On the Witch of Endor (Homily on 1 Samuel 28)

Origen of Alexandria (c. AD 240)

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Section 1

The passages read are rather many, so to put it briefly, there are four sections. First, the continuation of the story about Nabal the Carmelite was read. After that came the account of David hiding among the Ziphites and being slandered by them. Saul came wanting to seize David and came to watch for his opportunity. David came upon Saul and, while Saul and his guards were asleep, took "the spear and the jar of water." After this he brought a rebuke against the men who had been trusted to guard Saul but had fallen asleep. Next came the third account: David fled "to Achish son of Ammach, king of Gath," and found great favor with him after his many deeds of courage. Achish says to David, "I will make you my chief bodyguard." After these came the famous account of the ventriloquist woman and Samuel. It tells how the ventriloquist seemed to bring up Samuel, and Samuel prophesies to Saul. There are four sections, and each contains no small number of matters. They could occupy those able to examine them for the time not of one gathering but of several. So let the bishop propose whichever of the four he wishes, and we will spend our time on it. "Let the matter of the ventriloquist be examined," he says.

Section 2

Some accounts do not touch us, while others are necessary for our hope. I say “accounts” because we have not yet come to the deeper, spiritual sense. That sense is useful to everyone who knows how to draw it out, or who can listen to it being drawn out. Now of the historical matters, some are useful to all and some are not useful to all. Take, for example, the account of Lot and his daughters. Whether it holds anything useful in its deeper sense, God knows, and so does anyone to whom he grants the grace to examine such matters. But if we take it as history, you might well ask what benefit I get from the story of Lot and his daughters. In the same way, what benefit is it to me to have the story of Judah and Tamar, and what happened to her, simply told? But the account of Saul and the ventriloquist touches everyone, and so its truth is necessary to the argument. For who, once released from this life, wants to be under the authority of a demon, so that a ventriloquist could bring him up? And here she brings up not just any one of the believers but Samuel the prophet. God says of him through Jeremiah, “Even if Moses and Samuel stood before my face, I would not listen to these.” The prophet also says of him in the hymns: “Moses and Aaron among his priests, and Samuel among those who call on his name. They called on the Lord, and he himself listened to them; he spoke to them in a pillar of cloud.” And elsewhere: “If Moses and Samuel should stand...” and so on. So if the ventriloquist brought up a man of such stature, who was under the earth, does a demon have authority over a prophetic soul? What shall we say? These things are written. Are they true, or are they not true? To say they are not true urges people toward unbelief, and [the blame] will come down on the heads of those who say it. But to say they are true raises a question and leaves us in perplexity.

Section 3

And yet we know of some of our own brothers who looked at this Scripture and said: “I do not believe the ventriloquist woman. She says she has seen Samuel; she is lying. Samuel was not brought up. Samuel is not speaking. Just as there are false prophets who say, ‘Thus says the Lord,’ when ‘the Lord has not spoken,’ so this spirit is lying too, when it promises to bring up whomever Saul commands.” For she says, “Whom shall I bring up?” and he says, “Bring up Samuel for me.” These same people, who say that this account is not true, go on like this. Samuel in Hades? Samuel brought up by a ventriloquist, the most outstanding of the prophets, who was dedicated to God from his birth, who was said in the temple to be coming before he was born, who as soon as he was weaned put on the ephod and the linen robe and became a priest of the Lord, to whom, while still a child, the Lord spoke and gave his word? Samuel in Hades? Samuel among those beneath the earth, the man who succeeded Eli, when Eli was condemned by providence for the sins and lawless acts of his sons? Samuel in Hades, whom God heard at the time of the wheat harvest, and he made rain come from heaven? Samuel in Hades, who spoke with such boldness: did he ever take anyone’s desired possession? He took no calf, he took no ox. He judged the people and condemned them, and he stayed poor. He never desired to take anything from such a great people. Why should Samuel be in Hades? Do you see what follows if Samuel is in Hades? Samuel in Hades? Then why not Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in Hades also? Samuel in Hades? Then why not Moses too, who is paired with Samuel in what was said: “Even if Moses and Samuel stand, I will not listen to them either”? Samuel in Hades? Why not Jeremiah also in Hades, to whom it was said: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you came out of the womb I sanctified you”? Isaiah in Hades, Jeremiah in Hades, all the prophets in Hades!

