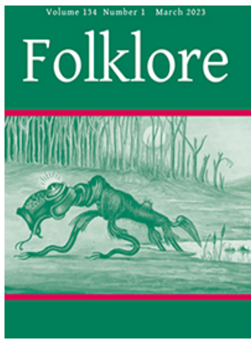

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The Witch of Endor in History and Folklore

Owen Davies

Abstract

The Old Testament account in 1 Samuel 28 of how the Woman or Witch of Endor apparently raised the spirit of the prophet Samuel has been a matter of much theological debate for many centuries. Hundreds of scholarly articles have also been written about it with regard to its significance in Biblical exegesis from late antiquity to the early modern period. Yet very little research has been done on the religious and cultural significance of the Endor story in the age of the folklorist. This lecture explores the influence of sermons and literary culture on folk beliefs, examines the theories of early folklorists and anthropologists regarding the Endor story, and charts the emergence of a positive view of the 'Witch'.

Introduction

Considering the brevity of King Saul's encounter with the 'Woman' of Endor, as recounted in 1 Samuel 28, and the episode's seeming insignificance in relation to the totality of Bible history, it is remarkable how much resonance the narrative has had from antiquity down to the present day. The Woman is one of the few women in the Old Testament to become deeply embedded in the wider religious culture of Christianity. One of the main reasons is because she came to obtain the status of a 'witch'. This happened during the era of the European witch-trials in the early modern period and became deeply cemented in Western popular culture during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The reasons for this transformation provide valuable folkloristic insights regarding the mechanics of popular religion, the meaning of Bible legends, and the gender politics of religious imagery in the nineteenth century. But first we must recount the story itself.

The three key figures in the Endor encounter are King Saul, the spirit of the prophet Samuel, and the Woman of Endor. Saul's servants are also present but silent witnesses. In Biblical history (his actual historical existence is another matter) Saul was the first king of a united Israel around a thousand years before Christ. The Hebrew Testament provides three different accounts of his rise to kingship, one of them being that he was anointed king by Samuel, a judge and prophet who attained widespread influence over the Israelites. But Saul and Samuel fell out after the

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successful conquest of the Amalekites. Samuel had received a command from God that the Amalekites had to be utterly destroyed, but Saul spared the life of the Amalekite king and kept the best of the tribe's livestock. Samuel was furious and told Saul that God could take away his kingship just as he had given it. He subsequently anointed David as king in secret. After Samuel's death, Saul banished all 'those that had familiar spirits, and the wizards, out of the land'. And yet one fateful night, on the eve of battle with the Philistines, he broke his own law by consulting just such a person. And, so, now to Endor to meet the 'Woman', as described in the King James Bible, 1 Samuel 28: 5–25:

> And when Saul saw the host of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart greatly trembled.
>
> And when Saul enquired of the LORD, the LORD answered him not, neither by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by prophets.
>
> Then said 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 Endor.
>
> And Saul disguised himself, and put on other raiment, and he went, and two men with him, and they came to the woman by night: and he said, I pray thee, divine unto me by the familiar spirit, and bring me him up, whom I shall name unto thee.
>
> And 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?
>
> And Saul swore to her by the LORD, saying, As the LORD liveth, there shall no punishment happen to thee for this thing.
>
> 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.
>
> And the king said unto her, Be not afraid: for what sawest thou? And the woman said unto Saul, I saw gods ascending out of the earth.
>
> And he said unto her, What form is he of? And she said, An old man cometh up; and he is covered with a mantle. And Saul perceived that it was Samuel, and he stooped with his face to the ground, and bowed himself.
>
> And Samuel said to Saul, Why hast thou disquieted me, to bring me up? And Saul answered, I am sore distressed; for the Philistines make war against me, and God is departed from me, and answereth me no more, neither by prophets, nor by dreams: therefore I have called thee, that thou mayest make known unto me what I shall do.
>
> Then said Samuel, Wherefore then dost thou ask of me, seeing the LORD is departed from thee, and is become thine enemy?
>
> 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:
>
> Because thou obeyedst not the voice of the LORD, nor executedst his fierce wrath upon Amalek, therefore hath the LORD done this thing unto thee this day.
>
> Moreover the LORD will also deliver Israel with thee into the hand of the Philistines: and tomorrow shalt thou and thy sons be with me: the LORD also shall deliver the host of Israel into the hand of the Philistines.

> Then Saul fell straightway all along on the earth, and was sore afraid, because of the words of Samuel: and there was no strength in him; for he had eaten no bread all the day, nor all the night.
>
> And the woman came unto Saul, and saw that he was sore troubled, and said unto him, Behold, thine handmaid hath obeyed thy voice, and I have put my life in my hand, and have hearkened unto thy words which thou spakest unto me.
>
> Now therefore, I pray thee, hearken thou also unto the voice of thine handmaid, and let me set a morsel of bread before thee; and eat, that thou mayest have strength, when thou goest on thy way.
>
> But he refused, and said, I will not eat. But his servants, together with the woman, compelled him; and he hearkened unto their voice. So he arose from the earth, and sat upon the bed.
>
> And the woman had a fat calf in the house; and she hasted, and killed it, and took flour, and kneaded it, and did bake unleavened bread thereof:
>
> And she brought it before Saul, and before his servants; and they did eat. Then they rose up, and went away that night.

Saul and three of his sons are killed in the battle. As stated in 1 Chronicles 10:13: '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'.

