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THE STORY ABOUT THE WITCH OF ENDOR IN THE WRITINGS OF THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS*

Abstract

The story of the witch of Endor (1 Samuel 28, 3–25) and the events surrounding it have generated great interest for readers starting from the early church history. According to the story, Saul, the first king of Israel, visited the sorceress (despite the ban of all witchcraft throughout the kingdom) and asked her to conjure up the spirit of the prophet Samuel, so he could tell his fortune. The necromancer evoked the spirit identified by Saul as Samuel, who informed Saul that he and his three sons would die in combat the next day during the battle with the Philistines. This episode from the II century has been the subject of many varied interpretations, which can be separated into three main groups of opinions on the status of the witch/necromancer: 1) the woman of Endor did, actually, have the power to call Samuel back from Sheol; 2) the evocation was a result of a deception by the devil who was, in fact, the one to appear to Saul; and 3) Samuel actually appeared to Saul, but not because of the power of the necromancer, but because of the will of God. From the broad exegetical material on the issue, a compilation which includes interpretations of Origen, of Eustathius and of Gregory of Nyssa is presented, as a result of the work of an unknown Byzantine scholar who gathered together these three texts (attested by the codex Monacensis Graecus 331 of X century). The present text does not grant a definite answer to the ontological and dogmatic status of the witch of Endor, but offers brief overviews of the stances of Origen, Eustathius and Gregory of Nissa, showing the richness of interpretation and research of the story and its implications.

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Introducing the witch

While it could easily be asserted that some ancient religious forms often used certain types of divination, which in some cases included the practice of, and the belief in necromancy, the subject of non-prophetic divination was clearly considered a matter of negative cult in monotheistic systems. The following text examines an instance of a forbidden action of necromancy, performed, nevertheless, not only in the presence of the ruler who had previously banned all types of sorcery, but also according to his wishes to have foresight about the results of an upcoming battle. This famous story is the passage about the witch of Endor, the belly-myther, the sorceress who raised Samuel from the dead. The interest about this particular passage spans across centuries, whether in theological debates about the nature of the necromancy and the roles played in the events, in religiological analyses of the significance of magic in the Old Testament, or in references to female characters in philosophy and in popular culture. The present text will focus on some interpretations by the early Church fathers, showing three lines of thought that use similar hermeneutical keys, but different stances.

In every passage where necromancy is mentioned, the Hebrew Bible clearly disapproves of such a practice and condemns the practitioner, except in the story of the “witch of Endor”¹ (1 Sam 28, 3–25), a magnificent

¹ Rowan Greer, in his *Preface* to his and Mitchell’s collection of interpretations from the Early Church, discusses the issue of translation of *ἐγγαστριμυθος* (the term the Septuagint uses to translate the Hebrew phrase in 1 Sam 28:7), which describes the woman consulted by king Saul. The Hebrew version is somewhat ambiguous, but may have meant something like “a woman having mastery over necromancy”, “over ghosts.” The terminological problem is particularly acute for this passage, since English speakers are most accustomed to calling this woman “the witch” of Endor. The translation of *ἐγγαστριμυθος* as “ventriloquist”, proposed by the standard Greek lexical framework, to Greer seems inappropriate. Current English Bible translations from Hebrew include “medium” (rsv/nrsv, niv), “a woman who consults ghosts” (jps), “necromancer” (jb), and “a woman who has a familiar spirit” (kjv). “Medium” is vague enough to do the job, but one loses both the compound term and the more specific ancient resonance of how an *ἐγγαστριμυθος* is thought to have operated. “Necromancer,” “dead-diviner,” is a compound word (although not a literal one for this term), and if used in the translation of the works of some early Christian authors, it would mean that exactly that craft which is the topic of denial and dispute amongst various interpreters is verbally attributed to the woman. Both “medium” and “necromancer” could obscure the role of speech inherent to the Greek term *ἐγγαστριμυθος* and the phenomenon of the verbal oracular utterance it seems to denote. The virtue of “a woman who has a familiar spirit” is the way it captures the sense of possession, but “familiar spirit” is ambiguous (“familiar” to whom?), and in any case the

specimen of biblical narrative. It is the story of Saul, the first king of Israel, who visited the sorceress and asked her to conjure up the spirit of the prophet Samuel.² What strikes as curious is the fact that the unnamed witch is not being condemned by the people who interact with her, nor is she later on condemned by the narrator.³

The passage in question opens with the statement that Samuel has died, a narrative detail necessarily repeated to remind the reader that the prophetic word (as far as Saul is concerned) has died with Samuel. In obedience to God Saul had already expelled all sorcery out of the land (although this “reformation” is not recorded elsewhere in 1 Samuel), which indicates that these illegal means of gaining information were unavailable due to Saul's own actions. This, of course, makes his search for a witch appear that much more reprehensible. The presence of the Philistines emphasizes the potential threat they posed and the narrator indicates in vivid terms that Saul was extremely afraid of them. Saul decided to inquire of God insights regarding the upcoming battle through dreams, the Urim and the prophets, but was confronted only with divine silence. In desperation, he found a sorceress in Endor.⁴ However, the fact that all sorcery had been previously banned makes the fact that a witch is so easily found available quite interesting.⁵ Saul is hiding his identity, as shown by him travelling by night and incognito, which would seem to mark his guilty conscience and/or need to seemingly uphold the rules he himself had established. His mission is to ask a medium to summon the prophet Samuel

phrase is too clumsy to be consistently used. Plutarch chooses ἐγγαστρίμυθος with the “Pythones”, connecting it to the Delphic Apollonian cult. Greer suggests “belly-myther” as the most appropriate translation, basing this on the fact that the term ἐγγαστρίμυθος is a Greek compound word composed of “in the belly” (ἐν+γαστήρ) and “myth/fable/speech” (μῦθος). Moving in this direction, ἐγγαστρίμυθος can thus be translated into English as either “belly-speaker” (“belly-talker”) or “belly-myther”, and Greer chooses the latter (Robert Greer, Margaret Mitchell, *The Belly-Myther of Endor: interpretations of 1 Kingdoms 28 in the Early Church*, Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta, 2007, xi-xv).

² In earlier passages in 1 Samuel, Saul had been denied a dynasty (13:1-14) and then stripped of his kingdom (15:1-31) due to his disobedience. Saul refused to step down from his throne after being rejected as king, which only further deteriorated the situation.

³ Susan M. Pigott, “1 Samuel 28, Saul and the not so wicked Witch of Endor”, *Review and Expositor* 95 (3/1998), 435-444.

⁴ The original meaning of “Endor” is unknown and its spelling in Hebrew varies. It is mentioned or alluded to in the Bible two more times, in 1 Samuel 28:7 and in Psalms 83:11. Endor, a Canaanite city, is listed in the Book of Joshua (Joshua 17:11), and is located between the Hill of Moreh and Mount Tabor in the Jezreel Valley.

