consult the medium,²² he was prepared to venture on such a risky journey, passing over the shoulder of the very hill (of Morah) on which the Philistine military forces were assembled.

‘They came to the woman by night: and he said, I pray thee, divine²³ unto me by the familiar spirit, and bring me him up, whom I shall name unto thee’. This is one of ten night scenes of which we read in 1 Samuel.²⁴ And I guess that, in the whole of the Bible, it must rank as the most vivid description of any night scene, with the sole exception of that when Judas Iscariot betrayed the Saviour!

Verses 9-10. *‘The woman said unto him, Behold, thou knowest what Saul hath done, how he hath cut off those that have familiar spirits, and the wizards, out of the land: wherefore then layest thou a snare for my life, to cause me to die?’* Initially, the medium was totally fooled by Saul’s disguise! So much then for her occult powers.

Interestingly, the word used by the woman (‘cut off’) is that used in God’s law uses to describe what the Lord would Himself do to *those who consult mediums* – which is, of course, exactly what *Saul* was doing at the time – ‘the soul that turneth after such as have familiar spirits, and after wizards, to go a whoring after them, I will even set my face

against that soul, and will *cut him off* from among his people', Lev. 20. 6. But Saul was hardly likely to register the point.

'Saul swore to her by the Lord, saying, As the Lord liveth, there shall no punishment happen to thee for this thing'. As these words didn't lead the woman to the conclusion that her visitor was Saul himself, she clearly understood Saul to mean, not that he possessed the authority to guarantee her protection, but that he would keep their meeting secret, thereby shielding her from exposure as a medium and 'punishment' ('hurt') in consequence. I wonder whether, later, after she had recognized her visitor as Saul, her mind may have flashed back to his oath and she may have thought, 'So that was what he meant! And that was how he could assure me I wouldn't be held responsible for flaunting a royal prohibition!'

There is, of course, an ironic twist here in that Saul swore an oath in the name of the living God while seeking help from one who supposedly consulted the dead – a practice which Saul knew had been declared an abomination by that same living Lord! Saul has now degenerated so far as to swear to the woman in *the Lord's* name that she would not be punished for transgressing *the Lord's* law.

It is sad that, as far as we know, the last time Saul ever used the name of the Lord was in guaranteeing protection to a medium.

Verses 11-14 Sudden recognition! ... (a) of Saul by the medium, and (b) of Samuel by Saul

Verse 11. 'Whom shall I bring up unto thee?' The word translated 'bring up' was a natural description to use of bringing back one who was dead and who had been buried in the ground. Although in this case, it was Samuel's spirit – and not his body – which was brought back. The word rendered 'bring up' is in fact one of the key words of the passage – occurring no less than six times between verse 8 and verse 15.²⁵ Interestingly, the same word, and in exactly the same form as here, is found in Hannah's prayer, 'the Lord ... bringeth down to Sheol and bringeth up', 2. 6. Little did Samuel's mother suspect that her own – then new-born – son would one day be brought up from Sheol in such a spectacular manner!

'He said, Bring me up Samuel'. That Saul knew what he was doing was wrong is proven by the fact that he had earlier done all he could to eradicate such practices from Israel, and that most violently, v. 3. But, having failed to obtain the desired communication from any living prophet, v. 6, he now, in his desperation, turns to a dead prophet. Saul's sin lay, of course, not in *who* it was he wished to consult – he wasn't asking to speak to an uncircumcised Goliath – but in the fact *that* he wished to consult the dead at all – even if that dead person happened to be one of the godliest of men. And I suppose that Saul's now seeking counsel from Samuel is testimony indeed to the influence which godly Samuel had exerted over Saul in Saul's better days.

Verse 12. 'And when the woman saw Samuel, she cried with a loud voice'. There is no evidence that the woman had anything to do with the appearance of Samuel – indeed all the evidence points very much the other way. Presumably, the medium began to make her normal preparations, expecting, as usual, to lapse into some trance-like state – in which state, if the truth were told, she would normally have come under the power of some spirit (her 'control spirit' as it is often known in occult circles), who would then impersonate the individual called for.

This time, however, the usual occult procedure was cut short abruptly by the sudden – and totally unexpected – appearance of the spirit of the real Samuel. It is worth noting that the word 'when' at the beginning of the verse is not in the Hebrew text and I have to say that its insertion very much weakens the point being made. The text properly reads, 'And the woman saw Samuel, and cried out with a loud voice'. That is, the text is highlighting the way in which the whole thing happened very quickly and that the abruptness – coupled with the reality – of Samuel's appearance caused the medium to call out.

For, with the real appearance of Samuel, the woman realised she had got more than she had bargained for. *This* was no demonic impersonation – and, if I may say so, *she* was no 'happy medium'! It seems clear that she was transfixed with terror and screamed out loudly because she knew immediately that what she saw was something fundamentally different to anything which had come within the range of her previous experience.²⁶

We can take it for granted that there is no way in which this woman had been able to summon the spirit of one of the righteous dead. That would mean that Satan possesses power over the spirits of departed saints! But clearly neither was this a case of human fraud and deception. Apart from the later words of Samuel proving this, the text itself speaks from verse 12 to verse 20 in terms of a real appearance of Samuel.²⁷

It follows then that Samuel appeared by the power and permission of God Himself – that neither the woman nor Saul – that neither Satan nor the demonic world – had any hand in it.²⁸ Samuel actually came then, not because the medium, or anyone else, summoned him, but because it pleased God, for His own good reasons, to permit it. I suggest that the Lord stepped in, partly to expose the fraud of all the woman was engaged in, partly to baffle any attempt by the powers of darkness to take advantage of the opening given to them by Saul's foolish request, and partly to allow Samuel to speak his final word of truth and doom to Saul.