Section 4

This is what someone will say who does not want to accept a struggle over the question, claiming that it really was Samuel who was brought up. But we must be fair-minded in listening to the Scriptures. Since the argument rumbles against us in a persuasive way and could truly trouble and shake us, let us see whether the person who does not accept this has really understood the passage, or whether he argues from reputable premises but says things contrary to what is written. What, then, is written? "And the woman said, 'Whom shall I bring up for you?'" Whose voice is it that says, "The woman said"? Is it the voice of the Holy Spirit, by whom the Scripture is believed to have been written, or of someone else? For the narrating voice everywhere, as even those experienced in all kinds of writings know, is the voice of the author. And the author of these words is believed to be not a man but the Holy Spirit, who moved the men. So the Holy Spirit says: "And the woman said, 'Whom shall I bring up for you?' And he said, 'Samuel for me.'" Who says, "And the woman saw Samuel, and the woman cried out with a loud voice, saying"? To the man who has rumbled so much against us and said ten thousand things to show that Samuel was not in Hades, we will say: "The woman saw Samuel." The narrating voice said this. "And the woman cried out with a loud voice and said to Saul, 'Why have you deceived me? You are Saul.' And the king said to her, 'What is it? Do not be afraid. What have you seen?' And the woman said to Saul, 'I saw gods coming up out of the earth.' And he said to her, 'What is his appearance?' And she said to him, 'An old man coming up, and he is wrapped in the linen robe of the ephod.'" It says she saw even the priestly garment. But I know that the one who holds the other view will say: "No wonder, for Satan himself disguises himself as an angel of light."

"It is no marvel. For Satan himself disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no great thing if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness." But what is it that "the woman saw"? "Samuel." And why is it not said, "The woman saw a demon that pretended to be Samuel"? Instead it is written that "Saul knew that it was Samuel." If it was not Samuel, the text ought to say, "Saul supposed that it was Samuel." But as it stands the text says, "Saul knew," and no one knows what does not exist. So "Saul knew that it was Samuel," and "he fell on his face to the ground and worshiped." Then again we have the voice of the Scripture: "And Samuel said to Saul: Why have you angered me by bringing me up?" The Scripture says "Samuel said," and we ought to believe it. "Samuel said: Why have

you angered me by bringing me up?" Then Saul answers him: "The Philistines are making fierce war on me, and God has departed from me and no longer answers me, either by the hand of the prophets or in dreams. I have called you to make known to me what I should do." Again the Scripture does not put it any other way, but says that Samuel himself spoke: "Why do you ask me, when the Lord has departed from you? The Lord has become your opponent, and has made another man for himself, just as he spoke by my hand. He will tear the kingdom out of your hand." Is the speaker telling the truth or lying when he says, "The Lord has departed from you and has become your opponent and has made another for himself, as he spoke by my hand, and he will tear the kingdom from your hand"? Does a demon prophesy about the kingdom of Israel? What does the opposing argument say? You see how great a struggle there is in the word of God. It needs hearers who are able to listen to holy words, great and unspeakable, about the departure from this life. And the earlier points are still in doubt, and the later ones are not clear either.

