

D. The Occult and Spiritualism

The belief in an after-death existence is clearly expressed in the classical Greek writings; it also enjoyed widespread popularity in the ancient Near East. The story of Saul and the witch of Endor (1 Sam. 28:3–19) and the many Israelite tombs containing pottery deposited for the use of the dead indicate that this belief was not entirely unknown among ancient Israelites. Nevertheless, the Bible roundly condemns this concept. Therefore, attempts to communicate with the dead through the occult, spiritualism, or the use of a medium also are condemned as a superstition to be vigorously combated (Ex. 22:18 ; Lev. 19:31 ; 20:6 , 27 ; Deut. 18:9–13 ; Isa. 8:19 , 20).

The unusual story about Saul and the woman at Endor tells of the king's desperate attempts to communicate with the dead prophet Samuel through a medium. The story makes clear that Saul by this time was suffering mental deterioration (1 Sam. 19:9–17 ; 28:3–10), that he attempted to consult God through the dead Samuel when dreams, Urim, and living prophets failed to answer him (1 Sam. 28:6). Evidently he talked only to the woman of Endor, the medium. It is possible to conclude on the basis of the context that only he, and not the woman of Endor, claimed to recognize Samuel in the apparition, while only the woman was able to see anything. Meanwhile, the "ghost" coming up from the earth, described by the woman as a god, and looking like an old man wrapped in a robe, was identified by Saul on the basis of her less-than-detailed description as the one he was seeking, namely, Samuel (verses 11–14). In short, the story bears no testimony to the actual presence of the dead prophet.

More important, Saul learned nothing from the experience except what he already knew from previous reports given by Samuel while the prophet was still alive (verse 17 ; cf. 1 Sam. 15:23 , 27 , 28). That message Saul feared and hoped to overturn. The satanic element in this story lies in the false idea that one can gain otherwise unavailable information from the dead through a spirit medium. The attempt at impersonation of a dead person is roundly condemned in the OT story as deceptive and useless, and the work of demonic agencies aided by a medium. No information can be gained from the dead, for in fact, they know nothing (Eccl. 9:5 , 6).

Against this fundamental principle we can now place some unusual biblical descriptions of the state of the dead, recognizing that we deal with metaphoric language portraying the loss of human existence following death. For example, the Bible speaks of the dead as shades (*rḥpā'im*) characterized by their inability to live and communicate with God and humanity (Ps. 88:10 ; Prov. 2:18 , 19 ; 21:16 ; Isa. 26:14). The term *rḥpā'im*, "shades," does not designate a quality of existence, such as soul (*nepesh*) or "spirit" (*ruah*) would portray. In fact, the word nowhere describes a being who can be said to live in any manner associated with normal human existence. Indeed, death, the condition of the *rḥpā'im*, implies the absence of all consciousness. Rather than being ghosts enjoying some presumed minimum existence in death, the *rḥpā'im*, in fact, share all the known characteristics of the dead. They know nothing (Eccl. 9:5). They cannot talk or praise God (Ps. 6:5 ; 88:11 ; 115:17), their thinking and planning have ceased (