⁵ Noted also in Kent Mundhenk, “Saul’s Visit To The Medium At Endor: An Animistic Perspective”, *Melanesian Journal Of Theology*, 22-2 (2006), 6.

from the dead. Saul commanded the woman⁶ to divine for him by necromancy, but the woman protested, in fear for her life, unwilling to disobey the law (as per Lev 20:27). Saul, by swearing an oath in Yahweh's name, promised that the woman would avoid punishment. Then he told her who she was to bring to life and she conjured Samuel. The narrator provides no description of the procedure, perhaps purposefully to enhance “the suggestive and mysterious nature of the episode”.⁷

What follows is a dialogue between Samuel and Saul. Samuel does not sound happy about being disturbed and Saul exposes his distress about the Philistines. In response, Samuel spells out for Saul what the defiant king should have known already: he did not listen to the voice of Yahweh, so he and his three sons were to die in battle the next day. Samuel did not tell Saul what to do because there was nothing to be done, the message from the grave was grave indeed.

Once again irony pervades the passage. In his frantic attempt to rationalize waking Samuel from the dead, Saul clashed with the essence of his problem: Yahweh really was no longer with him. According to the story, soon after this event, Saul's forces met the Philistines and Saul died. The witch of Endor was not mentioned again.

The three main lines of interpretation

The story, as an expression of a very particular mentality, cannot make us think that the author harbored any doubts about whether what they were recounting was seen as an actual, real course of events. And in fact, the oldest rabbinical exegesis did not doubt that Samuel had been really summoned by the necromancer,⁸ and only much later began to cast doubt on the reality of the appearance of Samuel.⁹ The 1st century Jewish historian Josephus recorded the incident in his *Antiquities of the Jews* (6. 14. 2f.), accepting the spirit-speaker as being Samuel himself. But Pseudo Philo, paraphrasing and liberally amplifying the biblical story, considered

⁶ The necromancer in some authors, like Eustathius, is presented as “mad woman” (Eustathius 2, 6), being “under demonic influence” (Eustathius 8, 7) and demon-possessed (Eustathius 26, 10; 30, 1), R. Greer, M. Mitchell, op. cit., pp. 80-83.

⁷ S. M. Pigott, op. cit., 438.

⁸ About the magic the necromancer used, the rabbis are very vague; in Lev. R. 26, 7 they describe the event by: “And she did what she did, and she said what she said, and raised him”.

⁹ K. A. D. Smelik, “The witch of Endor. I Samuel 28 in Rabbinic and Christian Exegesis till 800 a.d.”, *Vigiliae Christianae* 33 (1977), 160ss.

unseemly to admit that a prophet like Samuel had been subjected to the power of the necromancer. Although he does not deny that Samuel himself appeared, Pseudo Philo considers that the event has occurred by the will and at the command the Lord.¹⁰

For Christians who rejected and condemned every kind of magic as inspired by the devil it was difficult to believe that the necromancer had been able to summon the prophet. Additionally, the uncertainties they had regarding the belief in the existence of the soul in the period between the death of the body and its resurrection at the end of the world, might have increased their concerns about the acceptability of the story in its pure literalism.¹¹ However, the story of the witch of Endor and the events surrounding the story have created great interest for readers even in the early church history.

This episode from the II century has been the subject of many and varied interpretations, which can be separated into three main groups:¹²

1. The woman of Endor did, actually, have the power to call Samuel back from Sheol: Justin Martyr, Origen, Zeno of Verona, Ambrose, Augustine, Sulpicius Severus, Dracontius and Anastasius Sinaita.¹³

2. Samuel did, actually, appear to Saul (as a demon in his shape), not because of the power of the necromancer, but because of the will of God and at His command: John Chrysostom, Theodoret of Cyrillus, Pseudo-Justin, Theodore bar Koni, and Isho'dad of Merv.¹⁴

¹⁰ Pseudo-Philo, *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*, 64, 1-9.

¹¹ Manlio Simonetti, *La maga di Endor*, Nardini Editore, Firenze, 1989, 9.

¹² The groups are given in such an order for validation purposes. They have been extracted from a research article by George Salmon, "The Witch of Endor", *The Expositor* 2/3 (1882), 424-433 and from K. A. D. Smelik, op. cit., 165-166.

¹³ Justin Martyr, *Dialogus cum Tryphone Iudaeo*, 105 (PG 6,721); Origen, *In librum Regum homilia* II (Kleine Texte 83), cfr. also comm. on John 20, 42 (GCS10, 385); Zeno of Verona, *Tractatus* I, xvi, 4 (PL11,376); Ambrose, comm. on Luke 1, 33 (PL15,1 547); Augustine, *De diversis quaestionibus ad Simplicianum* 11, 3 (CCSL44, 81-6), *De cura gerenda pro mortuis* XV, 18 (CSEL41, 651f), *De octo Dulciti quaestionibus* VI (PL40, 162f), *De doctrina Christiana* II, xxiii, 35 (CCSL32.58), cfr. also his epistle 43 (CSEL 34/2, 105); Sulpicius Severus, *Chronicle* 1, 36 (CSEL 1, 37); Dracontius, *Carmen de Deo* II, 1, 324ff. (PL60, 797); Anastasius Sinaita, 154 *Quaestiones*, 39 and 112 (PG89, 581ff. and 764). Perhaps this is also the view of Evodius, cf. his letter to Augustine (CSEL44, 492).

¹⁴ John Chrysostom, Comm. on Matthew VI,3 (PG 57, 66): God informed the Magi by way of a star; what the Philistinian soothsayers proclaimed in 1 Sam 5 comes true by His grace. "The same thing applies to the necromancer: for, since Saul believed her, God announced to him through her what would happen to him". Comm. on the letter to Titus 111,2 (PG 62, 678); Theodoret of Cyrillus, *Quaest. in I Reg.* 28 (PG 0, 590), *Quaest. in I Paral. introduction* (PG 80, 808); Pseudo-Justin, *Quaestiones et Responsiones ad Orthodoxos* 52 (PG 6, 1296f. - maybe written by Theodoret, cfr. Altaner, *Patrologie*, 340); Theodore bar Koni, *Quaestiones* (CSCCO5 5, 222ff.); Isho'dad of Merv, comm. on Samuel (CSCO229, 81ff.).

3. A demon deceived Saul and gave him a false prophecy (the evocation was a result of the deception by the devil who was, in fact, the one to appear to Saul in the form of Samuel): Tertullian, Pseudo-Hippolytus, "Pionius", Eustathius of Antioch, Ephraem, Gregory of Nyssa, Evagrius Ponticus, Pseudo-Basil, Jerome, Philastrius, Ambrosiaster, and Pseudo-Augustine.¹⁵

From the broad exegetical material on the issue, a compilation of opinions which includes interpretations of Origen, of Eustathius and of Gregory of Nyssa will be provided in the present text, thanks to the work of an unknown Byzantine scholar who gathered together these three texts, as attested by the codex *Monacensis Graecus* 331 from the X century.¹⁶ These three texts, seen beyond the common denominator represented by the exegetical theme, are very different from each-other in terms of literary form. The text of Origen is a homily that was preached to the faithful; the text of Eustathius is a treatise, written with literary ambition to disprove the interpretation of Origen; and finally, the text of Gregory is a letter, in which he replies to a colleague, without any direct link to the other two texts. The three were, nevertheless, transcribed together and therefore continued to be grouped in an anthology, and have reached us through the codex of Monaco and its apographs.¹⁷

The first Christian author who, to our knowledge, has discussed the episode of Saul and the necromancer was Justin.