Section 5

But the argument is still being examined. I say that both the history and the examination of it are necessary, so that we may see what holds us after our departure from this life. “He spoke by my hand, and the Lord will tear the kingdom out of your hand and give it to your neighbor David.” But a demon cannot know the kingdom of David, which was set up by the Lord. “Because you did not listen to the voice of the Lord, and did not carry out the anger of his wrath against Amalek.” Are these not words of God? Are they not true? For Saul truly did not do the will of the Lord, but “he spared the king of Amalek.” Samuel had rebuked Saul for this both before his death and at his departure: “And for this reason the Lord has done this thing to you today. And the Lord will also give Israel into the hands of the Philistines.” Can a demon prophesy about the whole people of God, that the Lord is about to hand Israel over? “The Lord will also hand over the camp of Israel into the hands of the Philistines. Hurry, Saul: tomorrow you and your sons will be with me.” Can a demon know this too, about a king who was anointed by a prophet, that tomorrow Saul would leave this life and his sons with him? “Tomorrow you and your sons will be with me.”

Section 6

These things show that what was said is not false, and that it is Samuel who has come up. So what is a ventriloquist [engastrimythos, "belly-speaker"] doing here? What is a ventriloquist doing in the raising of a righteous man's soul? The one who gave the first answer has run away from this. So that he would not seem to face a struggle over all the other questions raised at this place, he says: "It is not Samuel. The demon is lying, since Scripture cannot lie." But the words of Scripture are not spoken from the person of the demon; they are spoken from the person of the woman: "And the woman saw Samuel," and "Saul said." . . . [gap in the text] . . . the things spoken by Samuel. How, then, will the matters of the ventriloquist at this place be shown to be resolved? I ask the one who said the earlier things: is Samuel in Hades? And so on. Let him answer the question put to him: who is greater, Samuel or Jesus Christ? Who is greater, the prophets or Jesus Christ? Who is greater, Abraham or Jesus Christ? On this point none of those who have once reached the Lord will dare to say that Jesus Christ, the one proclaimed beforehand by the prophets, is not greater than the prophets. So when you confess that Jesus Christ is greater, was Christ in Hades, or did he never go there? Is it not true what is said in the Psalms, and explained by the apostles in their Acts, about the Savior's going down to Hades? It is written that the words in the fifteenth Psalm apply to him: "You will not abandon my soul to Hades, nor will you let your holy one see corruption." So Jesus Christ was in Hades. Are you afraid to say that he went down there too to prophesy, and to go to the other souls?

Then, if he answers that Christ did go down to Hades, I will say: what did Christ go down to do? To conquer, or to be conquered by death? He went down into those regions not as a slave of those who were there, but as a master to wrestle, as we said recently when we were explaining the twenty-first Psalm: "Many calves have surrounded me; fat bulls have encircled me. They opened their mouth against me like a lion tearing its prey and roaring. My bones were scattered." We remember, if we do remember the sacred writings; for I remember these words being spoken in the twenty-first Psalm. So the Savior went down in order to save. Did he go down there announced beforehand by the prophets, or not? But here he was announced beforehand by the prophets, and yet elsewhere he goes down without the prophets? Moses also proclaims that he will visit the human race, so that our Lord and Savior rightly says: "If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?" And

Christ has visited this life, and Christ is proclaimed beforehand as visiting this life. But if Moses prophesies him here, do you not want him to have gone down there as well, so that he might prophesy that Christ would come? What then? Moses, but not the prophets after him? Not Samuel? What is out of place in doctors going down to those who are ill? And what is out of place in the chief physician going down to those who are ill too? Those others were many doctors, but my Lord and Savior is the chief physician. For the desire within, which cannot be healed by others, he himself heals. The one that "had not been able to be healed by any" of the doctors, Christ Jesus heals. Do not be afraid, do not be amazed: Jesus has been in Hades, and the prophets before him, and they proclaim beforehand the coming of Christ.

