

THE WITCH OF ENDOR

INTRODUCTION

This short though engaging treatise on necromancy or witchcraft¹ raises far too many thorny questions than it answers. Gregory of Nyssa had intended it as a refutation to the position maintained by his illustrious predecessor, Origen. The latter's view with regard to the so-called "witch of Endor" (1Sam 28.7) maintained that she had seen Samuel instead of a demon². In this letter he sets forth the conviction that a demon had deceived Saul and presented him with a forged prophecy. Due to the brevity of Gregory's epistle and its straight-forward presentation, we find it easy to discover this central theme. Nevertheless, the relationship between the soul of a just person (in this instance, the prophet Samuel) and the tendency of evil to deceive persons is an important though delicate issue in the spiritual life. Witness, for example, the offense perceived by Eustathios of Antioch when confronted by Origen's commentary on the sorceress of Endor with regard to Christ's soul in the underworld. The latter maintained that Christ's soul was in Hades but differed from the others in that his will was not present there³.

¹¹ The Greek title to Gregory's treatise is **Peri tes eggastrimouthou**, "Concerning Necromancy." As defined by **A Greek-English Lexicon** (Liddell and Scott, Oxford 1966, p.477), the word *eggastrimuthos* is defined as a ventriloquist, that is, it refers to a person who can project his or her voice without the movement of lips. More specifically, such a ventriloquist referred to women who were believed to deliver oracles from their belly. The Latin title is **De Pythonissa** which suggests *Puthikos*, the old name for Delphi, the famous place for oracles.

²² "Some of our predecessors [that is to say, Origen] wished to consider as true Samuel's evocation [from the dead]."

³³ "Some distinguishing marks of a 'unitive theology' are also evident elsewhere in Eustathius, particularly in his idea of the divinization of Christ's soul and body and their participation in the properties and being of the Logos. Here we feel reminded of Origen, who saw the soul of Christ completely steeped in the fire of the Logos, though it is just in this context that the opposition between the Antiochene and the Alexandrian becomes apparent. Eustathius is offended above all by the remarks about the soul of Christ in the underworld which Origen produces on the occasion of the question of the 'Witch of Endor...'The Alexandrian sees the difference between the soul of Christ and other spirits in the fact that while it was below in Hades with the others, by will it was above. The Antiochene says that by doing this Origen makes Christ an ordinary man, just as he cannot show how the prophets were superior to other men. For all souls, even those of the most wicked men, have a longing to be above and not below." Aloys Grillmeier,

There exists little commentary upon the letter in itself by modern scholars. Despite this fact, it should be taken within the larger context of Christ's descent into hell, life after death and even the resurrection. Perhaps the most extensive contemporary treatment may be found in an article by K.A.D. Smelik ⁴ which situates the bishop of Nyssa's letter to his fellow bishop, Theodotus, within the broader context of other Church Fathers and Rabbinic literature. Both Jews and Christians wrote on the same subject, that is, First Samuel, chapter twenty-eight, approximately up until the year 800. In brief, the rabbis considered necromancy wicked but admitted that the prophet Samuel was raised at Endor by a witch. On the other hand, Smelik divides Christian opinions on the matter into three categories:

I. Saul was resuscitated by a woman:

- Justin Martyr (Dialogues with Trypho: PG6.721)
- Origen (In Librum Regum homilia ii; Com. on Jn.20.42)
- Zeno of Verona
- Ambrose (Com. on Lk 1.33, PL15.1547)
- Augustine (De diversis quæstionibus ad Simplic., De cura gerenda pro mortuis, De octo Dulcitii quæstionibus, PL40.162f, De doctrina Christiana II, xxiii,35, Epistle 43)
- Anastasius Sinaita (PG89.581ff & 746).

II. Either Samuel or a demon in his shape appeared at God's command:

- John Chrysostom (Com. on Mat vi,3 (PG57.66), Com. on letter to Titus III,2 (PG62.678)
- Theodoret of Cyrhus (Quæst. in I Reg.28, PG.80.590; Quæst. in I Paral., PG80.808)
- Pseudo-Hippolytus
- Theodore bar Koni
- Isho'dad of Merv

III. A demon deceived Samuel and gave him a forged prophecy:

- Tertullian, (De Anima 57,8f)
- Pseudo-Hippolytus
- Ephrem (Com. on Sam.28 (in Opera Omnia, ed. P. Benedictus, ser. Syr.I (Rome 1737), p.387-90; n.3--Nisbian Hymn, 42,6 (CSCO 240,38f) &

Christ in Christian Tradition, vol. one (Atlanta, 1975), p.298.