¹⁵ Tertullian, *De Anima*, 57, 8f. (CCSL2, 866f.) (In the spurious *Carmen adversus Marcionem* I II, 126ff.-CCSL2, 1437 Samuel is, however, praised, because „... he retained prophetic rights also after his rest“; Pseudo-Hippolytus, *In Reges fragm.* (GCS 1, 123), not written by Hippolytus, but by an unknown author, cfr. Bardenhewer. *Geschichte der altkirchlichen Literatur* 11, 582 and H. Achelis, *Hippolytstudien* (TU16,4) 122ff.; „Pionius“, cfr. n. 2; Eustathius, *De Pythonissa* (K1.T. 83); Ephraem, comm. on Samuel, 28 (in *Opera Omnia*, ed. P. Benedictus, ser. Syr. I [Rome 1737] 387-390) - cfr. however, n. 3 - *Nisibian Hymn*, 42,6 (CSCO 240, 38f.) and 57,15f (CSCO 240, 86), *Contra Julianum*, (CSCO174, 86f) and the abstract of a sermon (CSCO 363, 63); Gregory of Nyssa, *De Pythonissa* (K1.T.83); Evagrius Ponticus, *Cephaleia Gnostica* VI,61 (Patr. Or. 28, 242f.); Pseudo-Basil, comm. on Is. 8,19/22 (PG 30, 497); Jerome, comm. on Matth. 6, 31 (PL26, 46), comm. on Ez. IV,13,17f. (PL25, 114), cf. however his comm. on Is. 111,7, 11 (PL2 4,106); Philastrius, *Diversarum Haereseon liber* 26,1f. (CCSL9, 226f.); Ambrosiaster, *Quaestiones Veteri et Novi Testamenti* 27 (CSEL 50, 54ff.) and Pseudo-Augustine, *De mirabilibus Sacrae Scripturae* II,11 (PL35, 2179).

¹⁶ Erich Klostermann, *Origenes, Eustathius von Antiochien, und Gregor von Nyssa uber die Hexe von Endor*, Marcus&Weber, Bon, 1912 in M. Simonetti, op. cit., passim.

¹⁷ In 1986 Pierre and Marie-Thérèse Nautin published their edition of Origen's homilies on Samuel, including the fifth homily, on 1 Kgdms 28. Three years later Simonetti published his edition of three works bound together in the manuscript tradition: Origen's homily, Eustathius of Antioch's much longer treatise refuting Origen's interpretation of 1 Kgdms 28, and the short letter of Gregory of Nyssa that gives us his interpretation of the story. In 2002 José H. Declerck published his edition of all the survived works of Eustathius.

Interpreting the Psalm 21 in the *Dialogues with Trypho*, regarding the death of Christ, he refers to the survival of the soul after the death of the body and observes:

“Now, I have proved that souls survive [after death] from the fact that Samuel's soul was invoked by the witch, as Saul demanded. And it seems that the souls of other just men and prophets were subjected to such powers, as is evident from the facts in the case of this witch. Thus, God through His Son also teaches us (for whom these things seem to have happened) always to do our utmost to become righteous and at our death to pray that we may not fall into any such power”.¹⁸

The story does not seem to have elicited any doubts in him: Justin accepts the story of Saul and the necromancer in its full literality and therefore does not doubt that the souls of the righteous and the prophets may, after the death of the body, fall under the power of adverse powers.¹⁹ He uses 1 Sam 28 to support his belief that souls survive death, convinced that it was Samuel's soul that came back, and he does not seem at all troubled by the fact that this happened through the intervention of demons.²⁰ This view of Justin is unacceptable to most Christian writers; only Anastasius Sinaita has a similar opinion.²¹

The biblical story does not specify at all that it was precisely the soul of Samuel to have appeared to Saul and the necromancer, but it speaks simply of Samuel, on the basis of the concept which ignored the body-soul dichotomy. But Justin is probably following Christian anthropology dominant in his time, thus, more or less clearly distinguishing between soul and body. All the other Christian authors after him seem to be reasoning along the same lines, so that henceforth for “Samuel” is to be understood the “soul of Samuel”.²²

Tertullian considers the biblical text in another way, denying that power to the demons and reflecting on the whole scene as a trick made by the devil, who was simultaneously intervening both on the necromancer and on Saul. In c. 57, 8-9 of *De anima*, in the context of the fallacy and deceit of the devil, after recalling some heretics who boasted of having power to summon the souls of the prophets from Hades, he writes:

¹⁸ Justin, *Dialogues with Trypho*, PG 6.721, ch.105; *The Fathers of the Church*, trans. Thomas B. Falls, Christian Heritage, New York, 1948, 312.

¹⁹ M. Simonetti, op. cit., 11-12.

²⁰ R. Greer, M. Mitchell, op. cit., xxxvii.

²¹ Charles Semisch, *Justin Martyr, his Life, Writings and Opinions*, II, T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1843, p. 465.

²² Given that the body had been buried, while the soul continued to exist even apart from him, Justin was naturally led to believe that the soul of Samuel appeared to Saul (which is a natural conclusion for the time; see also in M. Simonetti, op. cit., 11).

“I suppose that they can do so under cover of a lying wonder. For, indeed, it was no less than this that was anciently permitted to the Pythonic (or ventriloquistic) spirit — even to represent the soul of Samuel, when Saul consulted the dead, after (losing the living) God. God forbid, however, that we should suppose that the soul of any saint, much less of a prophet, can be dragged out of (its resting-place in Hades) by a demon. We know that Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light (2 Cor 11:14) — much more into a man of light— and that at last he will show himself to be God, even (2 Thess 2:4), and will exhibit great signs and wonders, insomuch that, if it were possible, he shall deceive the very elect (Mat 24: 24). He hardly hesitated on the aforementioned occasion to affirm himself to be a prophet of God, and especially to Saul, in whom he was dwelling. You must not imagine that he who produced the phantom was one, and he who consulted it was another; but that it was one and the same spirit, both in the sorceress and in the apostate (king)...”²³

The interpretation by Origen

This concern, expressed by Tertullian, about the possibility of a necromancer having power over the soul of the prophet, was well considered also by Origen, when he preached on the subject probably on invitation by the bishop Alexander.²⁴ To put this homily in its original context, one must remember that it was part of a short series of homilies of Origen on the Book 1 Sam, preached most likely in Jerusalem around 240 AD.²⁵ The topic, as it becomes apparent right from the opening lines, was well known and discussed. In a gesture unique amongst his homilies, Origen asks the bishop presiding at the gathering to assign him one of the four passages of 1 Sam (chapters 25-28) previously read. The episode obviously intrigued Origen, since he referred to it in three works from his Caesarean period that deal with seemingly unrelated texts.²⁶

²³ M. Simonetti, *op. cit.*, 12.

²⁴ Origène, *Homélie sur Samuel*, Pierre et Marie-Thérèse Nautin, eds., Cerf, Paris, 1986, 57-60.

²⁵ Origène, SC 328 in ed. P. et M-T. Nautin, eds., *op. cit.*, 57-60. The homily of Origen was certainly not preached in Alexandria. Around 233 Origen permanently left Alexandria, probably because of some tension with Bishop Demetrius of Alexandria and with his successor, Heraclas. For the remaining two decades of his life, he resided mostly in Caesarea, where he preached his surviving homilies, which, like the rest of his works, were recorded by stenographers (see Pierre Nautin, *Origène: Sa vie et son oeuvre*, Beauchesne, Paris, 1977; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 6. 23.1-2).