Section 7

Now I want to say something else, drawn from the Scripture itself. Samuel comes up, and what does the woman say to Saul that she has seen? She does not say she has seen a man. She was frightened by what she saw. Whom does she see? "I saw gods," she says, "gods coming up out of the earth." And perhaps Samuel did not come up alone, even then, to prophesy to Saul. It is likely rather that, as it is said here, "with the holy you will be holy, and with the innocent man you will be innocent, and with the chosen you will be chosen." There are gatherings of saints with saints here, not of saints with sinners. And if ever the saints do spend time with sinners, it is so that they may save the sinners. In the same way, perhaps, when Samuel came up, either the holy souls of other prophets came up with him, or angels came up with him along with the spirits. Perhaps you will ask whether angels were present over those spirits. The prophet says, "the angel who speaks in me." And everything is filled with those who need salvation, and "they are all ministering spirits, sent out to serve for the sake of those who are going to inherit salvation." Why are you afraid to say that every place needs Jesus Christ? The one who needs Christ needs the prophets. For a place does not need Christ and yet have no need of those who prepare the way for Christ's coming and visit. And John: no one born of women was greater than he, according to the testimony of our Savior, who said, "among those born of women there is no one greater than John the Baptist." Do not be afraid to say that he went down to Hades, proclaiming my Lord beforehand, so as to announce in advance that he would come down there.

For this reason, when John was in prison and knew the departure that lay before him, he sent two of his disciples to ask, not "Are you the one who is coming?" (for he knew that), but "Are you the one who is coming, or are we to look for another?" He had seen Christ's glory. He had spoken much of his wonder. He was the first to testify to him: "The one who comes after me has come to be before me." He had seen his glory, "glory as of the only-begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth." Having seen such great things about Christ, he hesitates to believe. He doubts, and he does not say, "Tell him, 'You are the Christ.'" Some people today do not understand what was said, and they claim: "John, great as he was, did not know Christ, but the Holy Spirit had departed from him." But he did know him. He had testified to him before he was born, and he had leaped for joy at him when Mary came to him, as his mother testified to Mary, saying, "For behold, as soon as the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped with gladness." So then, this John,

who leaped before his birth, who said, “This is the one of whom I said, ‘The one who comes after me has come to be before me,’” and “The one who sent me said to me, ‘The one on whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining, this is the Son of God,’” does he, they say, no longer know Jesus Christ? He knew him even in the womb.

But because of the excess of his glory, he did something like what Peter did. What was like it? Peter knew something great about Christ. “Who am I?” “Who do people say that I am?” And Peter answered: this and that. “And you, what do you say?” “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” For this he is called blessed, because “flesh and blood did not reveal” it to him, “but the Father in heaven.” So because he had heard great things about Christ and had grand ideas of him, he did not accept the word spoken to him: “Look, we are going up to Jerusalem, and it will be fulfilled,” and “The Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the chief priests and elders, and be killed, and on the third day rise again.” He says, “God forbid it, Lord.” He knew great things about Christ, and was unwilling to accept the humbler side of him. Think of John as something like this. He was in prison, knowing great things about Christ. He had seen the heavens opened. He had seen the Holy Spirit coming down from heaven upon the Savior and remaining on him. Having seen such great glory, he wavered, and perhaps doubted whether one so glorious would come down even as far as Hades, as far as the abyss. For this reason he said, “Are you the one who is coming, or are we to look for another?”

Section 8

I have not wandered off the subject or forgotten what lies before us. What we want to establish is this: if all went down to Hades before Christ, and the prophets of Christ were Christ's forerunners, then Samuel also went down there. He did not go down as just anyone, but as a holy man. Wherever the holy person is, he is holy. Is Christ no longer Christ because he was once in Hades? Was he no longer Son of God because he came to be in the place beneath the earth, "so that every knee should bow in the name of Jesus Christ, of those in heaven, on earth, and under the earth"? So Christ was Christ even when he was below. To put it another way, though he was in the lower place, in his purpose he was above. So it is also with the prophets and Samuel, even if they go down to where the souls below are. They may be below in place, but they are below in purpose. I ask: [text corrupt, perhaps: did they prophesy the things above the heavens?] For my part, I cannot grant a demon such power that he prophesies about Saul, [about Samuel] and about the people of God, and prophesies about the kingdom of David, that he is going to reign. Let those who say these things consider what is true about the matter of place. They will not be able to show why a holy person could not go, for the sake of those in a bad state, into the place of those in a bad state. Let doctors go to the places where the soldiers lie sick, and let them enter where the stench of their wounds is. Love for people, which is the physician's calling, lays this duty on them. In the same way the Word laid this duty on the Savior and on the prophets: to come here, and to go down into Hades.