I can see no reason to believe that Samuel appeared physically – in a body, that is. The text nowhere suggests he did, and, indeed, it draws attention in verse 3, not only to the fact that Samuel was dead, but that he had been buried! There is no suggestion that this was a case of a resurrection – it was an appearance of Samuel's spirit. According to scripture, God does sometimes permit unseen spirit beings – such as angels – to become visible. And, given the 'appearing' of Moses and Elijah 'in glory' on the Mount of the Transfiguration, Luke 9. 30-31, I cannot see how anyone can dispute that, should God will it, men from the realm of the dead *can* both return to this world and become visible.

And it is important to note in this connection that, in our Lord's account of the destinies of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16. 19-31, He did *not* say, as some imagine, that it is impossible for a dead man to return to earth! Jesus did

say that no-one in Abraham's bosom could pass to Hades on account of the 'great gulf fixed' between the two places, and He did say that the return (even the resurrection!) of someone who had died would be ineffective to bring the living to repentance and conversion – as is indeed proved true here in 1 Samuel 28. There is then absolutely no contradiction between our Lord's teaching and what we read in 1 Samuel 28 – as I said when commenting on verse 6, we can rest assured that we can always trust our Bibles!

Neither, because of its unique nature and of the evident intervention of God's own power, does this incident offer any support for the claims of spiritists and mediums today that they are able to communicate with the dead. Indeed, I note that this incident pays no compliment to this particular medium's supposed powers in that, on the one hand, for much of the time she was unable to penetrate Saul's disguise – even with the visible clue of his exceptional height! – and that, on the other hand, she clearly had no control over what was happening, and was stunned by the genuine appearance of the very one she was endeavouring to 'call up'!

'The woman spake to Saul, saying, Why hast thou deceived me? for thou art Saul'. To the woman, the sight of the real Samuel was proof enough that she had encountered a far greater power than anything she professed to wield – that she had encountered the power of God! Instinctively she realized that the only man in Israel important enough to receive such a supernatural visit was the head of the nation – that the man in the disguise was none other than Saul himself.

Verse 13. *'The king said unto her, Be not afraid'.* It may well be that Saul interpreted the woman's fear as stemming from her recognition of him ('Thou art Saul') rather than from the genuine and unexpected appearance of a deceased person – and so spoke to reassure her that her life was not in danger.

'What sawest thou?' Showing that, *at this stage at least*, Saul wasn't party to any visible appearance of Samuel.

'The woman said unto Saul, I saw gods ascending out of the earth'. She described Samuel in terms of '*elohim*', which word, though plural in form, is, of course, a common name of the one true God in the Old Testament. I note that the word is also used to describe judges in Israel, whose office as magistrates meant that they were representatives of God Himself, Psa. 82. 6; John 10. 35. It is possible therefore that the woman simply meant that the figure she saw had the appearance of a judge – a possibility strengthened perhaps by her own description in verse 14 of what she saw – 'an old man ... covered with a mantle (an outer garment worn by people of rank)'. I gather, however, that 'in the Ancient Near East, mediums used the term "gods" to refer to disembodied spirits'²⁹ – seemingly because these non-earthly beings existed in the realm of the supernatural. And it may be that this semi-pagan woman used the word in that sense – as forming part of her occult vocabulary.

Verse 14. *'He said unto her, What form is he of? And she said, An old man cometh up; and he is covered with a mantle'.* The woman described Samuel as 'old', which he certainly had been when he had died. For he had spoken of himself as 'old and grey-headed' way back in chapter 12 (verse 2), long before David had even been anointed, and had not died until the beginning of chapter 25. In the Septuagint, the woman describes him as 'an upright, erect (*ὀρθος*³⁰) man', and Samuel was certainly that *morally*, as again chapter 12 makes clear – 'here I am: witness against me before the Lord ... whose ox have I taken' and so on (verse 3).

Samuel was wrapped in a robe (*a meil*). This is the word used in the Old Testament (a) of the High Priest's garment, (b) of the 'little coat' which Hannah had made for Samuel himself and brought to him every year, 2. 19, (c) of Jonathan's robe which he had laid at Jonathan's feet, 18. 4, and (d) of Saul's robe, the hem of which David had cut off, 24. 4. The general view among scholars is that the word describes 'an outer garment worn by people of rank'³¹. Although here in chapter 28 we have to do with the manifestation of Samuel's *spirit*, by association the robe in which he appeared was in essence that which he had worn as God's prophet – and which therefore held distant but significant and sad memories for Saul. For that had been the 'mantle' ('robe') which Saul had once seized and rent, 15. 27, immediately following which Samuel had announced to him that, on account of his disobedience, 'the Lord hath rent the kingdom of Israel from thee this day, and hath given it to a neighbour of thine, that is better than thou', v. 28.

'And Saul perceived that it was Samuel'. If Saul now picked up on the association suggested by Samuel's distinctive robe, he might well have had a premonition of what Samuel would soon be saying to him in verse 17 – 'the Lord hath rent the kingdom out of thine hand, and given it to thy neighbour, to David!' Possibly the Lord caused Samuel's spirit to appear in this precise form to remind Saul of that very event and of the act of disobedience which cost him so dear.

'And he stooped with his face to the ground, and bowed himself'. I am reminded of chapter 24, when David had Saul's robe in his grasp, v. 4 – that robe which back in chapter 15 had certainly been a symbol of Saul's kingdom and dynasty, which Saul had been told plainly that God would rend from him and give to David. Interestingly, we read later in chapter 24 that David 'stooped with his face to the earth, and bowed himself', v. 8. Now we read identical words of Saul. And just as Saul now bowed down before Samuel, one who some long time before had died, so David had then bowed down before Saul, one now doomed shortly to die himself – and so to join Samuel; 'be with me', v. 19.

That Saul now fell prostrate may suggest that Samuel had become visible to Saul – although not *necessarily* so. It may have been that Saul's recognition of Samuel from the medium's description was sufficient to evoke such a response. In any case, from this point on, Saul and Samuel engage in conversation *directly* without any part being played by the woman as a channel of communication.