Exegesis from Antiquity to the Modern Era

In early Rabbinic exegesis the story of Endor was usually taken literally. It was accepted that Samuel's spirit did appear and that it was possible that the woman was instrumental in calling up his spirit (Smelik 1979). But there was some debate. The unknown Pseudo-Philo, author of a text called *Biblical Antiquities*, written sometime in the first or second centuries CE, was clear that Samuel really appeared but that it was at God's command and not within the power of a mere necromancer, even though Pseudo-Philo believed necromancy was possible. In the Gaonic Rabbinic period, from the sixth to the eleventh centuries, there was increased scepticism about this literal position. There was considerable back and forth amongst the early Church fathers, principally over the issue of whether it was really Samuel's spirit, and, if so, what on earth was he doing coming up from the ground rather than descending from the heavens? The lesser questions concerned whether the Woman had necromantic powers or was merely a fraud, and the role of the Devil in events. There were three main perspectives on these matters. The likes of Origen of Alexandria (*c*.185–*c*.253) read 1 Samuel 28 at face value. As it was clearly stated that she called up Samuel's spirit, then evidently that is what she did. The Woman was a wicked seer, the sort of person outlawed by Saul, but to say she was a fraud was to undermine the literal reading of the Bible. Then there were the theologians who thought like St Eustathius, Bishop of Antioch, who was convinced that it was mere demonic deception. The story should not be taken literally, as the narrator was only stating what the three actors said they saw and heard, which was all illusory, the Devil being the father of lies, and so different from what *actually* happened at Endor

(see Connor 2000). The third path was to argue that the Woman really did see and hear the likeness of Samuel, but that it could still have been a demon in disguise.

The debates did not shift greatly during the medieval period. As Charles Zika has shown, the Endor story was depicted numerous times in medieval illustrations, although the Woman nearly always appears as a third figure standing behind Saul as he encounters the spirit of Samuel. There is little depiction of her performing a divinatory or necromantic ritual (Zika 2017). It is also worth noting that the Woman of Endor does not appear in the Qur'an even though Samuel is considered a prophet in early Islam as well as in Judaism and Christianity. Some early medieval Arabic scholars did reflect on the Endor encounter, most notably the tenth-century Iraqi thinkers known as Ikhwān al-Ṣafā, the Brethren of Purity or the Sincere Brothers. Their interest in the story, though, was primarily concerned with Saul and the relationship between magic, justice, and politics (Almutawa 2021).

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with the era of the witch-trials in full swing, the focus switched from Saul and Samuel to the Woman of Endor. She was widely cited as biblical confirmation of the existence of witches and as divine validation for the new secular laws aimed at suppressing them. Vernacular translations of the Old Testament at the time further cemented the representation of the Woman as a diabolical necromantic witch. The Geneva Bible (1560) referred to her as 'a woman that hath a familiar spirite' and as a 'witche', while the Luther Bible described her as a 'a woman who has a divining spirit'. Luther also referred to her as a *Zauberin*, or sorceress, and later Luther Bibles refer to her as a *Hexe*, or witch. While the term 'a woman that hath a familiar spirit' was used in the King James Bible (1611) rather than 'witch', later King James Bible commentaries would refer to her plainly as a 'witch' when introducing 1 Samuel 28. And, of course, the term 'familiar' became deeply embedded in English and Scottish popular discourse about witches with regard to the supposed animal-shaped demonic spirits that were thought to aid and abet their witchcraft. Paintings and engravings represented her now as performing conjurations rather than merely being the vehicle for Samuel's appearance—real or otherwise (see Figure 1). From the 1560s such representations in printed woodcuts further cemented the image of her as a conjuring witch in popular cultures (Zika 2015).

The Endor story inevitably also became a political football in the confessional battles between Protestants and Catholics following the Reformation (Lecercle 2011). The refutation of ghosts and Purgatory as Catholic 'superstition' was fundamental to Protestant theology and so the notion that Samuel's spirit returned had to be repeatedly and adamantly dismissed. The souls of the dead did not return; it was all the sneaky Devil's work. Indeed, in some late seventeenth-century anti-Catholic polemics the Witch of Endor was used to embody the Catholic Church. In his *Daemonologie* (1597) King James VI of Scotland replayed the usual arguments and interpretations in the form of a dialogue between two characters in order to demonstrate that Samuel did not appear, and that the Woman was in league with the Devil—just like the witches being tried and executed under his 1604 Witchcraft and Conjuration Act (see Damsma 2021). Catholic theologians were less preoccupied with

Figure 1. Salvator Rosa (1615–73), 'Saul Consulting Samuel'. Engraving by J. Taylor, 1813 (Wellcome Collection, Public Domain Mark, wellcomecollection.org/works/fvj78dzd).

the Endor story and generally affirmed the likelihood that the witch did see and hear the spirit of Samuel, but that she was not responsible for his intercession. Yet the perennial divisions within Protestantism over theological issues regarding ghosts and the miraculous meant that Protestant exegesis had its own factions and contradictions. During the second half of the seventeenth century, Henry More

(1614–87) and Joseph Glanvill (1636–80) argued vehemently against the Protestant mainstream of the time and asserted that the soul of Samuel had indeed returned to deliver his message. To deny it, and also the reality of witches, was to give succour to the scourge of modern 'sadducism' or unbelief in miracles (Cameron 2010, 278–80).

The English witchcraft sceptic and ardent anti-Catholic, Reginald Scot (d. 1599), posited an entirely secular explanation for the goings-on at Endor. Like King James, and other British demonologists at the time, Scot used the term 'pythoness' rather than 'witch' to describe the Woman. This was, in origin, a reference to the *pythia* or ancient Greek priestess and oracle at the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. It was meant as a derogatory term for a diviner. The Woman was nothing but an illusionist and ventriloquist. There was no ghost and there were no demons involved. The pythoness used her ventriloqual or 'belly-speaking' artifice to fool Saul. This 'rational' interpretation became more widely expressed from the end of the witch-trials and through the eighteenth century as an Enlightenment explanation for the story. In 1736, for instance, the Reverend Joseph Juxon, vicar of Twyford, in his sermon against local witchcraft belief, noted 'the fit Opportunity' that the night-time darkness of Saul's visit 'afforded to a Ventriloquist to display her Art, by assuming an artificial Voice' (Juxon 1736, 13). When, in 1795, M. J. Naylor, lecturer at the parish church of Wakefield, gave one of his annual lectures on witchcraft, he also followed Scot's interpretation, suggesting the 'impostor' of Endor was a ventriloquist:

> This extraordinary art, or rather perhaps gift of Nature, as experience has discovered, requires not the interference of any evil Spirit … [but] might easily impose upon the ignorant and superstitious, and make them readily believe, that these responses were really uttered by *that Spirit of Divination or Apollo*. (Naylor 1795, 14)

