

*THE WITCH OF ENDOR.*

It is hardly possible to over-estimate the value of the recent survey of Palestine in throwing light on obscure portions of the Bible narrative. Nothing enables us to realize scenes enacted long ago so truthfully as accurate descriptions of the localities in which they took place. Mr. Conder's short paragraph<sup>1</sup> on the position of Endor is an admirable example of the worth of his labours.

The remarkable narrative contained in 1 Samuel xxviii. 7-25, derives its importance from its being the only instance of its kind to be found in the Bible; and, further, from the inference usually drawn from it, that a belief in witchcraft was countenanced by Holy Writ. The object of this paper is to shew not only that this inference is not justified by the facts, but that the passage yields some suggestions which throw doubt upon the assumption that the belief in witchcraft finds *any* support in the Old Testament.

It can hardly be necessary to remind the reader of the extent to which the human mind is liable to illusion of many kinds. Some of the hallucinations to which we are subject are permanent and deeply rooted, as, for example, that by which we every day are led to imagine that we see the sun moving through the sky; others, as for instance, ghost-seeing, are of a more transitory nature. Indeed we must remember that in every act of sense-perception there is a double process; there is the reception of an impression from an external object, and the interpretation of the impression so received. Hence anything that interferes with either part of this two-fold process, anything which renders the impression imperfect, or our interpretation of its contents erroneous, will inevitably lead to illusion more or less complete. In normally constituted beings, a state of

<sup>1</sup> "Tent Work in Palestine," p. 64.

deep exhaustion, whether bodily or mental, will materially interfere with the action of the senses. The eye can no longer see, the ear can no longer detect and classify sounds, with their wonted delicacy; and they are apt to deliver, in an incorrect manner, what they actually receive from without. But, further, the presence of any morbid emotion, in conjunction with exhaustion of the brain, will so colour the sense-impressions, themselves only imperfectly received, that the judgment formed as to the character of external objects will be utterly unreliable, and a complete illusion must result.

If, in the narrative we are to examine, we find prominence given to every circumstance which, according to the brief account just sketched, would imply the existence of a predisposition to illusion of various kinds, it is certainly just to infer that the author meant us to read his story in that light. Now, in his interview with the Witch of Endor, Saul is brought before us as suffering from both the disturbing influences described above. The Philistines, we are told, were already gathered in their strength (Verse 4), and Saul had laboured hard to collect his troops at Gilboa. Doubting the result of the impending conflict, he asked counsel of God, who answered him neither by dreams nor by Urim; nor did He commission any prophet to come to his aid. What with incessant watching for a Divine sign by day, and what with restlessness by night, brought on by the eager expectation of a God-sent dream, we might have inferred him to be weary and exhausted in body and brain. But we are not left to conjecture. We are expressly told that "*there was no strength in him; for he had eaten no bread all the day, nor all the night*" (Verse 20). Consider, too, what must have been his state of mind. We are told, in a few but significant words, that "*he was afraid, and his heart greatly trembled*" (Verse 5). And had he not full reason for dreading

the coming strife? Saul was not a coward who would lie down and weep because his enemies stood arrayed against him. "Swifter than the eagle, stronger than the lion, the sword of Saul returned not empty" (2 Sam. i.). But he felt himself deserted. Samuel had died;<sup>1</sup> and he must now look

<sup>1</sup> It is an interesting conjecture, of great antiquity, that Samuel had died but shortly before. The Midrash, if I remember rightly, asserts that not more than four months elapsed between Samuel's death and the death of Saul. Certainly, the repetition of the statement of the death of the seer at the beginning of this Chapter, seems to imply that it was a recent event.