We can assume that Saul didn't maintain his 'face down' posture throughout his conversation with Samuel, for we read in verse 20 that, at the close of the conversation, 'Saul fell straightway all along the earth'.³²

Verses 15-19 'He being dead yet speaketh', Heb. 11. 4.

I guess we could quite properly speak of Samuel's words in vv. 15-19 as 'grave words' – not only because of their nature but as words spoken *by* one who had been in the grave for some time *to* one who would soon be joining him there!

Verse 15. *'Samuel said to Saul, Why hast thou disquieted me, to bring me up?'* Many years before, Samuel had voiced his objection to the Lord, 'How can I go? If Saul hear it, he will kill me', 16. 1. But now Samuel had no fears that Saul would attempt to kill him! Or reach out to tear his robe for that matter, 15. 27!

Samuel began by complaining that Saul had 'disquieted' (disturbed) him. This is the word we find in Isa. 14, translated 'stirreth up' – 'Sheol from beneath is moved for thee to meet thee at thy coming: it stirreth up the dead for thee, even all the chief ones of the earth', Isa. 14. 9 – where the spirits of the departed in Sheol are pictured in poetic language as being roused with amazement at the arrival there of Israel's great oppressor, the king of Babylon, and who cry out in scorn, 'Art thou also become weak as we? Art thou become like unto us?'. v. 10. But the word which in Isaiah 14 is used simply poetically and metaphorically, is used here quite literally by Samuel, who had indeed been 'disturbed' and made to return to the world of the living.

'Saul answered, I am sore distressed; for the Philistines make war against me'. It is as though Saul was saying, 'I'm sorry, Samuel. I just had to call you. I know it's against all the rules, but, believe me, this is an emergency'. And yet we have to ask where was the logic in seeking counsel of the Lord's prophet by a means totally forbidden by the Lord? But evidently Saul was no longer capable of either rational thought or action.

I cannot help but note Saul's, 'the Philistines make war against me'. I don't want to be unfair to Saul and I recognize that he speaks as monarch of Israel, but I can't help feeling that even here we detect that same focus on himself³³ which has run through the narrative from chapter 15 – where, following Samuel's repeated announcements to Saul about the loss of his kingdom and dynasty, Saul's overriding concern was 'honour me now, I pray thee, before the elders of my people, and before Israel', 15. 30.³⁴

'And God is departed from me'. Saul was in a desperate situation. He was well aware that all previous victories over the Philistines during his reign had been God-given. Back in chapter 14, following the initial attack by Jonathan and his armour-bearer on the Philistine garrison, it had been apparent to all that, *'the Lord saved Israel that day'*, 14. 23 – indeed Saul himself had then spoken of the Lord as the One 'which saveth Israel', v. 39. And in chapter 17, it had been equally clear to all that, as David had forewarned Goliath, *'the Lord saveth not with sword and spear: for the battle is the Lord's, and he will give you (plural) into our hands'*, 17. 46. But now God was departed from Saul and he knew there was no real prospect of the Lord intervening to 'save' him and Israel again!

'And answereth me no more'. Quite possibly Saul had been able to hear the shouts of Philistines as he had passed relatively close by their camp on his way from Gilboa to En-dor, but, as he now told Samuel, he had not heard the voice of the Lord! He now faced what was, in his book, the greatest crisis of his life – and God had nothing to say to him!

'Neither by prophets, nor by dreams'. We read in verse 6 that 'the Lord answered him not, neither by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by prophets'. We can hardly miss that, in speaking to Samuel, Saul omits any reference to the 'Urim'. Why so? Was it that he was too embarrassed, in speaking to 'priestly' Samuel, to make any reference to something which suggested an association with the priesthood and therefore to Saul's massacre of the 85 priests at Nob – when Saul had been guilty of visiting on the innocent 'priests of the Lord' the very 'utter destruction' which Samuel had previously rebuked him for not visiting upon the Amalekites! I guess that the memory of how, having spared at least one of God's sworn enemies, Saul had slaughtered some of God's anointed priests, was not something he wished to draw to Samuel's notice!

'Therefore I have called thee, that thou mayest make known unto me what I shall do'. Both the silence of God and the later words of Samuel show that in reality, this was a request which could not be granted. 'Make known what he should do', indeed! The time for 'doing' in that sense was now past – the time for 'doing' had been when Samuel had made known the Lord's will to him – and had made it known plainly. God's longsuffering had borne with Saul then. But his persistent disobedience and self-will had now brought Israel's forlorn monarch to the point when there was nothing he could 'do' to avert that judgement he most feared.

Samuel's message to Saul in verses 16-19 registered four simple points – or, perhaps more accurately, lands four hard-hitting blows – covering four distinct areas of Saul's life. First, there was the spiritual dimension in verse 16, 'the Lord is departed from thee, and is become thine enemy'. Then there was the political dimension in verses 17-18, 'the Lord hath rent the kingdom out of thine hand, and given it to thy neighbour, even to David'. Then there was the national dimension in the opening and closing sections of verse 19, 'the Lord will ... deliver Israel with thee into the hand of the Philistines ... the Lord ... shall deliver the host of Israel into the hand of the Philistines'. And finally there was the personal dimension in the central section of verse 19, 'tomorrow shalt thou and thy sons be with me'.

Verse 16. First, the spiritual dimension.

'Then said Samuel, Wherefore then dost thou ask of me, seeing the Lord is departed from thee, and is become thine enemy?'

I observe that, whereas Saul had used the general word 'God' when speaking to Samuel in verse 15, in replying Samuel characteristically refers to 'the Lord' by name throughout verses 16-19 – doing so seven times in all.