Endor in Nineteenth-Century Sermons

During the nineteenth century the story of Endor continued to fascinate clergymen, artists, and scholars. Numerous sermons referencing the Witch were printed during the century, while many more were preached in churches, chapels, and meeting halls up and down the country, some of which were reported in local newspapers. There were five broad categories of Endor sermon. First, there was the Nonconformist hellfire and damnation preacher who conjured up vivid images of supernatural events from the Bible for shock and awe. The eccentric, but much in demand, Yorkshire Methodist preacher William Dawson (1773–1841), for instance, devised dramatic oratorial flourishes to grip the imaginations of his audience. One particularly effective embellishment was to point and look dramatically at the door of the chapel as if the Biblical character he was invoking was about to appear. He did something similar when conjuring up the Witch of Endor. As one witness to his preaching on the Witch explained:

> His picturing took such hold on the imagination, that on exclaiming, 'Stand by—stand by! There she is!' some of the poor people inadvertently directed the eye downward, where his own eye was fixed, and the spot to which he was pointing, as if she were about to rise from beneath their feet, and become visible to the congregation. (Keys 1873, 73)

Then there was the lazy minister or preacher re-treading the same Old Testament stories ad nauseam. In a humorous account of such sermonizing in Presbyterian Ulster it was noted how some ministers possessed only a small stock of sermons. One anecdote concerned a man returning from Sunday chapel who met on the road an absentee from the congregation that day: '"Well" (asked the absentee), "what was our minister at to-day? Was he hanging Haman again?"' This was a reference to a sermon the minister gave repeatedly on the story of Haman (from the Book of Esther) who was an evil official who planned to eradicate the Persian Jews. Another anecdote about the stinginess of Ulster congregations concerned a jobbing preacher who had been drafted in to cover for a minister. On returning home, the preacher's neighbour asked him about the subject of his sermon. 'The Witch of Endor', he replied.

> 'Well' (said his friend), 'and what did you make of the Witch of Endor?'
>
> 'Oh, just the old six-and-eight pence' (was the reply), 'but they gave me a feed of oats for my horse'. ('Some More Ulster Stories' 1874, 608)

The Baptist minister Frederick A. Charles of Darlington criticized this type of sermon as '*Interesting* preaching': 'we all know it, and most of us have tried our hands at it'. 'It is the sort of preaching', he explained, 'that may be done on a small stock of scholarship and a small stock of doctrine … bits of truth, bits of speculation—these are the staples of such preaching'. He gave some examples: 'Now the geographical position of the Garden of Eden, the Witch of Endor, the Visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon, Jonah's Gourd, and similar subjects are really not matters of any serious concern to us Englishmen in the nineteenth Century' (Charles 1883, 132). But it was Charles who was somewhat out of touch with the zeitgeist, because the Witch of Endor continued to speak to many people's concerns about witches and belief in cunning-folk—as is evident from other sermons.

The third type of Endor sermon was inspired by the present rather than Bible stories. They were provoked when clergymen discovered evidence of their parishioners' 'superstitious' nature, and usually arose from witchcraft accusations or the activities of cunning-folk, fortune-tellers, and astrologers. In the early nineteenth century, for instance, Joseph Lathrop (1731–1820), Congregationalist pastor of the First Church, West Springfield, Massachusetts, delivered a sermon entitled 'Illustrations and Reflections on Saul's Consulting the Witch of Endor', which was inspired by a local incident which began when a stranger disappeared and was presumed drowned in the river. But then a fatal robbery occurred on one of the roads out of Springfield and people started wondering about the fate of the stranger again. Some villagers got together and tasked a man to go to Albany to consult a woman 'professing a knowledge of secrets' (Lathrop 1812, 219). For Lathrop, such people were modern Witches of Endor, impostors who cheated their clients.

Across the Atlantic, in 1849, the Reverend Richard Phayre (1807–86) preached a long sermon on the sinfulness of astrology to his parishioners of Raynham St Mary, Norfolk. Phayre, who was from a wealthy family and had been awarded a gold medal for Classics while a student at Trinity College Dublin, was quite a prolific author of religious texts and very active in the local community, being a long-serving

magistrate sitting at the Fakenham Petty Sessions. Reporting on his funeral, the *Norwich Mercury* stated that with 'the death of the deceased the poor have indeed lost a warm and generous hearted friend' (*Norwich Mercury*, 9 January 1886). It was his deep concerns about his parishioners' resort to an astrologer, which he described as 'eating into this small community like a canker', that motivated him to give them a sermon on the matter in church, and then publish it for the modest price of two pence. 'Many of my parishioners have been for some time repairing to a man for health and cure, who, I cannot doubt, practises astrology', said Phayre. 'He speaks, in his printed circular, of his celestial or heavenly art of healing any internal or external diseases'. The man was evidently conducting a distance mail-order service, charging one pound per postal consultation. This made it impossible for Phayre to do much about it as a local magistrate. His sermon was principally about the 'sinfulness of astrology' based on Biblical examples rather than the Endor story per se, but he could not but help make the equation between the Witch and the modern diviner: 'What was told him [Saul] by the witch proved true, but did that prove that men might seek knowledge by witchcraft? The plain command of God was against it. Saul, under the influence of fear, did what the Lord forbad, and filled up the measure of his iniquity' (Phayre 1849, 12).

The fourth genre of Endor sermon appeared during the second half of the century and was an attack on Spiritualism and mediums. To give a flavour of many of them we can see what George Baldwin, pastor of the First Baptist Church, Troy, had to say in his sermon, *The Witch of Endor, and Modern Spiritism* (1872). Referring to the King James Bible, he remarked: 'True, in this record she is called "a woman that had a familiar spirit," and I call her a witch. Why? Because, although sexually she was a woman, professionally she practised witchcraft—and therefore was a witch' (Baldwin 1872, 11). Such people were 'always wicked women, abandoned by their own sex, living alone, and devotees of the lowest forms of idolatry'. The Witch was also a base fraud. But Baldwin was clear that he did not call modern mediums 'witches'. He knew and respected some Spiritualists personally and wished to cause no offence: 'All I say is, that it is my own conviction that one of the agencies employed by the woman of Endor and others of her class, was the same mesmeric or nervous principle … which they honestly think are caused by departed spirits' (Baldwin 1872, 27). While Baldwin drew upon science and sceptical psychical research to explain mediumship, another evangelical approach was to bring in the Devil. For English Wesleyan preacher John Rose, Spiritualism was the work of devils operating through mediums by mesmeric influence (see Figure 2). In his 1875 lecture he concluded that 'the delusion of spiritualists consists in supposing that the "familiar spirits," with whom they hold intercourse, are human, instead of being demons, as the Bible proves' (Rose 1875, 109). Mediums, he suggested, might want to distance themselves from the Witch of Endor, but 'if proved to be akin to the old sorceress, they would trace the likeness only so far as each had the power to convoke departed spirits' (Rose 1875 109). But even this was vanity and sinful for they had no right to assume such powers. The Reverend William Croswell Doane (1832–1913), future bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Albany, told his listeners that the description of Saul visiting the Witch