The following extract from an important Rabbinical work on Biblical Chronology may be of interest as exemplifying the older method of this species of criticism: Eli ruled Israel for forty years (1 Sam. iv. 18), and on the day of his death God "forsook the tabernacle of Shiloh, the tent which He placed among men, and delivered His strength (*i.e.* the ark) into captivity" (Ps. lxxviii. 60). The ark was with the Philistines 7 months (1 Sam. vi. 1), and after its recovery it abode in Kirjath-jearim for 20 years (1 Sam. vii. 2). David removed the ark thence after he had reigned for 7 years in Hebron (2 Sam. ii.), and thus his reign commenced 13 years after the ark first reached Kirjath-jearim. Now the year in which Saul was elected king was the 10th year after the death of Eli and the capture of the ark; in the 11th year after that event, Saul, obedient to Samuel (1 Sam. x. 8) defeated Nahash the Ammonite, and confirmed himself in the throne (*Ib.* xi. 12), in the following year (xiii. 1) Saul failed to wait patiently for Samuel (verse 9), and the latter on his arrival severely blamed his disobedience and announced that his rule would not be lasting (*Ib.* verse 14). At this period David was first anointed king (*Ib.* xvi. 1), and was 29 years old, thus being in the 30th year of his age (2 Sam. v), when the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul (1 Sam. xviii.). Samuel lived to the age of 52 years and a few months; for in 1 Sam. i. the reference, "Now Eli the priest sat upon a seat by a post of the temple of the Lord," seems to imply that Eli's appointment as judge was recent; Eli's death occurred 40 years later. Samuel lived 13 years beyond that date, but was not born till late in the first year of Eli's rule. Further, Samuel died four months before Saul; for we are told in 1 Sam. xxvii. 7, "And the time that David dwelt in the country of the Philistines was four months; and that period covered the interval between the death of Samuel and that of Saul." (*Seder Olam Rabbah*, ascribed to Rabbi José ben Halafta, ch. xiii.) The word ד'ימים which occurs in the last cited text means at least two days, and might bear the interpretation given it in the English Version, "a full year," did the context permit. But Raschi and other commentators argue that the latter rendering is impossible. David, the former remarks *ad loc.*, did not betake himself to the Philistines till after the death of Samuel, and the period referred to in 1 Sam. xxvii. 7 terminated with the death of Saul, and the latter could not have survived Samuel more than about four months, as the following independent considerations shew. From the commencement of Eli's rule to the end of the 7th year of David's reign are  $40 + 20 = 60$  years. Samuel's death took place 52 and a fraction years (the fraction being *greater* than half a year) after the former event, thus leaving 7 years and a small fraction from his death till the end of David's 7

forward to the fulfilment of the dead seer's gloomy predictions. What more natural than for Saul to imagine that the day of reckoning was at length about to dawn, and that the myriads of his foes were hurrying to put into execution the punishment decreed of God so long before? He is unable to bear the suspense any longer; he *will* find out, if not by fair means, then by foul, what is about to happen to him, and in what all those dark forebodings are to end. He who had so conspicuously shewn himself superior to ordinary superstitions, by removing from his territory "all those that had familiar spirits, and the wizards, out of the land" (Verse 3), now, in the moment of his dire perplexity, groping everywhere for guidance and finding every avenue closed up against him, allows his fears to get the better of his reason, and seeks, if not for a professional soothsayer or diviner, at least for one pretending to the power of divulging the future. Accordingly Saul disguises himself, so far as disguise is possible, and presents himself at the dwelling of the witch at Endor—the witch, be it noted, being recommended to Saul *by his servants*. Two points in the journey demand attention; first, that it was performed by night, and with only two attendants (Verse 8).

"Light thickens; and the crow  
 Makes wing to the rooky wood:  
 Good things of day begin to droop and drowse;  
 Whiles night's black agents to their prey do rouse."

*Macbeth*, iii. 2.

But, next, it must be observed that this was by no means the only, or the chief peculiarity of that silent journey. The Philistines were encamped at Shunem (Verse 4) "on the southern slopes of the mountain," while Saul had

years, which began at the death of Saul. Hence only a fraction of a year (*less than six months*) is left as the interval between Samuel's death and Saul's meeting with the Witch of Endor. These calculations are of course open to criticism; but the worst that can be alleged against them is, that they are not the only possible conclusions which can be drawn from somewhat intricate data.

pitched in Jezreel. Now Endor, which is east of Nain and north of Shunem, could only be reached from Jezreel by passing through Shunem. Hence Saul must needs pass through the Philistine army on his strange errand. Mud-huts hedged by prickly pears now mark the site of the scene of his perilous adventure. A bare and stony hillside, "with a low ledge of rock in which rude entrances are cut," and, in particular, one remarkable cave, round which runs "a curious circle of rocks, which form a sort of protection, and resemble somewhat a Druidical circle, though the formation is probably natural."<sup>1</sup> This would offer a not inappropriate scene for the extraordinary meeting between the king and the sorceress; nor can we help recognizing the admirable skill and forethought manifested in the selection of so dark and inaccessible a spot for the exercise of the witch's secret and nefarious arts.