It may at first seem strange to us that, though previously Saul had unsuccessfully sought the Lord through 'prophets', v. 15, now the Lord speaks to him through a prophet – and that, in one sense, the Lord therefore gave Saul what he had earlier sought. But we must note that what Samuel had to say to Saul was certainly not what Saul wanted to hear. First, the prophet fed back to Saul his own words – that the Lord *had* indeed departed from him –

and then questioned why, in such circumstance, Saul should wish to seek counsel from him, Samuel. Did Saul believe that the Lord's servant might prove more merciful than the Lord Himself, to give him the very guidance he had sought in vain from the Lord? Well, if that was what Saul had hoped, he was to be bitterly disappointed, because Samuel neither gave Saul any counsel as to what Saul was to 'do', nor offered him one ray of comfort or hope. All Samuel told Saul was what was to happen.

To Saul's mind, Saul currently had only two enemies – the Philistines and David. Back in chapter 18, we were told that he had required 'an hundred foreskins of *the Philistines*, to be avenged of *the king's enemies*', 18. 25, and, shortly after, that 'Saul became *David's enemy* continually', v. 29. Now Samuel confronted him with the grim truth – the Lord Himself was his enemy!³⁵

Verse 17. Second, there was the political dimension.

'And the Lord hath done to him, as he spake by me: for the Lord hath rent the kingdom out of thine hand, and given it to thy neighbour, even to David'. I believe that the 'him' in the expression 'the Lord has done to him' should be understood as a reference to the Lord, and the clause rendered as 'the Lord has done for Himself'³⁶ – meaning, I assume, 'done for His own glory', in demonstrating, that is, the truthfulness of His word spoken through Samuel. For Samuel immediately proceeded to explain to Saul that the Lord was carrying out what He had previously declared through him – namely that He would tear the kingdom from Saul and give it to his 'neighbour'.

And, surely, it was only fitting that the word of the Lord regarding the certainty and the justice of Saul's *loss of his kingship* – now 'torn' from him by the Lord – should be made known to Saul in private by the very same man who, at the first, had made known to him in private his anointing by that same Lord *to his kingship*, 9. 25-10. 1 – 'Samuel communed with Saul upon the top of the house ... about the spring of the day ... and ... as they were going down to the end of the city, Samuel said to Saul, Bid the servant pass on before us ... but stand thou still a while, that I may shew thee the word of God'.

Sadly, the day would come when, through another prophet, Nathan, that the Lord would have occasion to speak to the man now described as king Saul's 'neighbour' – but then, as Saul here, having been king for many years – in identical words, of 'thy neighbour', 2 Sam. 12. 11 – then telling David that He, the Lord, would, as in the case of Saul, be 'taking' from him what was David's and would be giving it to this 'neighbour' of his. The 'neighbour' of whom the Lord would then be speaking would be David's own son Absalom, and that which, in consequence of David's unbridled lust for Bathsheba, the Lord would be taking from David would be his wives; 'I will *take* thy wives before thine eyes, and *give* them unto thy neighbour, and he shall lie with thy wives in the sight of this sun'.³⁷ God is no respecter of persons, and sin sometimes bears its fruit in the lives of the godly as it does in the lives of the ungodly.

Verse 18. *'Because thou obeyedst not ('because you did not listen to') the voice of the Lord, nor executedst his fierce wrath upon Amalek'*. Samuel called Saul's mind back to the events recorded in chapter 15, reminding Saul of his question to Saul at that time, 'Wherefore ... didst thou not obey ('why did you not listen to') the voice of the Lord, but didst fly upon the spoil', 15. 19.³⁸

In effect, Samuel was explaining to Saul that the Lord had ceased speaking to him, v. 6, because Saul had ceased 'listening' to the Lord. The lesson for us from this is hardly comfortable, but it is clear! If we reject and despise God's word, He will cease to speak to us through it. If we persistently refuse to obey God's word, we will endure God's silence.

Samuel had made it clear back at that time also, that, in the light of Saul's persistent disregard for the Lord's word, the One who rent the kingdom from him to give it to another would *not* repent of His decision; 'the Strength of Israel will not lie nor repent: for he is not a man, that he should repent', v. 29. But that had been *many* years previous, and, it may well be, that Saul had come to hope – even believe – that the Lord had nevertheless changed His mind. Samuel made it clear to Saul that the Lord most certainly had not! And we too must learn that, *if* we sin and come under God's discipline, our repentance and genuine brokenness may well change God's ways with us, but the passage of time in itself certainly won't.

'Therefore hath the Lord done this thing unto thee this day'. In other words, 'Saul, it is not a matter of what *you* are to "do", v. 15, but of what God is now "doing"' – being the same Hebrew word.

Verse 19. Third, there was the national dimension.

'The Lord will also deliver Israel with thee into the hand of the Philistines ... the Lord also shall deliver the host of Israel into the hand of the Philistines'. Chapter 9 makes it clear that Saul came to the kingdom with great potential. The Lord's word to Israel through Samuel had then been, 'I will send thee a man out of the land of Benjamin, and thou shalt anoint him to be captain over my people Israel, *that he may save my people out of the hand of the Philistines*: for I have looked upon my people, because their cry is come unto me', 9. 16. But now the Lord's word through Samuel could only serve to heighten Saul's misery – for, not only was he shortly to be slain, but, though he had in better days accomplished much, as God had said, to 'save' God's people 'out of the hand of the Philistines', 14. 48, the same people would now, on account largely, no doubt, of Saul's sin and poor leadership, be delivered again 'into the hand of the Philistines'.³⁹

And, finally, there was the personal dimension.

'Tomorrow shalt thou and thy sons be with me'. Charles Wesley once wrote a beautiful expanded paraphrase of these words :

'What do these solemn words portend?
A ray of hope when life shall end.
Thou and thy sons, though slain, shall be
To-morrow in repose with me.
Not in a state of hellish pain,

If Saul with Samuel do remain:
Not in a state of damn'd despair,
If loving Jonathan be there'.