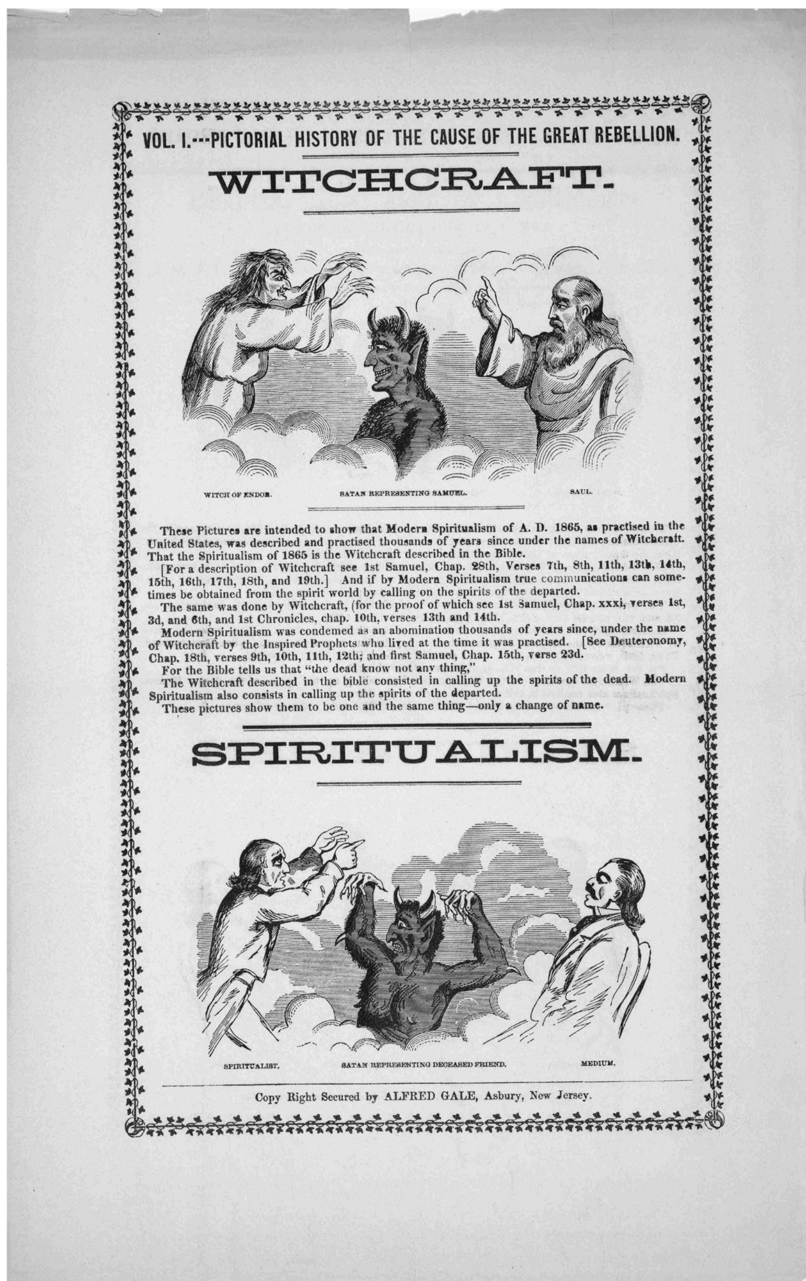

Figure 2. Spiritualism as modern witchcraft, 1865 (Library of Congress, Printed Ephemera Collection, hdl.loc.gov/loc.rbc/rbpe.10004600).

answers very well to the wicked farces of our day: the mystery, the darkness, the woman's fear, the pretended vision, seen only by the witch, the old man coming up, the mantle. But who was it that spoke? Beyond a shadow of a doubt to my mind, it was the devil. (Doane 1863, 14)

Likewise, he said, the modern medium's 'vulgar, silly, sensual, material mixture of twaddle and lies' had at their unwitting base the cunning wiles of diabolic machination (Doane 1863, 15).

The final category of Endor sermon was motivated by the venerable defence of Biblical literalism. In his lecture on 'Superstition', the American lawyer and promotor of agnosticism Robert Green Ingersoll (1833–99) complained bitterly that 'Ministers who admit that witchcraft is a superstition will read the story of the Witch of Endor—will read it in a solemn, reverential voice—with a theological voice—and will have the impudence to say that they believe it' (Ingersoll 1898, 24). In 1878, for instance, the American Unitarian *Pamphlet Mission for Freedom, Fellowship and Character in Religion*, which described itself as a periodical for liberal religious thinkers, decried a sermon preached by the rector of St Paul's Reformed Episcopal Church. The rector, W. J. Hunter, told his congregation that to deny the veracity of Saul's encounter with the Witch of Endor was to deny the word of God:

> A man may say, 'O yes, I believe the bible, except that witch story, or that story of Jonah and the whale, I don't believe them.' But if you throw these out what have you left? If you throw out this witch story, you must throw out with it every other passage in the bible where witchcraft, and necromancy, and sorcery, and the spirit of divination, and satanical possessions are recorded, and so you throw out the miracles of Moses, of Christ, and of the apostles. ('Notes and News' 1878, 6)

The editors of the *Pamphlet Mission* shook their heads: 'are we living in the nineteenth century, or have we got back into the dark ages?' ('Notes and News' 1878, 7).

