

Before getting sidetracked with other things, I was discussing the intriguing story of 1 Samuel 28, where the king of Israel, Saul, illicitly consults a medium in an attempt to communicate with his now-dead advisor and predecessor, the prophet Samuel. This is the only case of necromancy in the entire Bible. In this post I want to consider what the author of the passage seems to think about those who go to Sheol after death.

Recall the story: Saul is experiencing both internal turmoil (his rival David is on the rise and there is civil war) and external threat (from the warring Philistines). He wants advice about how to proceed, but there is no one to turn to. So he takes on a disguise and resorts to a medium (after having, as king, outlawed mediums!) to call up Saul from the realm of the dead.

She does as he asks. As Samuel “comes up” from the ground, the medium realizes that it is Saul who is her client and that she’s in big trouble - he is the one who has forbidden what she is doing. Samuel tells her not to fear, and asks what she is seeing. She says that she sees an Elohim (divine being, usually translated “God,” but it can refer to other superhuman beings) coming up; he is an old man, wrapped in a robe. And Saul immediately realizes it is Samuel.

Samuel is not ...

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