Beautiful words indeed, but, for my part, I suspect that Mr Wesley has read far more into Samuel's words than Samuel ever intended. Particularly in their context here, I cannot read Samuel's words as 'a ray of hope' – to me, they are rather 'a statement of doom'. I take them therefore as the Lord's confirmation of what Saul must have feared – that neither he nor his sons would survive the forthcoming battle. Come the morrow, they would join Samuel in the realm of death.⁴⁰

Verses 20-25 Saul's 'last supper'

Verse 20. *'Then Saul fell straightway all along on the earth'*. Saul's knees buckled immediately ('straightway') at Samuel's words, and he fell 'his full length'⁴¹ – literally, 'his full stature' – which, for a man 'higher than any of the people from his shoulders and upward', 10. 23, was no mean length!

It is perhaps more than coincidence that this is the same word which the Lord used when He made it clear to Samuel in chapter 16 that, in choosing *His* kind of king for Israel, He, the Lord, paid no regard to a man's 'stature'; 'Look not on his countenance', the Lord had said, 'or on the height of his stature', 16. 7. A man's 'stature' may then qualify a man for kingship in the eyes of his fellows – as it had with Saul – but it doesn't in the eyes of God. And I suspect that the Holy Spirit may well be drawing our attention to this here – saying, in effect, 'take a look at the "stature" of the people's choice of a king now!

We have witnessed Saul helpless on the ground before Samuel on a previous occasion, when, back in chapter 19, he had 'stripped off his clothes ... lay down naked all that day and all that night', 19. 24. At that time, the Spirit of God had come on Saul to incapacitate him and so to deliver David from his clutches. Now Saul fell to the ground on account of his own emotional and physical exhaustion – 'emotional' in that he 'was sore afraid ('he greatly feared')', because of the words of Samuel', and 'physical' in that 'there was no strength in him; for he had eaten no bread all the day, nor all the night'.

Verses 21-22. *'The woman came unto Saul, and saw that he was sore troubled, and said unto him, Behold, thine handmaid hath obeyed thy voice ... now therefore, I pray thee, hearken thou also unto the voice of thine handmaid, and let me set a morsel of bread before thee'*. The medium pointed out to Saul that she had 'obeyed' ('listened to') *his* voice in doing all she could to respond to his requests in verses 8 to 12; now she wants him to 'hearken ... unto' (the same word, to 'listen to', to 'obey') her voice, and to eat some food.

In accordance with the manners and standard protocol of the east, the woman spoke in typical understatement of the meal she was planning – describing the fatted calf and unleavened bread⁴² of verse 24 as only 'a morsel of bread'. Interestingly, her description matched perfectly that of Abraham in Genesis 18. 5, when he said, 'I will fetch a morsel of bread'. The patriarch had also been speaking of a 'calf' ('the son of the herd', literally), which he also 'hurried' to make ready – and which he also supplemented with other foodstuffs, Gen. 18. 8. Nor do the parallels stop there, in that then Abraham provided *his* 'morsel of bread' for three 'men' who had arrived unexpectedly with him, Gen. 18. 1, and now the woman provided *her* 'morsel of bread' for three men (Saul and the 'two men with him', v. 8) who had arrived unexpectedly with her. And just as, in the case of this woman, her three guests fell into two distinct categories – namely, that of the king of Israel and that of his two servants – so also Abraham's three 'guests' also fell – if I can say it reverently – into two far more dissimilar categories – namely, that of the Lord Himself and that of two angels, Gen. 18. 2, 17, 22, 33; 19. 1. But, in Genesis 18, the key 'visitor', the Lord had unexpectedly 'appeared' to Abraham from the unseen world to give him a message of life – for, in their great age, he and Sarah would shortly have a son – whereas, here, in 1 Samuel 28, the key 'visitor' was given a message of death by someone who had unexpectedly appeared from the unseen world.

Verse 23. *'But he refused, and said, I will not eat'*. On this occasion, it wasn't so much that Saul always had a problem listening to other people – though both Samuel and Jonathan could testify that he did! – but that food and physical comfort no longer featured on Saul's agenda, as now being wholly irrelevant in that he could already see ominous, black clouds of death gathering on his immediate horizon.

'His servants, together with the woman, compelled him; and he hearkened unto their voice'. But Saul's two servants along with the woman 'urged' him – they were 'insistent', a strong word mainly used in the Old Testament to describe something being broken through or broken down, such, for example as the walls of some great city.⁴³ We might perhaps therefore render the expression here, 'they broke him down' – that is, broke down his resistance.⁴⁴ Alas that a man who could be 'broken down' to 'listen to the voice' of a medium and of two of his men, v. 23, had steadfastly refused to 'listen to (the same word) the voice of the Lord', v. 18!

'So he arose from the earth, and sat upon the bed'. 'The bed' being a bench which ran along the wall of the room and was equipped with pillows or cushions.

Verses 24-25. *'The woman had a fat calf in the house; and she hasted, and killed it'. 'A calf of the stall', literally.⁴⁵* This was very much a delicacy. Truly, this woman provided a meal fit for a king!

Flavius Josephus may well have been right when he conjectured that the woman 'had one calf that she was very fond of, and one that she took a great deal of care of, and fed it herself; for she had no other possession but that one calf. This she killed, and made ready its flesh, and set it before his servants and himself', adding, 'it is but right to commend the generosity of this woman'⁴⁶ – the more so, I suppose – when we recall the woman knew full well that Saul had previously 'cut off' those, who like herself, had engaged in occult practices, v. 9.

I suppose that, with our greater familiarity with the New Testament, it is only natural that the killing of the fatted calf should trigger in our minds the similar action of the father in our Lord's parable about the so-called Prodigal Son, who instructed his servants 'bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry', Luke 15. 22-23.