These Endor sermons conjured up an image of a monstrous figure. She was often described as a 'hag' and invariably described as old, even though no intimation of her age is given in the Bible. The Revered William Vowles, for instance, declared during a sermon delivered at Tiverton, Devon, in 1814, that it was impossible that God would have sent a saint from Heaven to the Endor abode of a 'detestable old hag' (Vowles 1814, 41). In one of his sermons at Beresford Chapel, Walworth, London, Edward Andrews told his congregation of the figure of the Witch of Endor 'with her muttering lips, sunken cheeks, her lurid eyes, and skeleton fingers' (Andrews 1827, 132). The Reverend Doane (1832–1913) drew heavily upon his imagination in a sermon he gave at Mary's Parish, Burlington, New Jersey. He described how Saul sought out 'the poor out-of-the-way hovel of an old despised and persecuted witch, and [stooped] to the whisper of an old crone, who, peeped and muttered of gods ascending out of the earth' (Doane 1863, 12). Preachers regularly told their flocks that the Witch lived in a cave or cavern, which, again, was based on iconic imagery rather than the Bible text. The irony in all this is that even Bible literalists diverged from the strict word of the Bible in their zealous attempts to vilify the Witch. She was turned into a folkloric stereotype that resonated with popular imagery of the hag-witch going back to the woodcuts of the witch-trials and the portrayal of witches in fairy tales.

Considering the cultural reach of the Endor sermon, it is not surprising, perhaps, that the clerical preoccupation with the Witch became a minor device in fiction writing during the nineteenth century. In his prose story of 'The Old Farmer and the Vicar' the poet John Clare (1793–1864) describes the eponymous old farmer in

question as a 'plain and superstitious' man known to his enemies as 'horse Shoe Ralph' because of the numerous horseshoes he nailed to his house and stables to ward off witches. The vicar was equally 'superstitious':

> and always quoted the witch of Endor as a knockdown to unbelievers in witchcraft for he swallowed every story with the most credulous faith and because a farmer once doubted his authority of the 'witch of Endor' as a proof of their existence he instantly set him down as an Atheist and decided that he should not be buried in the churchyard if he could help it. (Robinson 1966, 74)

One of Clare's contemporaries, the Scottish novelist and advocate Gabriel Alexander (b. 1793) wrote a fictionalized account of his own youthful experiences of growing up on a farm in Stewarton, Ayrshire. One evening two contrary neighbours, Damhead and Knockbrae, installed themselves before his grandfather's fire and began to debate this and that weighty matter before arriving at the issue of whether witches exist. Knockbrae was a believer and brought up Exodus, but Damhead countered, 'that though it be in the Bible, there may not be a witch, for the Bible says things that may be doubted'. What, then, did he think of the Witch of Endor asked Knockbrae. 'She was nae great things', responded Damhead provokingly. 'She was nae mair a witch than auld Bell Rippet in the Clachan, or ony ither auld daft wife who sets up in that gate; and what is better, this is Mr. Fullarton's opinion, my minister'. Knockbrae fulminated that the Witch of Endor was a witch and that there were witches in the present day and many other supernatural beings. As to the opinion of the minister, Knockbrae was concerned that the Kirk of Scotland was becoming full of papistry (Alexander 1829, 53–55).

In Richard Doddridge Blackmore's popular romance *Lorna Doone: A Romance of Exmoor* (1869), set in the seventeenth century, the narrator, John Ridd, relates that following a strange supernatural noise heard in the vicinity, and the activities of a local cunning-woman named Mother Melldrum, the parson 'preached a beautiful sermon about the Witch of Endor, and the perils of them that meddle wantonly with the unseen Powers' (Blackmore 1869, 203). Other novelistic uses of Endor sermons were rooted firmly in the nineteenth century rather than the distant past. In his novel *Shoemakers' Village* (1871), William Brighty Rands (1823–82), who was best known as a children's author writing under the pseudonym Henry Holbeach, focused his plot on members of a Nonconformist community called the Zoar Meeting-House Christian Mutual Improvement Society. A 'flowery young preacher' arrives from Lancashire and gives a sermon on the invisible providential hand of God, warning the congregation 'it was not to be forced into visibility by any exorcisms of the understanding'. The congregation are suitably moved. But when he 'went off to the Witch of Endor for an illustration, he overdid his work', leaving some upset by the egregious comparison with their own small religious desires to see the hand of God at work in their own lives (Holbeach 1871, 201). In William Langford's *This Deadly Blot* (1893), set in a fictional, bucolic English village called Meadlands, Dr Monckton and his wife attend a Spiritualist séance in a nearby town. When the local clergyman, the Reverend Greatrex, hears about this he gets to work preparing a hostile sermon on Spiritualism and Endor. He was wont to notice the foibles of his parishioners and

make them the subject of his next Sunday sermon while avoiding any overt personal allusions. With the Moncktons in mind, he pens a text entitled 'For this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie', in which,

> After referring to the Witch of Endor who called up Samuel from the grave, to Balaam, and to many passages in Holy Writ denouncing those who sought after familiar spirits, he pointed out in clear and incisive language that those who attended these seances incurred the awful risk of a personal interview with Satan himself. (Langford 1893, 113)

The anonymous author of *The Foundling of Cru Light: A Gipsy Tale* (R. M. Y. 1868) used the Endor sermon for another purpose. The romance begins with a wealthy London businessman, Edward Warren, visiting his hunting estate in western Scotland. On his first day he encounters a mysterious young Romani woman who tells his fortune. He attends the local Sunday service shortly after, where the sermon concerns Saul's encounter with the Witch of Endor, and the minister opines on witchcraft as practised by the ancients. He closes his sermon by declaring that all such practices had been banished from the world forever, concluding 'with a glowing picture of the blessings which the people enjoy in this age'. This unsettles Warren, whose rational core has been shaken by the influence of the mysterious fortune-teller's predictions. Were such mysteries really extinct (R. M. Y. 1868)?