²⁶ Joseph W. Trigg, “Eustathius of Antioch’s Attack on Origen: What Is at Issue in an Ancient Controversy”, *Journal of Religion*, 75:2 (1995), 225. In a homily on Jeremiah 18, that prophet’s descent to the potter’s house recalled to Origen Samuel’s descent into Hades, so Origen supposed that Samuel had voluntarily descended to Hades in order to “observe and behold the mysteries of Hades” (Origen, *Homilies on Jeremiah* 18. 2, SC 238: 182. 40-46). He refers to it twice in the later writings of his Commentary on John. In Book 20 he incidentally mentions Samuel’s being summoned by the medium as evidence that he, along with the other righteous

Origen preliminary draws the attention of the audience to the importance of the text, as a relevant topic on the issues of fate – the situation of the soul after death (c.2) and presents the thesis, supported by some of the faithful, according to which Samuel would not have really appeared to the necromancer (c.3), and then proposes its interpretation.²⁷ This can be divided into two stages: in the first one, Origen supports the validity of the literal interpretation of the story and therefore the veracity of the apparition of Samuel and of the prophecies addressed to Saul, which therefore confirms the appearance (cc. 4-5); in the later one, Origen justifies Samuel's presence in Hades as a continuation of his earthly ministry, preparing departed souls for the coming of Christ, whose soul later also descended into Hades after his crucifixion (cc. 6-9).²⁸ In the final peroration Origen reminds the listeners how fortunate they are, because they are already redeemed by Christ, so they can go right into heaven after their death, a privilege previously denied even to the patriarchs and prophets, who had to wait for their Savior in Hades.²⁹

The focus of the demonstration of Origen is in chapter 4, where he observes that nothing in the story of Saul and the necromancer makes it clear to the reader that the narrator does not believe in its truthfulness. "What is it that a woman saw? Samuel", he argues. "And why is it not said: The woman saw a little demon, that pretended to be Samuel? But it is written that Saul knew that it was Samuel. If it was not Samuel, it would be necessary to write: Saul supposed that it was Samuel. Yet now it is written: Saul knew and no one knows what does not exist" (4:7).³⁰ Even if this conclusion entails various difficulties, it should not be allowed to put it in doubt and claim that the necromancer did not actually conjure the soul of Samuel. In fact, it is hardly surprising that Origen, much inclined to put aside the literal sense of the sacred text for the benefit of the spiritual interpretation of the allegorical type, has here adhered so closely to a literal sense of a problematic and already questioned text. Eustathius would also express his amazement about this unusual behavior, especially since the difficulty offered by the literal sense of a biblical passage was a rare

of the Old Testament, was in Hades awaiting Christ's resurrection. In Book 28, regarding the prophecy of Caiaphas in John 12:49-51, the idea that one man should die for the sake of all the people, seems to have led Origen to mention the medium in connection with the validity of the prophecy on the part of the wicked (Origen, *Commentary on John*, 20. 393, SC 290. 346 and 28. 148-49, SC 385. 134).

²⁷ M. Simonetti, op. cit., 13-14.

²⁸ J. W. Trigg, op. cit., 199.

²⁹ M. Simonetti, op. cit., 14.

³⁰ Origen, *Homilies on Jeremiah and 1 Kings* 28, 4, 4-5.

occasion for Origen to deny the validity of the literal sense on expense of the spiritual one.³¹

In the first place, Origen does not seem convinced that the literal meaning of the story, though problematic, is unacceptable, as was seen by some Christians: “I confirm, therefore, that the literal interpretation of the story and its examination is necessary, in order that we see what it holds for to us after the final departure” (5, 1). In fact, not much could be extracted from the Scriptures regarding the condition of the soul after the death of the body,³² in order to exclude the veracity of the story if understood literally. Origen does not hesitate to consider erroneous some details of the Genesis story about the creation of the world and of man, and because of the implication of an anthropomorphic conception of God, dismisses the literal meaning of those passages of the story for the benefit of the spiritual interpretation. But, regarding this story, he has no equal certainty about the afterlife of the soul and therefore remains much more cautious in his appreciation of the text.³³

“But then, what is the necromancer doing here? What is she doing in order to be able to evoke the soul?” (6, 1). To this question Origen responds starting a wide argument concerning Christ's descent into Hades and the presence of the prophets there, but in fact he gives no explicit answer to the question that was asked; here it is clear that Origen has some difficulties.³⁴ “If all the prophets before Christ descended into Hades as precursors of Christ, then Samuel also came down there. And not just simply, but as someone holy, because wherever he is, the holy is holy” (8, 1). He argues *a fortiori* that, if Christ descended into Hades, we should not be shocked to read that a prophet descended to the same place, especially since a prophet would be needed there to prepare for Christ's coming.

On another hand, a demon could not have spoken Samuel's words to Saul, since they would be beyond the knowledge of a demon. A demon would not have known that the Lord had already designated David as king or that Saul would die the next day, clearing the way for David to ascend the throne. Origen believed that such matters belonged to the divine plan of

³¹ M. Simonetti, *op. cit.*, 15.

³² Origen himself evidently believed that souls retain the form of the body after death. For Origen's writings suggesting an intrinsic connection between body and soul, see *De Princ.* (CPG, 1482), 1.6.4, 4.3.13. For a discussion, see Henri Crouzel, “Le theme platonicien du ‘véhicule de l'âme’ chez Origène,” *Didaskalia*, 7 (1977), 225-237, Mark Edwards, *Origen against Plato*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2003, 95-96.

³³ M. Simonetti, *op. cit.*, 16.

³⁴ M. Simonetti, *op. cit.*, 84.

salvation, which was deliberately hidden from the demons (8, 3).³⁵ Origen provides his listeners with two additional reasons why it should not be disturbing to believe that Samuel was in Hades. First, death would not have deprived him of his prophetic powers, but would, on the contrary, have improved them: “If Samuel was a prophet and when he died the Holy Spirit left him and therefore left him also the power to prophesy, then it is not true that the apostle says: ‘For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears’ (1 Cor 13, 9-10). So, perfection occurs after life (9, 1). Secondly, all souls, even those of saints like Abraham and Samuel, were in Hades, excluded from paradise until Christ opened the way (9, 8-9). Just as Jesus did not cease to be the Christ in his descent to Hades (“So Christ was still Christ even when he was below”, 8, 2), Samuel did not lose his capacity to choose,³⁶ that is, his self-determined moral action, when he descended there. The conviction of some Christians that Samuel could not be held in Hades and could not fall under the power of the demon, was questionable to Origen, while it is in contrast with the literal meaning of the story it still appears quite consistent and free of internal difficulties. That is why in this case it has not been considered necessary to accept the literal sense at the cost of arousing opposition in certain listeners.³⁷

It is necessary to consider that despite his obvious preference for the spiritual sense and the allegorical interpretation, Origen considered the correct appreciation of the literal sense a prerequisite for a correct spiritual interpretation of the biblical text, because it is only by keeping the historical significance that we can raise ourselves to a good spiritual meaning and oppose the “bad” spiritual meaning.³⁸

A few years after Origen had preached the homily that provoked a great reaction, at the time of the persecution of Decius (in the year 250), there is another interpretation of the episode in c. 14 of the *Martyrdom of Pionius*, in the context of a discourse where Pionius is addressing the

³⁵ J. W. Trigg, op. cit., 226.