Quite likely many of you have come across the story – whether true or fictional I cannot say – about the Sunday School class which had been taught the parable and were being asked questions about it. It is said that, when the teacher asked one boy, 'Who was it that was sorry when the prodigal son returned home?', the lad thought for a few moments, and answered, not altogether unreasonably, 'The fatted calf, miss'. Certainly, from the passages in Genesis 18, Luke 15 and here, it does seem, that, if you happened to be the fatted calf, and some crisis, need, or special occasion arose in the household, your hours – if not your minutes – were well and truly numbered!

Sadly, this particular fatted calf in 1 Samuel 28 met its end – not, as the animal in our Lord's parable – to provide the main course in a feast of 'merriment' to celebrate the homecoming of a prodigal who had repented and returned – for even at this last hour, Saul showed no sign of doing either – but to provide the last meal for a king, effectively on death row, awaiting his execution the following day. For this was to be, quite literally, Saul's 'last supper' – and just like Judas Iscariot over 1,000 years later, Saul would rise from supper to go out into 'the night', v. 25; John 13. 30 – and, in both cases, it was 'night' in more senses than one. And here the narrative bids us take our leave of Saul for a time, a man who, in his desperation, had turned to the spiritual darkness of an unseen world, now disappearing into the physical darkness of this material world on his way back to the mountain on which he, along with many others, would die the following day.

Pick up the lessons :

Verse 3. We saw that, in his better days, in accordance with God's word, Saul had waged war on spiritism and the occult. God's word is clear – 'Do not turn to mediums or spiritists; do not seek them out to be defiled by them', Lev. 19. 31 NASB. Make no mistake; we are not going to find honey in the jar on which God has written 'Poison'! If we dabble in the occult, even its milder forms, we are flirting with demonism and seriously jeopardize our spiritual health and usefulness for the Lord.

Verse 5. We saw that Saul had to learn that 'whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap', Gal. 6. 7. That principle holds true in every realm. In the context of Galatians 6, it seems to apply primarily to the use to which we put our money and possessions and to whether we do good to others or not. Let us determine to sow what we have, not for this present physical world, but for the world to come.

Verse 6. We saw that because Saul had failed to obey God's word to him in the past, God refused to reveal more of His will to him in the present. How important it is that we live up to the light we have.

I suggested that Saul's real concern lay, not with his poor spiritual condition, but simply with his desire to avert trouble for himself. In his letter, James puts his finger on the central issue, 'Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts', James 4. 2-3. We need to watch our motives when we pray.

Verses 6 and 12. When considering **verse 6**, we saw that there was no *real* contradiction between the statement there that 'Saul enquired of the Lord' and the statement in 1 Chronicles 10.14 that he 'enquired not of the Lord'. And when considering **verse 12**, we saw that there was no contradiction between the appearance of Samuel and our Lord's *actual* teaching in Luke 16. Both cases only served to confirm what we know well – that we can always trust our Bibles!

Verse 12. We reached the conclusion that neither the woman nor Saul – that neither Satan nor the demonic world – had any hand in Samuel's appearance – and that he appeared only by the power and permission of God Himself. Because of its unique nature and the manifest intervention of God's own power, the incident therefore offers no support for the claims of mediums today that they are able to communicate with the dead.

Verse 18. I suggested that, though Saul had been told by Samuel that the One who rent the kingdom from him would 'not lie nor repent: for he is not a man, that he should repent', Saul may have come to believe, with the passing of the years, that the Lord had nevertheless changed His mind. If he had, Samuel soon put him right. The Lord most certainly had not changed His mind! Let us remember that, if, as Christians, we sin and come under God's discipline, our repentance and genuine brokenness may well change God's ways with us, but the passage of time in itself won't.

General. From the appearance of Samuel, then long dead, let us grasp the firmer that there is indeed another world beyond the present – and let us prize the more that far clearer understanding we have as Christians of what awaits us should we die; 'absent from the body ... present with the Lord', 2 Cor. 5. 8; 'with Christ; which is far better', Phil. 1. 23!

End-notes

¹ Some have conjectured that the 'Apek' of 1 Samuel 29. 1 is not that of 4. 1. For details, see the note to 1 Samuel 29. 1.

² True, we read about a later incident that 'there fell some of Manasseh to David, when he came with the Philistines against Saul to battle: but they helped them not: for the lords of the Philistines upon advisement sent him away', 1 Chron. 12.19, which it is possible to interpret as if David and his followers would have 'helped' the Philistines had it not been for the Philistine lords' intervention. But the verse certainly doesn't require this interpretation and, for me, the evidence cited in the main notes is overwhelmingly against it.

³ 1 Sam. 24. 6, 10; 26. 9, 11, 23.

⁴ See also the notes about the seven men from Manasseh at 1 Samuel 29. 2.

⁵ We can compare the later references to the Cherethites and Pelethites (seemingly foreign mercenaries), who, under Benaiah, appear to have formed at least part of David's own private bodyguard, 2 Sam. 8. 18; 15. 18; 20. 7; 20. 23; 1 Kings 1. 38, 44; 1 Chron. 18. 17.

⁶ King Joash of Judah is commended in scripture because he also removed 'mediums and wizards' – together with other 'abominations' from Judah, 2 Kings 23. 25.

⁷ Some expositors believe, however, that there was further distinction between the two roles, with the 'medium' being someone who claimed to be able to communicate with the dead and the 'wizard' being someone who communicated openly with demonic powers. I can find no evidence for this distinction.

⁸ Also TWOT, numbers 37 and 848d, and NIDOTTE, numbers 200 and 3362. For the practice of divination in general, see NIDOTTE, number 7876.

⁹ 1 Sam. 31. 9; compare the references to the 'cutting off' of his skirt, 24. 4, 5, 11.