Popular Perspectives

The Radical politician William Lovett (1800–77) recalled in his autobiography returning one time to his hometown of Newlyn, Cornwall. While chatting with an old acquaintance who was a baker, Lovett laughed about a recent ghost scare in his old neighbourhood. The baker was affronted by the mocking tone and upbraided Lovett, declaring that he was clearly not a believer in the Bible and quoted to him passages from 1 Samuel 28 (Lovett 1876, 14). At the turn of the twentieth century, a folklorist who tramped the roads and byways of the Kennet valley, Berkshire, talking to locals, found witchcraft belief was still 'constantly justified by reference to the story of the Witch of Endor'. 'We knows as there was such things', said people, 'because we reads of 'em in the Bible' (Salmon 1902, 427). When, in the 1920s, folklorist Mark Taylor interviewed people about folk medicine and witchcraft in Norfolk, one of his informants from Brandiston began his account of witchcraft, 'We all know there are witches. It is in the Bible. There was the Witch of Endor. Well, when I was young, there was a man, his pony was taken ill …' (Taylor 1929, 130).

It was likely through the medium of sermons that the Woman of the King James Bible came to be universally referred to as the 'Witch' in folk belief. After all, the actions of the Woman as described in 1 Samuel 28 were more that of a village diviner or wise-woman than a malefic, cursing witch. There is no reason why the humble, domestic reader of the Bible would transform the one into the other from reading the text alone. Indeed, outside the religious discourse on the Endor episode, there were plenty of cultural commentators who freely associated the Woman with contemporary cunning-folk rather than the witch figure. One essayist on Cornish folklore remarked, for instance, 'we read with a smile of amusement and pity, the

account of some provincial conjuror, who follows, with slight changes, the trade of the Witch of Endor' (Harland and Wilkinson 1867, 22). The biologist and anthropologist Thomas Henry Huxley (1825–95) deliberately rejected the language of witchcraft and called the Woman the 'Wise Woman of Endor'. For Huxley, the passage describing Saul's servants telling their master about the Woman of Endor was 'just as, in some parts of England, a countryman might tell any one who did not look like a magistrate or a policeman, where a "wise woman" was to be met with' (Huxley 1900, 293). Provincial newspapers also headed news stories about cunning-folk with titles such as 'A modern Witch of Endor'.

During the nineteenth century the diffusion of cheap illustrated Bibles also had a folkloric influence, particularly on young minds. In 1894 Andrew Lang observed that, 'of all the Bible stories none is more popular with children than the tale of the Witch of Endor. On wet Sunday afternoons the most admired plate in the folio Bible, is that which shows Saul falling forward on the earth, and the witch woman shrinking back in astonishment and awe' (Lang 1894, 165). Lang may have had in mind the engraving of Salvator Rosa's painting 'Saul and the Witch of Endor', which was included in Charles Knight's popular *Pictorial Bible* of 1836 (Waters 2019, 55; see Figure 3). It was this religious inculcation that led the young Lang to adopt the popular view of the Witch. He recalled that as a child aged five or six, growing up in Selkirk, he and the family gardener 'often hammered at this problem'—of whether the Witch was a witch and Samuel's spirit really appeared. Lang would simply argue that the Bible was true and therefore if it said there were a witch and a ghost then witches and ghosts existed. Then the gardener would counter in such terms as, 'there *were* witches, or at least there was a witch, but that was before the coming of the Gospel. So now run away and see if you can find a ripe strawberry'. Or again, the answer would be: 'Saul was a bad man, and therefore the devil was allowed to deceive him in the shape of Samuel'. 'But it does not say anything about the devil; and the ghost's prophecy came true', replied Lang. 'Oh, no doubt that was permitted for wise reasons. So now run away' (Lang 1894, 165–66).

Folklorists' Interest in the Story

In 1884 the English politician and one-time Professor of Statistics and Economic Science James Edwin Thorold Rogers (1823–90), who also wrote anonymously on Bible history, published *Bible Folk-Lore: A Study in Comparative Mythology*. It was a critique of Church dogma regarding Bible stories and borrowed from ancient Persian, Egyptian, and Indian mythology. He had little to say on the Endor story, but he argued from the point of view that the episode was historical reality. While Saul had banned and persecuted sorcerers who conjured up demons, the ritual of the Witch of Endor was a divinatory ceremony of 'white magic', thereby lessening Saul's apparent hypocrisy (Rogers 1884, 131). Two years later, Huxley, who was a high-profile defender of Darwin, gave substantive consideration to the story in his essay 'The Evolution of Theology: An Anthropological Study' (1886). 'From the point of view of an anthropologist', explained Huxley, 'I beg leave to express the opinion that the

Figure 3. Saul bows to Samuel after the witch of Endor has conjured him from the dead. Mezzotint, 1795 (Wellcome Collection, Public Domain Mark, wellcomecollection.org/works/hdtv59h3).

account of Saul's necromantic expedition is quite consistent with probability' (Huxley 1900, 292). He argued that all those present would probably have given very much the same account as that described in 1 Samuel 28. Using the language of survival theory, Huxley considered the story much more than a mere narrative. It was a 'fossil' that helped reconstruct the theology of the time and also the centrality of the

concept of the spirit surviving bodily death as a ghost. The 'Wise Woman' of Endor was clearly a 'medium' as understood in modern Spiritualistic terms, hence Saul was dependent on her to translate the message from Samuel's spirit. But Huxley was clear that it did not matter to his theory whether the events actually happened or not. The important thing was that the Old Testament narrator believed they did. Huxley was not trying to prove the reality of spirit communication, but to show its basis in early Judaic theology.

Lang was dismissive of Huxley's approach and interpretation of the story: 'alas! He does not absolutely satisfy me, any more than the gardener did in our old discussions, as he reasoned, leaning on his spade' (Lang 1894, 166). Although Lang's own interests in psychical research as a means of understanding historic and cross-cultural visionary experiences had put him, in his own words, 'in disgrace with the Folk-Lore Society', he was dubious regarding the notion of the wise-woman of Endor as a medium. Comparing her actions with the details in the recently published scientific report on the American medium Mrs Piper, Lang was not convinced that either knew things in trance which they did not know when wide awake (Lang 1894, 168). Lang thought Huxley put too much weight on the Endor story as evidence of early Hebraic 'ghost theory', placing ghost belief in the realm of ancient *theology* at a moment in the present when he believed the nature of ghosts had yet to be fully *scientifically* examined.