⁴⁴ **The Witch of Endor**, an article from **Vigiliae Christianae** 33 (New York, North Holland, 1979), p.160-79.

57,15f(CSCO) 363,63)

-Evagrius Ponticus (Cephaleia Gnostica vi,61 (Patr. -Or.28,242f

-Pseudo-Basil (Com. on Is.8,19 (PG30.497)

-Jerome (Com. on Mat.6,31, PL26.46; Com. on Is.iii,7,11 (PL24.106)

-Philastrus

-Ambrosiaster (Quaestiones Veteri & Novi Testamenti

-Pseudo-Augustine, De mirabilibus Sacrae Scripturae ii,11(PL35.2179)

Gregory of Nyssa belongs to the third category which generally maintains that the woman had actually seen Samuel (1Sam 28.9) and not a demon in his form as the other two groups contend. Such an observation compels the reader to take a closer look at the actual text of First Samuel 28, an appeal Gregory of Nyssa makes at the beginning of his letter to his fellow bishop. This entreaty should be considered with the context of his two opening scriptural quotations, one by Christ (Mt 7.7), "Seek and you will find" followed by St. Paul (2Tm 4.13), "Attend to reading, Timothy, my son." His plea to attentiveness and a careful reading of scripture is certainly intended to impress upon his readers the necessity of not imposing their own preconceived ideas upon such a mysterious and thought provoking incident as recorded in First Samuel. To stress his intent, Gregory makes it a point to quote the unbridgeable chasm which exists between Abraham and Lazarus (Lk 16.26) because it prevented the devil from crossing as well as a person "established in the good" from crossing over to evil. Despite this insurmountable barrier, Gregory admits that demons attempt to deceive persons (to cross from the good to evil) through "omens, divinizations, oracles, rites to conjure up ghosts, ecstasies, possessions, inspirations and many other tricks." Furthermore, he singles out for condemnation sorcery (*eggastromuthos*), "a form of magic believed to attract departed souls to life on high." This form which the woman at Endor has seen took on the appearance of "gods (*theoi*) ascending out of the earth" (vs.10). In the context of scripture "gods" represent beings from another world; by no means do they partake in attributes considered belonging to the supreme Divinity. Note that the Septuagint version has the word "gods" in the plural. Such difficulty of interpretation as revealed by this word has therefore given rise to a wide variety of misunderstandings regarding the original text as well as an equal variety of interpretations, a fact brought out by Smelik's article.

About midway through Gregory's letter we obtain a true picture of an issue even more troublesome to his mind than sorcery. This problem is articulated in the correct interpretation of scripture, something which had continued to bother all theologians down through the centuries. Gregory asks, "How can servility to the letter of the text concur with the record of history? If Samuel is truly a vision, the sorcerer indeed sees gods." In other words, Gregory does not shrink back from the difficult problem presented by 1Sam

28; rather, he seeks a correct interpretation of the text in the spirit of Mt 7.7 and 2Tm 2.7 which set the tone of his search for greater understanding in his opening paragraph. To further clarify his position, Gregory quotes Ps 96.5, "All the gods of the nations are demons." The shift of emphasis now passes from the fact that the woman had summoned up Samuel over to the literal meaning of sorcery as implied by the letter's title, **Peri Eggastrimouthou**. As we have already seen, the Greek term, *eggastrimuthos*, more specifically refers to ventriloquism, the ability to project one's voice so that it can be associated with another object or person. This literal meaning fits in well with Gregory's interpretation of the demon and the way he had deceived the woman ⁵, that is, by simulating (or projecting) Samuel's voice. In this fashion Gregory escapes the difficulty of having Samuel associated with evil: "If this [vision] were truly Samuel, how could he be associated with evil?" Like many of his fellow Christian commentators on this passage, the bishop of Nyssa refers to the incident of Balaam. This man was a foreign priest-diviner, though not a member of the covenant community, who nevertheless remained obedient to the Lord speaking within him. In the incident which remains particularly important for Gregory, he refers to Balaam's freedom from association with omens in Num 24.1, "He did not go, as it was his custom, to look for omens." Gregory employs this thwarted tendency for soothsaying on Balaam's part as proof that the "demon who appeared as Samuel and simulated his words, had cleverly imitated prophecy ⁶."