¹⁰ Compare: 'Regard not them that have familiar spirits, neither seek after wizards, to be defiled by them: I am the Lord your God', Lev. 19. 31; 'The soul that turneth after such as have familiar spirits, and after wizards, to go a whoring after them, I will even set my face against that soul, and will cut him off from among his people', 20. 6; 'When thou art come into the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee ...there shall not be found among you any ... consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard ... for all that do these things are an abomination unto the Lord', Deut. 18. 9-14.

For a helpful article on witchcraft in the Bible, see *Bibliotheca Sacra*—V128 #512—Oct 71—354, from which the following is an extract :

'God's attitude toward witchcraft is bluntly stated in Exodus 22. 18, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live". "There must not be found among you anyone who makes his son or daughter pass through the fire, anyone practicing divination or soothsaying, observing omens, applying sorcery (a charmer, a medium, a wizard, or a necromancer. For all who do these things are offensive to the Lord" (Deut 18. 10–12, Berkeley). God gave these stringent orders in order to preserve the Israelites from spiritual contamination with the degraded occultic practice of Canaan. The profession of the sorcerers in both Egypt and Babylon along with the magicians and the enchanters in Babylon is condemned through the O.T. as representing black magic. Jezebel, the wicked queen of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, was deeply involved in witchcraft ("her sorceries were many", 2 Kings 9. 22). Therefore Joram asked how there could be any peace in Israel so long as Jezebel's magical practices prevailed. This "cursed woman" (9. 34) died a violent death (9. 33–35), which is typical of the fate of so many who are involved in this kind of evil practice. King Manasseh of Judah practiced numerous kinds of occultism, including spiritism and magical sorcery (2 Chron 33. 6). God called these deeds "abominations" and stated that Manasseh had "done wickedly" (2 Kings 21. 11). Therefore Manasseh and his kingdom suffered greatly (21. 10–16). The term "abomination" has the clear connotation of outrageously affronting God by contaminating His holy worship with the adoration of finite, polluted, false deities. It is certainly shameful that the chief monarch of God's people fell to such low depths of sin'.

See also 'Saul, the Spiritist, and Samuel' by Thomas O. Figart in *Grace Theological Journal*, V11 #1:13–29—Wtr 70–13.

¹¹ The Philistines were feared far and wide for their wooden chariots armed with iron fittings at vulnerable and strategic points. Compare 1 Sam. 13. 5.

¹² In context, the principle of 'proportionate sowing and reaping' applies to money, a person's benevolence, and the doing of good, Gal. 6. 6-10. Though someone may fool himself or herself – by sowing little yet expecting much – he or she cannot fool God and the results of meagre sowing will be manifest. If, for example, a Christian spends his money on what gratifies his fleshly nature, he will reap a fleshly harvest. And since the flesh is mortal and will one day pass away, the harvest will pass away as well. On the other hand, if a man uses his money to promote spiritual causes and to feed his spiritual nature, the resulting harvest will remain. The principle is, of course, of wider application – and is relevant also to the use of time, energy, the mind, and so on.

¹³ See 1 Sam. 23. 2, 4; 30. 8.; 2 Sam. 2. 1; 5. 19, 23.

¹⁴ In context, the people were prepared also to show how keen they were by enduring the inconvenience of fasting – but then what did a little abstinence from food matter provided they could retain their basic life style of disobedient rebellion against the moral demands of God?

¹⁵ 'The prophets' charges of abuse help set the specific act of enquiring (*dārash*) within the context of an ongoing relationship. The act of inquiry is always indicative of the relationship', NIDOTTE, number 2011, volume 1, page 996. It was a relationship with God which Saul no longer enjoyed.

¹⁶ 'Bible History. Old Testament', Eerdmans.

¹⁷ See End-note 51 to the notes on 1 Sam. 22. We know that the tabernacle continued on – in spite of the destruction of Nob – because, at the beginning of David's reign, it was at Gibeon, with Zadok the son of Ahitub, of the line of Eleazar, officiating as priest, 1 Chron. 16. 39.

¹⁸ A frequent combination in the writings of Saul's namesake in the New Testament, 2 Cor. 7. 15; Eph. 6. 5; Phil. 2. 12.

¹⁹ D. R. Davis opens his exposition of vv. 3-25 with the following story, 'The telephone rang down in the Führerbunker. It was for Hitler. Joseph Goebbels, Minister of Propaganda for the Third Reich, was on the line. He was ecstatic. The reason? The news: Franklin D. Roosevelt was dead. It was April 1945. Germany was caving in. The Allies were pressing from the west, the Russians from the east; soon Berlin itself would crumble. But none of that mattered to Goebbels, for, as he told Hitler: "It is written in the stars. The last half of April will be the turning point for us." He was referring to two previous astrological predictions that had forecast the hardest blows for Germany during the first months of 1945, especially in the first part of April, but an overwhelming victory in the second half of the month.'¹ Unfortunately for Goebbels's horoscopes, Hitler committed suicide on April 30. Goebbels was not so unusual. Facing ruin, men will sometimes turn in their desperation to any resource that, they think, will give some hope, some direction. So it was with Saul'. Professor Davis quotes Cornelius Ryan, *The Last Battle*, as his source.

²⁰ Horatius Bonar. See www.sermonindex.net/modules/articles/index.php?view=article&aid=1617.

²¹ Nor did Saul's disguise avail him anything, certainly not with the woman, v. 12. It is interesting that centuries later two other kings, Ahab of Israel and Josiah of Judah, would gain nothing from disguising themselves – 'the king of Israel said unto Jehoshaphat, I will disguise myself, and enter into the battle', 1 Kings 22. 30, 34-35// 2 Chron. 18. 29, 33-34; and 'Josiah ... disguised himself ...and came to fight in the valley of Megiddo', 2 Chron. 35. 22-24.

²² In chapter 25, David had received good counsel from a spiritual woman; in chapter 28 Saul seeks counsel through a 'spiritist' woman.