Thus the condition, mental and physical, of the king, the circumstances in which he was placed, the perilous nature of his night journey, and the peculiar appropriateness of the locality in which the scene is laid, are all vividly brought before us in the terse but suggestive narrative in Samuel. It is just these facts and circumstances which would make Saul a ready dupe to illusion; and the author who brings them into such marked prominence may be fairly presumed to have anticipated the inference we draw from them.

But we shall find that this inference is strongly confirmed by the further circumstances which remain to be discussed. Saul, we have seen, attempted to conceal his identity from the witch (Verse 8); but it is fair to infer that she recognized him at once. Apart from the fact that Saul must have been well known to his subjects, we must remember that his stature was too remarkable to render disguise easy. His height alone must have betrayed him; for "from his

shoulders and upwards he was higher than any of the people" (1 Sam. ix. 2). But, further, the woman plays a skilfully acted part in inquiring her visitor's rank; and, when he asks her to bring up him whom he shall name, she feigns reluctance until he assures her of immunity. Even if she had not known him from the first, could she fail to recognize him now, seeing that he can swear to her a great oath by the living Lord that she shall suffer no harm if she comply with his request?

The narrative proceeds thus: "Then said the woman, Whom shall I bring up unto thee? And he said, Bring me up Samuel. And when the woman saw Samuel, she cried with a loud voice, and the woman spake to Saul, saying, Why hast thou deceived me? for thou art Saul" (Verses 11 and 12). There can be no doubt that these verses are clouded in deep obscurity. If the woman really saw Samuel, we must suppose either that her incantation was successful, or that God interposed to bring about a result which the witch little expected. As Trench remarks: "None was more amazed at the success of her necromancies than the sorceress herself." The alternative is clearly untenable. It is simply impossible to suppose that God, who had refused to answer Saul when he sought counsel in a legal way, would respond to the pressure of illegal rites. But if that be so, the question presents itself, how could the woman's incantations be successful when they had not yet been performed? There is not a word in the text which implies that there was any interval of time between Verse 11 and Verse 12. It cannot be that so important a detail is suppressed as unnecessary, nor was there any reluctance on the part of the sacred writers to divulge details of this character (see Ezek. xxi. 21 seq.). It remains to suggest another explanation.

It might be suggested that the verb רָאָה, here translated as meaning "to see," is used in much the same general

sense as is its English equivalent.<sup>1</sup> This, indeed, is an idea which I might be inclined to work out were I not prepared with a different and less obvious interpretation, which I now proceed to offer.

An ancient superstition, very widely spread, attributed to the sorcerer a singular power over any person with whose name he was correctly acquainted. So strong was the confidence in this strange power, that the members of some tribes would never allow their names to be told to strangers; while others were always known by names different to their true ones, in order to prevent injury to themselves.<sup>2</sup> In the Publications of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society (1852), in the sixth part of the Sarapian divinations there described, a charm is mentioned for enabling the operator to become acquainted with the real names of the living and the dead. But this is not the exact point I am insisting on now. I wish particularly to call attention to the use that was made of *names* in sorcery of this kind. We meet with accounts in which the name of the person to be called up is formally written down by the sorcerer's client. Similar rites are fully described in such works as Lane's "Modern Egyptians."<sup>3</sup> As the writer of the article referred to before well remarks: "The importance attached by the ancient thaumaturgists to a knowledge and use of the true names of beings they wished to invoke is well known. . . . Hebrew names were supposed to have a great effect."<sup>4</sup> I therefore suggest that Saul, as he

<sup>1</sup> The meaning then would be, "and the woman saw that he asked for Samuel."

<sup>2</sup> Dorman, "Origin of Principal Superstitions," p. 153.

<sup>3</sup> Rev. Hilderic Friend, in "The Folk-Lore Record" (vol. iv. p. 75), writing of "Euphemism and Tabu in China," remarks: "But on no account will a man tell you the name of his deceased father." Sir John Lubbock, in his "Pre-historic Times" (p. 570), corroborates this statement. "In many parts of the world," he asserts, "the names of the dead are avoided with superstitious horror." (See also Fiske's "Myths and Myth Makers," page 223; Tylor, "Early History of Mankind," chap. vi. etc.)