³⁶ This does not mean that Samuel chose to descend to Hades (in the sense that, like Christ, he could have chosen not to). His exercise of free choice lies, rather, in choosing to prophesy. Thus Samuel conforms, even here, to the ordinary character of prophecy, which, for Origen, is rational and voluntary – more in J. W. Trigg, op. cit., 228.

³⁷ There are testimonies about this opposition in the work of Eustathius, who, in the context of his polemic against Origen's interpretation, argues *ad litteram* different passages in the text of the opponent, but also adds some others (c. 26. 3 to 7). For this reason, it is possible to think that, facing the criticism that its interpretation of the episode about the necromancer had raised in the audience, Origen felt the need to later return to the subject, dedicating to it a new homily (M. Simonetti, op. cit., 17-18).

³⁸ M. Simonetti, op. cit., 17.

Christians imprisoned with him. He speaks about the Jews inter alia, considering them dangerous, because they claimed that Christ's resurrection was due to necromancy and therefore not proof of His divinity. Pionius wanted to demonstrate this as impossible through the episode of Saul and the necromancer, the story that the Jews had referred to. Pionius tried to refute their statements by asserting that it was not Samuel who appeared, but that the devil assumed his shape and showed himself to Saul and to the woman.³⁹ This is the same interpretation that we read in Tertullian, one that Origen rejects, and it is the same interpretation that we find in Eustathius.⁴⁰

³⁹ The question arises - had the necromancer the power to evoke Samuel or not? If one says "yes", then one admits that wickedness can do more than justice can, and be damned. If one answers that the prophet was not conjured from the grave, then not even Christ the Lord could have been. The reasoning is as follows: how could the impious necromancer, the devil, evoke the spirit of the holy prophet, who is resting in the bosom of Abraham? - because the inferior is commanded by superior. Then, is it true that Samuel was not mentioned at all, contrary to what they suppose? The story can be explained that it was not Samuel who was evoked: the demons of Hades, assumed a resemblance to Samuel, became apparent to the necromancer and to the betrayer Saul. In fact, he, who seemed to be Samuel, said to Saul: 'Today thou shall be with me'. How could it be that the idolatrous Saul would find himself in the company of Samuel? Here it is meant, perhaps, in the sense that he was to be in the company of the wicked demons, who had betrayed him and subjected him to their dominion (see Silvia Ronchey, Gioachino Chiarini, *Atti e passioni dei martiri*, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Roma-Milano, 1987, 177-179).

⁴⁰ K. A. D. Smelik, "The witch of Endor. I Samuel 28 in Rabbinic and Christian Exegesis till 800 a.d.," *Vigiliae Christianae*, 33 (1977), 160-161; M. Simonetti, op. cit., 19-20.

The Interpretation by Eustathius

In the period between 311 and 325 Eustathius⁴¹ addressed to an unidentified Eutropius⁴² a treatise written with obvious literary ambitions, where the interpretation of the episode of Saul and the necromancer is tackled in disagreement with the interpretation of Origen. It should not seem, he warns (c. l. 4-7), that he wants to discuss a “lawsuit” just like it suits him or that he wants to compete on its own in a competitive sport. On the contrary, he acknowledges the work of Origen, by referring to his homily.⁴³ Eustathius's treatise, the first response by a theologian from Antioch to Origen's exegesis, has attracted scholars from a distinctively Antiochene school of Christian theology, in opposition to a supposed Alexandrian school.⁴⁴

⁴¹ According to R. Greer and Daniel Buda, the treatise was probably written after 320, when Eustathius became bishop of Berea, but before the break of the Arian controversy. It is the absence of any reference to the Arian controversy in the treatise that explains the consensus that it was written before he became bishop of Antioch, shortly before the council of Nicaea in 325 (R. Greer, M. Mitchell, op. cit., ix.; Daniel Buda, “Aspects of Demonology in the text ‘On The Belly-Myther of Endor’ by St. Eustatius of Antioch”, *Teologia* 4 (2013), 173). Trigg locates the writing in the decade after the end of the Great Persecution in 312 (J. W. Trigg, op. cit., 219).

Eustathius was a rising star in the Constantinian church, a literary stylist and an ecclesiastical statesman. Eustathius's contribution to theological debate in the early fourth century was his insistence, distinctive for the period, that Christ had a human soul. His staunch support of the *homoousion* led Constantine to depose him, probably in 331 AD. Since he did not regain his position, as others did, when Constantine died in 337, it might be assumed that he had died in the meantime (see J. W. Trigg, op. cit., 220; R. P. C. Hanson describes Eustathius's vaunted style as “pompous wordiness” - R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, T&T Clarke, Edinburgh, 1981, 160; see also Henry Chadwick, “The Fall of Eustathius of Antioch,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 49 (1948), 27-38; and Hanson, op. cit., pp. 203-11, for a summary of his arguments from “The Fate of Eustathius of Antioch,” *Zeitschmyt fur Kirchengeschichte* 95 (1948), 171-79).

⁴² By the manner in which he is being referred to, as a “most distinguished and holy preacher of orthodoxy”, he could also have been a bishop. For some scholars Euthropius is probably to be identified with the bishop of Hadrianopolis (see R. Greer, M. Mitchell, op. cit., ix, for example, and also in more detail Michel Spanneut, *Recherches sur les écrits d'Eustathe d'Antioche avec une édition nouvelle des fragments dogmatiques et exégétiques*, Facultés catholiques. Lille, 1948, 60 et pass).

⁴³ M. Simonetti, op. cit., 21-22.

⁴⁴ J. W. Trigg, op. cit., 221. The claim of Eustathius on Christ's full humanity, along with his opposition to Origen, makes it tempting to see him as an ancestor of Diodorus of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia, who shared these sentiments. D. S. Wallace-Hadrill effectively treats Eustathius as a typical Antiochene exegete in the same sense that Diodore of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Theodoret of Cyrrhus were such (see D. S. Wallace-Hadrill, *Christian Antioch: A Study of Early Christian Thought in the East*, Cambridge University Press,

Eustathius denied that Samuel actually appeared, for such an interpretation would encourage the faithful to resort to magic and necromancy; it would disparage the power of God, who alone can raise the dead, whereas a medium could not even raise an ant or a spider, much less a prophet; and it would undermine Christian morality by erasing the distinction between ultimate destinies of the just and the unjust (3.4, 3.3, 14.7).⁴⁵ He opens his polemic with a diffuse paraphrase of the biblical story and thus immediately gets himself in a position to reject the methodological criteria proposed by Origen, according to which, since nothing in the story suggests that the writer, that is, the Holy Spirit, doubts its veracity, one must consider it to be truthful.⁴⁶