²³ Divination 'attempted to tell the future or bring to light hidden knowledge through various means, including the interpretation of signs or omens, communication with the dead, or the use of magical powers ... The uniqueness of the Israelite faith in the context of the Ancient Near East is shown by (the) attempts to eradicate' divination 'from the practice of their religion', NIDOTTE, number 7876, vol. 3, page 945.

²⁴ See also 1 Sam. 3. 3; 5. 3; 9. 25; 15. 11; 19. 10; 25. 36; 26. 7; 30. 17; 31. 12.

²⁵ One of the key words of the passage – occurring no less than six times in all. 1 Sam. 28. 8 ('bring up'); 11 ('bring up' – twice); 13 ('ascending'), v. 14 ('cometh up'); 15 ('bring up'). It should be noted that 'to bring up from Sheol' *can* mean 'to bring back from the verge of death by an act of healing'; see David's note of praise in Psa 30, 'O Lord my God, I cried unto thee, and thou hast healed me. O Lord, thou hast brought up my soul from Sheol: thou hast kept me alive, that I should not go down to the pit', Psa. 30. 2-3. On the other hand, 'to go down to Sheol' is a normal description of death; Gen. 37. 35; 42. 38; 44. 29, 31; Num. 16. 30, 33; 1 Kings 2. 6; Job 7. 9; 21.13; Ezek. 31. 15, 17; 32. 27.

²⁶ See 'Biblical Demonology', Merrill F. Unger, Van Kampen Press, 1952, page 149.

²⁷ See verses 12, 14, 15, 16, 20.

²⁸ 'Samuel's spirit was actually brought up from the spirit world ... by God Himself', Merrill F Unger, 'Demons in the World Today', Tyndale House Publishers, 1974, page 51.

²⁹ KJV Study Bible on 1 Sam. 28. 13.

³⁰ Translated 'upright' in Acts 14. 10.

³¹ NIDOTTE, number 5077. Compare TWOT, number 1230.

³² See too 1 Sam. 25. 23-24, together with the note there.

³³ Compare 1 Sam. 14. 47; 'Saul ... fought against all *his* enemies on every side', and 'Saul said, Thus shall ye say to David, The king desireth not any dowry, but an hundred foreskins of the Philistines, to be avenged of *the king's* enemies', 18. 25.

³⁴ Compare Saul's words, 'there is none of you that is sorry for me', 22. 8.

³⁵ The word translated 'enemy' in chapter 18 (*sar*) is a compound formed from the rare word rendered 'enemy' here (*ār*). The Septuagint renders the expression 'and is become thine enemy' as 'and has taken sides with thy neighbour'. The Vulgate translates it, 'has passed over to thy rival'.

³⁶ As by Mr Darby in his New Translation, and in the margin of NASB. Compare 'the Lord hath wrought for himself', RV. Some – as substantially the ESV – follow the Septuagint text and give, 'the Lord has done to thee'. Some – as the NIV – just ignore the words altogether! 'The Massoretic Text reads literally: "The LORD has done for him(self) what he predicted", the phrase "for himself" to be understood as a dative of advantage', Ronald Youngblood, note on 1 Sam. 28. 17.

³⁷ For the fulfilment of which see 2 Sam 16. 20-22.

³⁸ The word translated 'obeyed' in both cases meaning properly 'to hear, to listen'. There are several interesting details which root the events surrounding Saul's death in his great transgression in chapter 15. For example, (i) Samuel had told him that Saul's sin of rebellion was as serious as the sin of 'witchcraft' ('divination'), 15. 23, of which sin Saul, ironically, stands guilty in the end – and for which, in part, God slew him, 1 Chron. 10. 13-14. (ii) Although,

as noted in the main notes, in chapter 28, we have to do with the appearance of Samuel's spirit, by association the robe he wore was in essence that which he had worn as God's prophet, and which Saul had then seized and rent, 15. 27. (iii) It was then also that Samuel had spoken to Saul of 'the neighbour' of his to whom his kingdom would be given, 15. 28, a point to which Samuel now returned, 28. 17. (iv) Saul's fatal mistake in chapter 15 centred largely in the 'pity' (the word 'spared') which he showed to 'the king of the Amalekites' and in the forbidden spoil he had taken, 15. 8, 32-33; on Gilboa the corpse of 'the king of Israel' was 'spoiled' without pity, not by the Philistines, but by an Amalekite, 2 Sam. 1. 10.

³⁹ These are Samuel's last words to Saul. Compare Samuel's last words to the nation in 1 Samuel 12. 14-15, 25. See End-note 20 to chapter 29 which suggests a possible link between the spiritual condition of Saul and the spiritual condition of the people.

⁴⁰ Compare David's words 'I shall go to him' concerning the death of Bathsheba's first child, 2 Sam. 12. 23.

⁴¹ So the Septuagint rendering.

⁴² There wasn't sufficient time to bake *leavened* bread. It would have taken too long for the yeast to leaven the whole lump.

⁴³ See, for example, its use in 2 Kings 14.13; 2 Chron. 25. 23; 26.6; 32. 5; Neh. 1. 3; 2. 13; Isa. 5. 5. Also see NIDOTTE, number 7287.

⁴⁴ Luke uses the word found here in the Septuagint to report the action of Lydia at Philippi. Speaking to Paul, Silas and Luke, she said, 'If ye have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house, and abide there', to which Luke adds, 'And she *constrained* us', Acts 16. 15.

⁴⁵ An expression found only elsewhere in Jer. 46. 21 ('fatted bullocks'); Amos 6 .4 ('calves out of the midst of the stall') and Mal 4. 2 ('calves of the stall'). There is archaeological evidence that domestic stables were probably located *inside* residences. And see the wording of Jephthah's vow, 'whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the Lord's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering', Judg. 11. 31. Also Philip J. King, '*Amos, Hosea, Micah – An Archaeological Commentary*', pages 149-51.

⁴⁶ *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book VI, Chapter 14, paras 3-4.