Gregory of Nyssa brings to a resolution the question of Samuel's evocation from the dead by referring to the prophet Elias whom ravens fed without "defiled bread nor meat used for idols" during his stay in the wilderness. This incident reveals the uneasy association Gregory feels between sacrifices and their perversion, for he is quick to make special reference to the book of Leviticus which gives details about sacrifices and attendant rituals. At this juncture he quickly brings his letter to Bishop Theodoxios to a close citing his conclusion, namely, "the manner by which the [Holy] Spirit is present

⁵⁵ It is interesting to parallel this relationship with the serpent in the garden of Eden Gen 3 2-14. In this instance the serpent or devil deceived the woman in a manner similar to the way the demon had deceived the witch of Endor.

⁶⁶ On Gregory's position, refer to the remarks by Lynn Thorndike (**A History of Magic and Experimental Science during the First Thirteen Centuries of Our era**, New York: MacMillan, 1923, p.470): "But Gregory believes that Samuel was already in paradise and hence could not be invoked from the infernal regions; but that it was a demon from the infernal regions who predicated to Saul, 'tomorrow you and Jonathan shall be with me.' The longer treatise of Eustathios of Antioch is a direct answer to Origen's argument as its title, **Concerning the Ventriloquist** against Origen indicated."

before baptism." Gregory admits that this problem of how the Holy Spirit affects persons cannot be answered. Furthermore, no clear reference to this matter exists in Gregory's letter but it reveals a concern of his: that the Holy Spirit is the Divine Person specially responsible for inspiring all holy persons such as the prophet Samuel. Once this inspiration has firmly been rooted within a person, there is no room for any external influence such as from demons as we have seen with regard to the witch of Endor.

The critical edition to **Peri tes Eggastrimouthou** may be found in **Gregorii Nysseni Opera Dogmatica Minora, pars II**, edited by Hadwiga Horner (Leiden, 1987, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1987), pages 101-8. The edition by J.P. Migne may be found in **Patrologia Graecae**, volume 45 (Paris, 1858), pages 108-113.

GREGORY, BISHOP OF NYSSA, A LETTER CONCERNING THE SORCERESS, TO BISHOP THEODOXIOS

[**J.101 & M.108**] [Christ] says to his disciples, "Seek and you will find" (Mt 7.7). That is, he will reveal himself both to persons who are engaged in a diligent search in accord with this command and to those persons who are seeking [faith's] hidden mysteries. He who made this promise does not lie, for he has freely lavished upon us the magnificence of his gifts which transcend all our supplications. Therefore "Attend to reading, Timothy, my son" (1Tm 4.13). I believe it is appropriate to speak of your goodness using the great Paul's words in order that the Lord may bestow upon you understanding in all things (2Tm 2.7). In this fashion you will be rich in every word and in all knowledge (1Cor 1.5). Now allow me to attend to your request since I have thought of suggesting a few words which pertain to what the Lord had recommended to you. In this way you may learn that we are to serve each other through love and by carrying out each other's will.

Since, a proper understanding of Samuel is at this moment very important, with God's help and to the best of my ability, I will now offer [**J.102**] a few words. Some of our predecessors wished to consider as true Samuel's evocation [from the dead]. Furthermore, they offered their opinions on this topic because he had expressed grief over Saul's rejection (1Sam 15.35). Samuel continually besought the Lord saying, "Do you condone the witchcraft which Saul had banished from the people because it had deceived them?" For this reason the prophet was greatly vexed over the fact that the people had preferred a rejected person instead of the Lord. They [i.e., ?some of our predecessors?] claimed that God had allowed the prophet's soul to be conjured up through magic. Thus Samuel might behold the falsehood which God attributed to him because he expressed

indignation [M.109] when the sorcery had conjured up his soul.

I next turn my attention to the chasm [Lk 16.26] mentioned in the Gospel which the patriarch [Abraham] said was established between evil and good persons. More accurately, the Lord of the patriarch said that the damned could not [J.103] pass over to the repose of the saints, nor could the saints pass over to them. I do not accept opinions with regard to this matter as true; only the Gospel should be trusted. Because Samuel was great among the saints and sorcery is evil, I do not believe that he who was included in [the patriarch's] repose could traverse that chasm which the impious could not bridge whether they willed it or not. Thus the devil could not freely cross the chasm and deprive the saints of holiness; he was unable to do this and could not attribute evil to anyone who did not want it. For a person established in the good cannot cross over to evil; even though a person might wish to do this, the chasm does not permit it.

What, then, is our opinion of these matters? The common enemy which is hostile to human nature watches man with the utmost attention. What are those occasions where a man can strike some one else, thereby depriving him of the life-giving God and freely abandoning him to destruction? Persons who are pre-occupied with the body and who want knowledge of the future, means by which they hope to escape evil or follow pleasure, are unmindful of God. In their treachery, demons devise many ways [to thwart such unmindfulness]: omens, divinizations, oracles, rites to conjure up ghosts, ecstasies, possessions, inspirations and many other [J.104] tricks. Any premonition considered as true but is the result of deception reveals the cunning demon, since this person has mistaken a false opinion for a correct one.