Eustathius argues that the fundamental words of the story that identify Samuel, are spoken by the woman who is possessed by a demon (just like Saul is), and a demon cannot be anything but fallacious (cc. 2-5). Tackling the passage verse by verse, he attempts to refute Origen's view by using the techniques of Hellenistic literary criticism.⁴⁷ In doing so, however, he misrepresents Origen's best argument: that the inspired narrative voice identifies the apparition as Samuel. How unfortunate was to promise that Samuel could be conjured up from the dead? He asks whether it could have been affirmed that the woman could evoke the soul of a prophet, when in reality she could not have intervened on an ordinary person, nor even an ant or a flea. In fact, the demons have no power over the spirits and souls, such power only God has, as Lord of All. Therefore, the power to come and retrieve souls from Hades must only be recognized as belonging to a divine nature (3, 3).⁴⁸ Eustathius thus indicates that Origen's interpretation depends on the veracity of words spoken in direct discourse by the medium, which, he argues, should not be taken at face value: the words of the woman and of the apparition can be understood as false without compromising the integrity of the narrative. Eustathius here clearly assumes that Samuel's soul, although not called up by the necromancer of Endor, is active somewhere. Only God has power over souls. His objection to Origen's

Cambridge, 1982). Other scholars who have carefully studied Eustathius, notably Michel Spanneut and Manlio Simonetti, deny that Eustathius anticipates Diodorus' opposition (more in Manlio Simonetti, *Lettera e/o allegoria: Un contributo alla storia dell'esegesi patristica*, Institutum Patristicum "Augustinianum", Rome 1985, 124).

⁴⁵ J. W. Trigg, op. cit., 229.

⁴⁶ M. Simonetti, *La maga di Endor*, 22.

⁴⁷ J. W. Trigg, op. cit., 230.

⁴⁸ It can be argued that this is the doctrinal a priori that affects the whole interpretation of Eustathius in complete antithesis to that of Origen, M. Simonetti, op. cit., 211.

claim that Samuel really appeared in Endor rests on the improper power Origen attributes to the necromancer.⁴⁹ Eustathius briefly approaches the question on whether demons are able to tell the truth, and the answer is: “There are, of course, times when the demons are quite unwillingly compelled to tell the truth by being painfully tortured, but willingly, however, they would not say anything whatsoever without lying” (4, 4).⁵⁰

Eustathius asks why, if Samuel had actually been summoned, did Saul not see him, since he seems to be relying solely on the medium's description? He proposes an argument that Origen might have made in order to explain how it could be that while the necromancer saw Samuel, Saul did not. The suggested argument is that the necromancer saw Samuel's soul, which had taken the shape of his body. Eustathius then explains why this could not have been the case. In order to establish whether Eustathius thinks that souls *can* appear in the appearance of the people they had been part of when alive, the function of the phrase: “As everyone knows, sometimes in dreams spirits and souls appear to human beings, displaying the characteristics of humans with all their members...”⁵¹ should be established.⁵² This would mean that to be summoned is not the capacity of the soul, the capacity to summon lies within the subject (the one doing the summoning), and that is the issue.⁵³ Moreover, it is absurd to believe that indeed first the woman and then Saul may have recognized the soul of

⁴⁹ Sophie Hampshire Cartwright, *The Theological Anthropology of Eustathius of Antioch*, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, 189-190.

⁵⁰ Probably referring to episodes from Mt 8:29, Mk 1:24, see M. Simonetti, op. cit., 213.

⁵¹ S. H. Cartwright, op. cit., 194.

Eustathius continues: “Perhaps you will say that the very apparatus of the soul used to take shape in human form according to age, in order that by its appearance the soul might foretell the future by prophesy? As everyone knows, sometimes in dreams spirits and souls appear to human beings, displaying the characteristics of humans with all their members...[but if that were the case here] why on earth didn't the woman say 'I saw a prophetic soul' and not the opposite, 'I saw a man standing'?” (6, 1-2).

⁵² This belief is typical for animism – the belief in particular souls residing in the elements of reality, not only in humans. The animistic theory reconstructs the origin of the belief in the human soul through the belief in “doubles”, namely, the duality of man-and-soul as witnessed during dreams, when a person sleeps physically fixed in one location, while their soul wanders unattached. Early Christian scholars barely ever refer to such early forms of religious life, so in the purpose of a more or less succinct presentation of the problem at hand, this line will not be further contextualized.

⁵³ Greer makes this point and he also argues that, for Eustathius, souls must wait in “Hades” until Christ has harrowed it (R. Greer, M. Mitchell, op. cit., ix). He sees a circumstantial bar for the souls appearing in the sensible world, though not an ontological one, which is in itself problematic. A priori, this position is coherent with Eustathius's theology. However, it is not clear that Eustathius rejects that possibility of God recalling a soul from Hades under other circumstances (R. Greer, M. Mitchell, op. cit., lxi).

Samuel, which was supposed to have been devoid of bodily features and garments (cc. 6-7).

Eustathius argues that we can discern the character of a narrative by paying attention to what it fails to say and by the way it introduces its characters. In the story of Elijah and the priests of Baal (1 King 18:19–40), “... the text of scripture did not define precisely whether they [the priests of Baal] prophesied things that were true or false” (8.4). Obviously, however, no one could have the impression that they were true prophets (8. 7).⁵⁴ The biblical examples of the contrast between Elijah and the priests of Baal, and between Moses and the Egyptian magicians show that in similar cases the author, describing the facts does not immediately give a negative assessment of the moral order (cc. 8-9). In Ex 7, 12 the Scripture seems to allege that the staffs of the Egyptian sorcerers turned into serpents, but according to Eustathius, the author in this instance, as well as in other similar ones, presupposes that the reader understands this magic as delusive, being the product of demonic deceit. So it was not considered necessary to notify the reader of 1 Sam 28 that the necromancy was, in fact, fraudulent.⁵⁵ In this spirit, we have to believe that it was the devil who influenced Saul, involving him more and more in evildoing, appearing to him in the robe of Samuel (cc. 10-11). The exegesis of the verse from 1 Sam 28:13, which contains the words of the necromancer given as a response to Saul’s question “What have you seen” - “I have seen gods⁵⁶ coming up from the earth” is based on the idea that the demon is a liar, trying to find proof to support his lie by bringing other untrue reasons.⁵⁷ In such manner, the devil wants to destroy man, and to demonstrate with evidence that the demon has the power to evoke not only a single soul of a just man, but the souls of the saints altogether (10, 1-2).⁵⁸ Eustathius elucidates the intention of the devil: by calling up a whole army of the souls of the righteous, he tried to prove

⁵⁴ R. Greer, M. Mitchell, op. cit., xiv.

⁵⁵ K. A. D. Smelik, op. cit., 168.

⁵⁶ The *elohim* in the Hebrew text that the necromancer sees rise from Hades with Samuel, was translated by LXX with "gods", a term used vastly in the Old Testament almost always with negative meaning (pagan’s divinities), but not always (for non-negative use cf.. Ps 49. 1, 81. 6, 135. 2). Origen understands the word in the sense of angels or spiritual men, in context easily assimilated to the prophets, as here (see more in M. Simonetti, op. cit., 86-87).

⁵⁷ D. Buda, op. cit., 176.

⁵⁸ Origen had interpreted these just souls (of men and saints) as prophets or angels. During his long process of arguing, Eustathius does not fail to refute this explanation by Origen, but he insists above all on its interpretation: the gods are demons, according to a concept already well attested in the Old Testament: see. 95. 5 in the understanding that all the gods of the pagans are demons (M. Simonetti, op. cit., 218-219).

his divinity and indeed made Saul worship him. The real Samuel, he contends, would not have permitted Saul to do that.