By the early twentieth century, Comparative Bible Studies and the History of Religion were well established as academic disciplines, particularly in Germany, where Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932) developed a new form of methodological source criticism in his influential study of the Book of Genesis. The Witch of Endor appears only briefly in Gunkel's later work *The Folktale in the Old Testament*, published in German in 1917, where he describes 1 Samuel 28 as a 'wonderful eerie story of the witch of Endor, though it is so woven with historical reminiscences that it should probably rather be called a saga' (Gunkel 2015, 103). Writing two years later, Rabbi Moses Gaster, The Folklore Society's president from 1907 to 1909, commented wryly that modern Bible scholars, such as Gunkel, had come rather late to the revelation that stories in the Bible had parallels with popular legends and fairy tales. 'The student of Folk-lore has only a smile for such "discoveries"', he said. 'Commentators of the Bible often live in a narrow world of their own, like philologists of an older school. What Folklorists have seen long ago comes upon them with the suddenness of a revelation' (Gaster 1919, 72). Gaster was much more enthusiastic about James G. Frazer's three-volume study *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament* (1918), praising him as 'a master of the science of Folklore' who brought 'Folk-lore to the Bible' rather than 'making the Bible Folk-lore' (Gaster 1919, 72).

Frazer devoted a whole chapter to the Woman of Endor. He was back to calling her a 'witch' without a thought about the context behind the term. Indeed, he felt liberated to invent her persona anew: 'the sacred writer has not described her appearance, so we are free to picture her according to our fancy' (Frazer 1918, 520). He does indeed turn the story of Saul's visit into a full-on adventure story with watch-fires twinkling in the darkness and music drifting from the enemy camp as

Saul and his servants arrived. Saul tapped quietly at a cottage door. On entering they behold the witch:

> She may have been young and fair, with raven locks and lustrous eyes, or she may have been a wizened, toothless hag, with meeting nose and chin, blear eyes and grizzled hair, bent double with age and infirmity. We cannot tell, and the king was doubtless too preoccupied to pay much attention to her aspect. (Frazer 1918, 520–21)

Frazer's particular interest in the story was to illustrate the importance of oracles and necromancy in antiquity, drawing on classical Greek traditions to suggest what the Witch had done to call the spirits. He inevitably drew upon numerous recent ethnographic examples from around the world, including the Maori, Saharan Tuareg, and sub-Saharan African peoples, suggesting for example that modern 'Chinese witches resemble the ancient Hebrew witches' (Frazer 1918, 550). Frazer had little new to say of interest about the Endor story, other than that it was biblical confirmation of a simple fact, namely 'how widely spread the practice of necromancy has been among the civilised as well as the barbarous races of mankind' (Frazer 1918, 554). As Patricia Kirkpatrick observed in her study of Bible folkloristics, Frazer, and others, accepted uncritically that some Bible stories like the Witch of Endor preserved original traditions of the time while others represented 'degenerative' survivals of the ancient rites practised in the actual past (Kirkpatrick 1988, 14).

In a similar vein, Margaret Murray explored the topic of 'Folklore in History' in her 1955 Folklore Society Presidential Address, and picked on 1 Samuel 28 as a good topic: 'There is an interesting piece of folklore in the Bible, which was certainly historical. This is the episode of the Witch of Endor' (Murray 1955, 261). For Murray, the Witch of Endor's familiar was explicable in terms of a modern medium's 'control', but what most interested her was the incantation used to call up the spirit of Samuel. Adopting the Frazerian approach, Murray went looking for ideas in the divination rituals of ancient Egypt and modern North Africa. She returned to the issue in an article in *Folklore* the following year where she declared it highly likely the Witch of Endor practised a ritual known as the 'Ink-Pool' (Murray 1956). This involved placing water and oil in a bowl made of black bronze, on the bottom of which was engraved the figure of Anubis, the Egyptian god of death. Following some incantations, the magician, in this case the Witch of Endor, or perhaps her 'familiar' (possibly a child-seer, thought Murray), would see the spirit in the reflective surface and communicate with it. This explained, thought Murray, why the Witch saw the spirit of Samuel and Saul did not.

A Positive View Emerges

The epithet 'witch' was banished from the Spiritualist discourse over 1 Samuel 28. She was referred to as the Woman or Lady of Endor, a seer, a prophetess, the mother of all mediums, and incontrovertible proof of spiritual communication (see Blythe 2017, 60–61). Writing in the British Spiritualist newspaper *The Medium and Daybreak*, Robert Hallock declared that 'the woman of Endor practised the noblest of Christian virtues before Christianity was born into the world' (Hallock 1876, 19). The only

character in the affair worthy of reproof was King Saul. Another physician and Spiritualist, James Martin Peebles (1822–1922), similarly asserted ‘the clairvoyant of Endor was a woman, benevolent, generous and forgiving, even by the feeding of her enemy’. He went on: ‘Only a pulpit “Pecksniff,” mad with prejudice and accustomed to “billingsgate,” would apply to her such epithets as these—“vile witch,” a “wretched outcast,” “idolater,” “outlaw,” “a lonely hag,” “wretched medium,” “haggard,” “godless,” “abandoned,” &c., &c.’ (Peebles 1872, 64–65).

The American women’s rights campaigner, novelist, and Spiritualist Elizabeth Oakes Smith (1806–93), writing in 1852, adopted her as an ideal female role model. ‘The Woman of Endor! That is a strange perversion of taste that would represent her hideous in aspect. To me she seemeth all that is genial and lovely in womanhood’ (Smith 1852, 64). In Smith’s imagination the Woman was learned in all the wisdom of the East and had read deeply into the philosophy of the Greeks. She was the daughter of the Magi and pursued her occult education with the ‘meek spirit of inquiry’. With a great flourish she described her icon in complete contrast to the centuries of male representation of her as a hag:

> The braids of her dark hair mingled with the folds of her turban; her oriental robes spread from beneath the rich girdle, and the bust swells with her impassioned appeal. I behold the proud contour of her features, the deep, spiritual eye, the chiseled nostril, and the lip shaming the ruby. (Smith 1852, 65)