Furthermore, the devil resembles an eagle in flight. He closely watches us in order to frustrate any hope and expectation we may have; he wishes to excite us, make our ears itch, and to divert our attention. The malevolent devil imparts these signs to persons whom he has deceived through close observation. And so, demonic worship is a way of turning men away from God because they believe that demons are responsible for this action.

One such deception is sorcery [*eggastrimuthos*], a form of magic believed to attract departed souls to life on high. Therefore when Saul despaired at being saved from the alien tribes arrayed against him, he sought deliverance from Samuel (1Sam 28.4-5). Once the devil deceived the woman by becoming friendly with her and by using her sorcery, [M.112] he assumed numerous dark forms. However, he did not manifest himself to Saul; the phantoms which this woman's sorcery conjured up were visible only to her. At first the demon made his appearances believable while concealing (28.12) his

true person [J.105]. This surprised Saul since the woman who had been deceived did not know the true power of sorcery. Because of her ignorance, she claimed to have seen gods ascending (28.13) and a man standing upright clothed with a double cloak.

How can servility to the letter of the text concur with the record of history? If Samuel is truly a vision, the sorcerer indeed sees gods. Scripture says of demons who are gods, "All the gods of the nations are demons" (Ps 96.5). Are we to equate Samuel's soul with the demons? Of course not. But any power obedient to demonic sorcery and other spirits associated with the deceived woman have indeed misled Saul. However, she conjured up the demons through sorcery, that is, the form which Saul sought had simulated [Samuel's] voice. Also the response which the woman uttered in the spirit of prophecy seemed to be in response to an appearance. The demon rebuked [Saul] and did not want him to know the truth: "Tomorrow you and Jonathan will be with me" (28.19). If this were truly Samuel, how could he be associated with evil? But it is clear that instead of Samuel, the evil demon had appeared and said that Saul would be with him.

If scripture shows [J.106] that it was Samuel who was speaking, we should not alter the correct understanding of the text; however, keep in mind that scripture intends these words for anyone who believes that Samuel [is speaking]. We have learned that scripture frequently relates something apparent instead of that which is real. For example, refer to Balaam: "I will hear what God will speak in me" (Num 22.19). Later on Balaam knew that he did not please God by cursing the Israelites: "He did not go, as it was his custom, to look for omens" (24.1). For it was presumptuous of Balaam to think that he could speak with the true God. Scripture further shown that Balaam confused the true God with his thoughts about him. Because of this, the demon who appeared as Samuel and simulated his words, had cleverly imitated prophecy.

Inquiry concerning Elias is unnecessary since you have failed to mention him. God ordered him to drink from the brook (1Kg 17.4), and secretly instructed him to rescind the prophet's sentence against the Israelites. [Elias] alone drank from the brook which later [M.113] ran dry. He had no other means to slack his thirst because [God] refused his request for rain, yet the brook continued to provide him with water. Ravens also served the prophet by providing food, an example which the true God used to show the trust many persons [J.107] have in his assistance. These ravens did not bring defiled bread nor meat used for idols. Impious persons employ means as these as we see in the attempt to treacherously persuade Elias, for it is not fair to hold as liable for punishment persons looking to God. If bread is brought to him early in the morning and meat in the evening, this example mysteriously symbolizes enthusiasm for the virtuous life. We should consider early morning as pertaining to the commencement of a life according to

virtue. We can thus easily understand Paul when he speaks of something more perfect which is held in store for those who are perfect: "Solid food is for the perfect, or those who have their faculties exercised" (Heb 5.14).

You are not ignorant of Moses' veil, reference to which may be found in Paul's epistle to the Corinthians (1Cor 3.13-18).

As for sacrifices, you may find information by more carefully examining the book of Leviticus in its entirety and by attending to the law contained there. Thus you may comprehend the part [of the text] along with the whole, for a part cannot be clearly distinguished apart from the entire text.

Your questions about the power of evil do not offer a clear solution because the angels do not associate with that archangel who became a deserter. An army in battle array clearly [**J.108**] requires leadership. In this manner the question with regard to how the one can participate in the many is solved, for soldiers who have deserted their leader have a certain bearing upon the matter at hand.

Last of all, we send to your reverence, with God's assistance, our conclusion (I mean the manner by which the Spirit is present before baptism) which contains further reflections and thoughts with regard to the text.