“Then Saul, who had not seen anything at all, when he heard the words he recognized in his own judgment that it was Samuel, because he was possessed by a demon inside. Misled by the description of the characteristic signs, then bowed to the ground and worshipped him. At this point one might first observe rightly: if that was Samuel and not a transformation of the multiform serpent, he would have said to Saul, ‘Thou shall worship the Lord your God and serve only Him’” (10, 8-10).

It is clear that for Eustathius the prophecies were fictitious, as he sees them as replica of the words which were spoken by Samuel on another occasion, complemented by easy predictability of the outcome of the ongoing war (cc. 12-14). He argues that the apparition did not actually prophesy anything that Samuel had not prophesied while he was still alive. The one new piece of information the apparition supplies - that Saul and his sons would die the next day - was, he contends, false, since the biblical narrative allows a few more days to pass before they actually meet their fate⁵⁹ (if that particular piece of information is false, the modality of the foresight remains uncertain, and not true). How can the devil have power over a prophet? Eustathius, who denies this possibility, blames Origen for not having been able to give a precise answer to this point and also criticizes the way in which he had spoken of Christ's descent into Hades and of the prophets (cc. 16-20).⁶⁰ “For it belongs to God alone to give orders with such authority that he can summon and call souls from Hades” (16, 10) – this is a conclusion sufficiently demonstrated until now by Eustathius. That scripture fails to make clear judgments about the demonic character of the belly-myther’s divination is no surprise, since such a judgment is possible for anyone who reads the narrative carefully (16:11–13).⁶¹ However, he is constrained by Origen to continue his argumentation (17, 2), because he stooped to a “deceptive artifice” appealing to the “person of Christ ... by comparing him side by side with the holy men” and saying that it was possible for Samuel to come up since Christ himself went down to Hades”

⁵⁹ J. W. Trigg, *op. cit.*, 231.

Eustathius clarifies: “Without saying anything due to foreknowledge, cunningly repeats those miseries that Samuel, when he was still alive, predicted that would happen to Saul and prophesying the predicted as happened ... All of these words Samuel had spoken to the letter ...” (12:1 and 6). Moreover, the prophecy made by the demon had not even been completely exact (c. 15).

⁶⁰ M. Simonetti, *op. cit.*, 23.

⁶¹ R. Greer, M. Mitchell, *op. cit.*, xlv.

(17, 3).⁶² Eustathius also argues that the apparition of angels provides further proof that the narrative cannot be taken at par value - and Origen even puts the angels under the demon, forgetting that they are always in God's presence (c. 20).⁶³

After a very critical digression on the principles of exegesis of Origen (cc. 21-22), he continues the discussion on the validity of the prophecy of Samuel (cc. 23-24). For Eustathius it seems clear that since Christ himself was in Hades and brought the fruits of his salvation there, the power of the demons might be considered as very limited. In a repetitive conclusion, “... to summon souls from Hades and to call the choruses of angels that wing their way around heaven at the same moment – God alone and his most divine Son have authority to do this. Absolutely no one else has this authority” (23, 6).⁶⁴ The conclusion is that the demons might know the truth of the Scripture and can express it, but in all cases they try to use the inspired word in a wrong manner or for evil purposes: “Surely, then, if he (the devil) fashions his speech from the holy scripture, he has a knowledge of what is written, even he is poorly trained. ... Therefore, the demon, by saying that which had already been, did not prophesy a single thing at all” (23, 8).⁶⁵ What follows is the reference to the condemnation of all kinds of divination, reading several places of Scripture (cc. 25-26). In the final part of the refutation of the proof, Eustathius takes the connections of the term, ἐγγαστήριμος, to detect how the μῦθοι, although condemned by Plato, although beautiful and delectable for the art of Homer and Hesiod, are being accepted by Origen in the form of depravity (cc. 27-30).⁶⁶ The necromancer herself is by definition demon-possessed (26. 10; 30. 1).⁶⁷

It was necessary to underline the clear dissimilarity of the work of Eustathius not only in the manner of the literary genre, but also of the tone and commitment with respect to the homily of Origen. The text of Origen is short and the issue is treated in a comprehensive manner, without dwelling much on the details and without insisting on polemics. The text of Eustathius is an acrimonious and meticulous critic, which also subjects the

⁶² D. Buda, *op. cit.*, 178.

⁶³ J. W. Trigg, *op. cit.*, 231.

⁶⁴ Greer rightly observes that Eustathius “... seems more preoccupied with insisting upon God's sovereignty at the expenses of demonic powers than with sorting out a Christian view of the life to come” (R. Greer, M. Mitchell, *op. cit.*, xxxii). There is no place for dualism in St. Eustathius' demonology. The power of demons is nothing compared to the omnipotent power of God.

⁶⁵ D. Buda, *ibid.*

⁶⁶ M. Simonetti, *op. cit.*, 24.

⁶⁷ R. Greer, M. Mitchell, *op. cit.*, lxvi.

biblical narrative to little fair analysis compared to the basic criteria of story-writing. The many arguments adopted by Eustathius are of different weight. There is a platitude of banalities and arguments that only marginally approach the issue and seem introduced for expressive purposes, but Eustathius does not fail to reveal the weak point of the interpretation of Origen: the insufficient explanation of how the necromancer had so much power over the soul of Samuel to summon him from Hades. However, he seems indisposed or unwilling to appreciate how worthy the methodological foundation on which Origen had proposed his interpretation is.⁶⁸

The writing of Eustathius, although at first sight dedicated to the discussion of a specific issue and well-circumscribed in its importance, has ambitions of a much broader scope. To put it clearly we draw attention to a number of unflattering epithets and judgments which Eustathius uses for Origen throughout the discussion, with a systematic approach that makes them a true Ariadne's thread of his writing: in addition to the trivial and insignificant insults, some of them are ironically reminiscent of the great fame surrounding Origen in his time. So, Eustathius does not write dispassionately and serenely to discuss a traditionally debated question, but with the specific purpose to degrade Origen, to demonstrate how his reputation was deficient and unsubstantiated.⁶⁹

The Interpretation by Gregory of Nyssa

In the decades between Eustathius and Gregory of Nyssa, in the second half of the IV century, there are two important interpretations of the episode of the necromancer, by Apollinaris and by Diodorus. The fragment by Apollinaris repeats Origen's opinion that because of Christ's connection with hell we have something more, that is, the gates of Hades have been broken open, and Christ has opened, through his own ascent, a way up for the souls that were held there. Apollinaris thinks of the Harrowing of Hades

⁶⁸ M. Simonetti, *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Trigg states that "even though Eustathius does find some real weaknesses in Origen's interpretation, Eustathius does not, in the end, provide a convincing alternative. He focuses closer attention on the passage than any other ancient author, but the more minutely he examines the passage, the farther away we are from the gripping drama of a desperate king illicitly summoning a dead prophet only to have his doom confirmed" (J. W. Trigg, *op. cit.*, 231-232).

in terms of Christ's victory over the devil, rather than merely in terms of his preaching to the souls imprisoned in Hades.⁷⁰