It was not only the Spiritualist movement that elevated the Witch to the status of prophetess during the mid-nineteenth century (see Figure 4). Early Mormon theologians pondered her qualities. The founder, Joseph Smith, wondered, ‘who is to tell whether this woman is of God, and a righteous woman—or whether the power she possessed was of the devil’. His brother and leader of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS), Hyrum Smith (1800–44), was more definite. According to accounts of a now lost sermon he gave, Hyrum believed ‘this woman instead of being filled with the devil was one who had power with God or the Holy Priesthood to call forth the dead’ (Blythe 2017, 52 and 54). It also became part of early LDS folklore that the Woman of Endor was, in fact, Samuel’s wife, which chimed with the LDS belief that relations with one’s spouse continued after death through dreams and apparitions (Blythe 2017, 54–55). But during the second half of the nineteenth century the LDS establishment moved away from the founders’ position, and the Woman was demoted from her brief statehood of prophetess. This shift was, in part, driven by hostility towards Spiritualists and a desire to create clear blue water between them in the public mind. Writing in 1870, for instance, LDS Elder H. C. Bronson stated in the *True Latter Day Saints’ Herald* that, ‘Our Spiritualist friends refer to the case of the woman of Endor, 1 Sam. Xxviii, to prove their position, which clearly proves to me that Spiritualism in *that* day was not of God’ (Bronson 1870, 358).

The Spiritualist embrace of the Woman as a noble female archetype did not translate into the occult movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Golden Dawn and its circle were drawn to ancient Egyptian goddesses and priestesses, as exemplified in the Mathers’ Rites of Isis. Theosophy, with its inspirations from Eastern mysticism, also found little room for a Judaic prophetess,

Figure 4. The stage mentalist Miss Baldwin, who described herself as a 'Modern Witch of Endor'. Colour woodcut, *c*.1870 (Library of Congress, Magic Poster Collection, loc.gov/pictures/item/2014637436/).

although in 1891 the President of the Los Angeles branch of the Society, Elizabeth A. Kingsbury, did give a paper on 'The Witch of Endor' ('Theosophical Activities' 1891, 396). In the early 1960s, however, the American occultist, fortune-teller, and

Spiritualist Church minister Herbert Arthur Sloane (1905–75) created his own cult known as 'Our Lady of Endor Coven, the Ophitic Cultus Sathanas'. While describing it as a Satanic cult gives it a sinister air, it was actually based on Gnostic principles with Sloane embracing the Devil as a force for good. His Coven services were inspired by Christian ones. Sloane explained that they opened with an invocation, included communion, and ended 'with a social hour over coffee and doughnuts' (cited in Introvigne 2016, 280).

Away from the world of Western occultism, a positive image of the Woman also emerged in Jewish poetry and fiction during the first half of the twentieth century. She was usually described as the 'Medium of Endor' in such Jewish literature, and was represented as a feminine, independent, and almost feminist character resisting patriarchy. As Rachel Ofer puts it, in modern Jewish fiction she is 'closer to the figure of a good psychotherapist than to that of a wicked witch' (Ofer 2021, 201). And, over the last few decades, scholarly feminist reinterpretation and reframing of female Biblical figures has further cemented the Woman as a role model. In her *Biblical Women Tell Their Own Stories* (2005), the feminist Hebrew Bible scholar Athalya Brenner has the Woman self-reflecting critically on the Bible account of her. She describes herself as a 'communications expert', explaining: 'I was a well-known, "wise" woman whose talent it was to establish communication between the here and the beyond' (Brenner 2005, 205). Bible scholar Ann Jeffers reframes 1 Samuel 28 as a 'ritual narrative' of divination, and thereby aims to reconfigure 'women's distorted or forgotten religious roles' (Jeffers 2017, 283).

In her published PhD dissertation on Biblical translation, J. Kabamba Kiboko, a pastor in the United Methodist Church in Cincinnati, but originally from Musanga in the Democratic Republic of Congo, interprets the Woman through a post-colonial African cultural lens. She concludes:

> From a Musanga, feminist, post-colonial perspective, I must say that the woman of Endor has been maligned and violated consistently and undeservedly in translation and interpretation. I, therefore, end by saying:
>
> We need to listen more often
>
> To the text than to the beings … (Kiboko 2017, 227)

The Korean-American Old Testament scholar Suzie Park also applies a non-Western self-reflexive approach to understanding the Woman. She recalls how her mother and friends saw no conflict in attending a Presbyterian church and also visiting fortune-tellers and numerologists, and also reflects on how old shamanic Korean beliefs and practices were not seen as incompatible with Christian faith in her home culture. For Park, then, the Woman of Endor's practice is not theologically problematic but, rather, an aspect of syncretism. Indeed, in her interpretation of the story the Woman is the hero, 'helpful and hospitable, she is the only one who is truly laudable' (Park 2019, 248). Another Bible Studies academic, T. J. Wray, puts a similar spin on the Woman in her book *Good Girls, Bad Girls: The Enduring Lessons of Twelve Women of the Old Testament* (2008). Although Wray refers to her as the 'Witch of Endor', she considers it best to think of her as a medium with the power to contact the dead: 'In a very real sense, the Witch of Endor is a heroic figure. An exemplar of

courage, compassion, and fidelity, she becomes a powerful symbol for us today in several ways' (Wray 2008, 86). For Wray it is clear she is no charlatan, and her determination to carry on her craft despite its prohibition is described as a 'model of valor and resolve' (86).

Conclusion

Necromancer, pythoness, hag, witch, charlatan, ventriloquist, prophetess, medium, healer, shaman, proto-feminist, and psychotherapist—the Woman of Endor has cast her spell across two millennia of history. Although over the last 150 years or so she has been adopted as an archetype of female spirituality, wisdom, and compassion, the title of 'witch' clings widely to the Woman in contemporary popular culture. Among some modern fundamentalist movements she is still held up as an iniquitous 'witch' who practised a forbidden art and who really could conjure ghosts and spirits. The King James Bible continues to be held up as proof of witches, and the need to persecute them, in evangelical communities in parts of the world. The Woman was not a divine or semi-divine witch archetype like the classical Circe and Hecate. The powerful resonance of her fleeting Biblical appearance down the ages was due to her apparent normality. She felt real to people, akin to the accused witches or wise-women that were part of everyday life through the early modern and modern periods. As a solitary, independent woman with magical powers she became a vessel for other people's fantasies, fears, and folklore.

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