<sup>4</sup> *Publ. Camb. Antiq. Soc.* (1842), p. 40.

named Samuel, also wrote down the name "Samuel," in accordance with the usual custom. It was this "Samuel" that the woman "saw," and might well see without any interval being needed between Verses 11 and 12. It is simply astonishing how well this explanation fits in with what follows. When the woman saw that Saul by boldly asking for Samuel no longer wished to shroud himself in mystery (for how *could* he, after his promise to protect her?) she, too, threw off her disguise in turn, and confessed her recognition of him. He had practically revealed himself; and she could gain nothing now by pretending not to know him. But Saul mistakes, as she perhaps intended him to mistake, the meaning of her alarmed cry of recognition. He attributes it to the dreadful spectacle she is witnessing. He eagerly attempts to quiet her fears, and asks her to describe what it is that is passing before her eyes. *Saul, then, sees nothing after all!* The woman quickly catches at his mistake. "An old man, covered with a mantle," she says, is coming up; and *this* suffices to make Saul believe that it is Samuel who addresses him. "If you think it is Samuel, so be it!" And the text then naturally puts the speaker's words into the mouth of Samuel.

And what does the pseudo-Samuel tell him! What it surely needed very little sagacity to prophesy. Saul's condition shewed plainly enough what must be the result of the morrow's battle. And the witch may have foreseen how powerfully her own words would tend to bring about their own fulfilment. She knew well enough what Saul's fears were. And when, with pitiless cruelty she declares, "For the Lord hath rent the kingdom out of thy hand and given it to thy neighbour, even to David" (Verse 17), there was little need to add, "To-morrow shalt thou and thy sons be with me (Samuel)." "Saul fell straightway on the earth!" Even the witch regretted that she had



worked on his fears so strongly. She dreaded his vengeance, perhaps; or pity and remorse were at work. So she kills her fat calf, and makes him unleavened cakes, and sends him away that night. But, now, mark what followed. Saul, as we might have anticipated, and as it needed no ghost to tell him, was defeated; but he was not killed by the enemy. So certain was he that he was to die, so great had been the effect of the witch's words, that, in his self-despair, it was he himself who made them good.

This narrative, then, I venture to submit, is designedly the narrative of a gross but simple deception. Designedly, I say, in order that it might act as a warning to any inclined to follow Saul's own example. And on this hypothesis, I contend that the author could not have chosen his words more happily than he has done, unless, indeed, he had been willing to forego the dramatic force which his story, in its present form, so eminently possesses.

Before leaving the subject I wish to make two remarks. The term אֹב, translated in the Authorised Version by "familiar spirit," is usually explained as signifying a species of ventriloquism. אֹב undoubtedly does mean a "skin bottle," as in Job xxxii. 19; and not only may the figure easily be applied to the distended body of the ventriloquist, but we are informed by Origen that sorcerers employed bladders and windpipes to produce sound. Further, the LXX. usually renders the word by *ἐγγαστριμυθος*. But this explanation of the term is altogether precarious and hypothetical; for it offers no explanation of the fact that just this particular form of sorcery was singled out for the infliction of the death penalty (Lev. xx. 27). I merely insist on this for a reason I hope to adduce in another paper on a kindred subject.

Finally, I wish to guard the reader, as indeed I have already guarded him incidentally, against a natural and common error. It is ordinarily inferred from the foregoing

passages that sorcery was early in the hands of women, and that therefore it is that the *feminine* is employed in the well-known but wrongly translated sentence which, in the English Version, reads: "Thou shalt not suffer *a witch* to live" (Exod. xxii. 18). The error in this rendering I hope hereafter to shew; but I can at once point out the groundlessness of the assumption that sorcery was chiefly in the hands of women. In the first place, though very many terms occur throughout the Bible in reference to Witchcraft and Divination, the *feminine is never used except in Exodus xxii. 18*. The truth is that the wrong translation in Exodus brought it about in later times that women almost monopolized the profession; and an attempt was made to read into the Bible that which it never contained. The story of the Witch of Endor, so far from supporting this erroneous view, proves exactly the reverse. Saul, it is true, seeks out *a woman*; but only because *he has removed all the men*, all the more celebrated and regular practitioners; and therefore it is that he has recourse to his *servants*, who would probably be acquainted with the humbler members of the class. It is distinctly stated in Verse 3, "And Saul had put away those that had familiar spirits, and the wizards,<sup>1</sup> out of the land."

I need add no more. I trust that what I have written may help to disprove the inference which is undoubtedly the strongest support of those who seek to make the Bible responsible for the vulgar belief in Witchcraft. I have attempted for one aspect of the subject what I think it possible to do for every other aspect; and what I shall partially at least attempt if the Editor of this Review allows me a further hearing.

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<sup>1</sup> It is only an *inference* that the terms used in Verse 3 refers to the men. I quote, however, the English Version; besides, the LXX. renders *γνώστας* which is, of course, a masculine term.