The interpretation of Diodorus is much broader and more complex and it is of fundamental importance for the presentation of this theme, because it constitutes a link between the interpretations of Eustathius and of Gregory of Nyssa. His argumentation is as follows: some believe that Samuel was summoned by the necromancer, but the Scripture does not state that the necromancer managed to evoke him, instead only that which the woman said to Saul: 'Who shall I summon?' and Saul's answer that it was to be Samuel. The summoning happens not thanks to the skills of the woman, nor as a result of the power of the demon which was acting in her. Diodorus, like Eustathius, pays attention to the inability to accurately predict the future (they would die the next day, while in fact they died several days later), offering some additional meaning. Namely, "tomorrow" (in Scripture) does not always indicate the next day, but sometimes stands to denote the imminence of an event. Further more, Diodorus outlines, when Samuel was alive, Saul had driven the necromancers away, Samuel had several times supplicated God for him without being heard; therefore, when Saul did not hesitate to summon him by using the necromancer, God makes Samuel tell him that since he had been hoping to be able to evoke the dead through necromancy and had been wicked to the point of believing to be able to defeat the enemy with the tools of impiety, he gets what was coming to him.⁷¹ Diodorus begins by agreeing with Eustathius that the necromancer did not, in fact, conjure Samuel. But afterwards, in the central part of the text, he discusses the alleged inaccuracy of the prophecy of Samuel, directly refuting one of the main arguments that Eustathius had used against Origen, in support of the hypothesis that a demon in the shape of Samuel would have appeared to Saul. Neither Apollinaris nor Diodorus identified any reason to doubt the veracity of the apparition of Samuel. But neither wanted to dismiss tout court the doctrinal objection to the denial of the necromancer's power to evoke a prophet's soul, as Origen did. Hence, a new interpretation, or rather the resumption of the Jewish interpretation of Ps. Philo: Samuel was really brought up, but by God rather than by the necromancer. Having established this mediating interpretation, Diodorus must explain why God brought up Samuel, which, according to him, was in order to glorify Samuel. The additional purpose, however, was to explain to Samuel why the prayers for Saul he offered to God while he was still alive

⁷⁰ R. Greer, M. Mitchell, *op. cit.*, lxxvi.

⁷¹ M. Simonetti, *op. cit.*, 30-31.

went unanswered.⁷² Apollinaris merely reaffirms that only Christ had the power to release souls from Hades.

The interpretation of this episode by Gregory of Nyssa is contained in a letter he wrote in response to a fellow by the name of Theodosius, who had proposed six *quaestiones* of exegetical argument (in the years not before 380). The importance of this *quaestione* led Gregory (even without having previously shown a particular interest), to deal with it much longer than with the others. This is, nevertheless, still much shorter than the Origen's homily, not to mention Eustathius' treatise. The Letter of Gregory of Nyssa is intended as a refutation of the position maintained by his illustrious predecessor, Origen. Gregory sustains that he could not accept the interpretation that Samuel could be really evoked. In his letter he sets forth with the conviction that a demon had deceived Saul and presented him with a fake prophecy. The reference to someone who was explaining the evocation as willed by God in order to clarify the indignity of Saul versus Samuel (2, 1-2) allows us to identify with reasonable certainty that the exegete with whom Gregory argues is Diodorus.⁷³

Gregory argues Diodorus' claim that "God permitted the prophet's soul to be brought up by magical arts of this kind", supposing there to be a "chasm" separating the righteous from the wicked (102-103). Neither willingly nor unwillingly could have Samuel crossed this chasm. The rest of Gregory's discussion is designed to demonstrate the demonic character of the story (2, 3-5).⁷⁴ The refusal seems motivated by the impossibility that the demon, "operator" of the necromancer, could have contact with Samuel in the afterlife. And so Gregory reasons that because Samuel was great among the saints and because sorcery is evil, he cannot believe that "... he who was included in repose could traverse that chasm which the impious could not bridge whether they willed it or not", which would also mean that 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. According to Gregory, a person established in the good cannot cross over to evil, and "... even though a person might wish to do this, the chasm does not permit it" (2, 4-5). "However", he continues, "the devil did not manifest himself to Saul; the phantoms which this woman's sorcery conjured up were visible only to her" (4, 2), thus underlying the fact that

⁷² R. Greer, M. Mitchell, op. cit., lxxvi- lxxvii.

⁷³ M. Simonetti, op. cit., 35-36. Gregory continues: "Some of our predecessors wished to consider Samuel's evocation [from the dead] as true. Furthermore, they offered their opinions on this topic because he had expressed grief over Saul's rejection (1Sam 15.35)... and they claimed that God had allowed the prophet's soul to be conjured up through magic (2, 2)".

⁷⁴ R. Greer, M. Mitchell, op. cit., lxxii.

Saul did not, in fact, see Samuel. If the man who appeared was Samuel, then they (the phantoms) were truly the ones that appeared to the necromancer. But the Scripture defines that "all the gods are demons".⁷⁵ And also, he asks himself whether the soul of Samuel was together with the demons, to which he replies with "Never let it be" (4: 4).⁷⁶ Gregory repeats the interpretation (a widespread one, and adhered to by Eustathius)⁷⁷ that the demon in the shape of Samuel would have appeared to Saul

Like many other Christian commentators on the passage, Gregory 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 through or within him. In the incident which remains particularly important for the bishop of Nissa, he refers to Balaam's freedom from association in Num 24. 1, emphasizing that " ... 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" (4, 7-9). He closes his letter to Bishop Theodotus by referring to "the manner by which the [Holy] Spirit is present before baptism" (6, 3). Gregory admits that the problem of how the Holy Spirit affects persons cannot be answered. Furthermore, no clear reference to this matter exists in Gregory's letter, but a concern of his is revealed, that the Holy Spirit is the Divine Person who is 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 demons, like in the episode of the Witch of Endor.⁷⁸

This outline of several important interpretations of the episode of necromancy is in no way exhaustive, as many other authors are omitted for the sake of methodological clarity. However, this remains a fruitful field of

⁷⁵ For this equalisation see footnote 57.

⁷⁶ Note that the Septuagint version has the word "gods" in the plural. "God" is indeed the word that the woman uses according BH, *'elôhîm*, the usual word for God himself or for angels, mighty men and beings. Baldwin comments, "the incident does not tell us anything about the veracity of claims to consult the dead on the part of mediums, because the indications are that this was an extraordinary event for her, and a frightening one because she was not in control" (J. Baldwin, J., *1 and 2 Samuel*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, IVP, 1988, 159).

⁷⁷ This similarity is insufficient to prove that Gregory was aware of Eustathius' text. However, there are no reliable data that may suggest that Gregory knew Origen's views, either.

⁷⁸ It should be noted that in his great exegetical works Gregory does not interpret the biblical text in a systematic way as an end in itself, as Origen, Eusebius and others did, but directs the interpretation in an external finality, which is usually by ascetic inspiration. In the interpretation of this episode he applies more or less the same process, only that this time the *a priori* is of a more doctrinal nature (M. Simonetti, op. cit., 37).

exploration, as a separate instance for the employment of hermeneutical keys, and as a biblical story which flourishes when put in theological context. It could also be analysed in a pluriperspective manner, under the banner of the ever-growing importance of joint inquiry of neighboring disciplines.