Section 9

One more thing must be added to the argument. Suppose it was Samuel, and suppose that when he came up the Holy Spirit left him and prophecy left him. Then the apostle is not telling the truth when he says: "For now I prophesy in part, and I know in part; but when the perfect comes, then the partial will be done away." So the perfect comes after this life. And whatever Isaiah prophesied, he prophesied in part, with all boldness. [As for what is said here, David has been attested as having reached the perfection of prophecy; the sense of this sentence is uncertain.] So Samuel did not lose the prophetic grace. Did he, then, use it as those who speak in tongues do, so as to say, "My spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful"? Yet the one who speaks in a tongue does not build up the church. Paul says that the one who prophesies builds up the church, and he says it in these very words: "The one who prophesies builds up the church." Now if "the one who prophesies builds up the church," and Samuel had the prophetic grace (for he had not lost it, since he had not sinned; the only person who loses the prophetic grace is the one who, after prophesying, has done things unworthy of the Holy Spirit, so that the Spirit abandons him and flees from his ruling center. David feared this after his sin, and said, "Do not take your Holy Spirit away from me"), then, if the Holy Spirit prophesies, and Samuel was a prophet, and "the one who prophesies builds up the church," whom does he build up? Does he prophesy in heaven? To whom? To angels, who have no need? "Those who are well have no need, but those who are ill." Some people do need his prophecy, for prophetic grace is never idle, and none of the gifts in the Holy Spirit is idle. So the souls of those who have fallen asleep (if I may put it so) needed the prophetic grace. Here, Israel had need of the prophet. But the one who has fallen asleep, who has been set free from this life, also had need of the prophets, so that the prophets in turn might proclaim to him the coming of Christ.

Besides, before the coming of my Lord Jesus Christ, it was impossible for anyone to go to where the tree of life is. It was impossible to get past those appointed to guard the way to the tree of life. "He appointed the cherubim and the flaming sword that turns every way to guard the way of the tree of life." Who could make a road there? Who could make anyone pass through the flaming sword? No one could make a road through the sea except [the pillar of fire, the pillar of light from God]. No one could make a road through the Jordan except Jesus. That Jesus was a type of the true God. In the same way, Samuel could not pass through the flaming sword, and neither could Abraham. This is why Abraham is seen

by the one who is being punished. The rich man, being in torments, lifts up his eyes and sees. It is from far off, but he sees, and he sees Lazarus in [Abraham's] bosom. So the patriarchs and prophets and all the others were waiting for the coming of my Lord Jesus Christ, so that he might open the way. "I am the way." "I am the door." He is the way to the tree of life, so that when you pass through fire, the flame will not burn you up. What fire is that? "He appointed the cherubim and the flaming sword that turns every way to guard the way of the tree of life." For this reason the blessed ones waited there, [carrying out the arrangement] but unable to go where the tree of life is, where the paradise of God is, where God is the gardener, where the blessed and chosen and holy ones of God [are planted].

Section 10

So there is no stumbling block in this passage. Everything in it is written wonderfully, and it is understood by whomever God reveals it to. But we who have come at the end of the ages have something extra. What is that extra? If we leave this life as good and upright people, not carrying the burdens of sin with us, we too will pass through the flaming sword. We will not go down to the place where those who fell asleep before Christ's coming waited for him. We will pass through, and the flaming sword will not harm us at all. "The fire itself will test what sort of work each person has done. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, but he himself will be saved, yet only as through fire." So we will pass through. We have something more, and having lived well we cannot depart badly. The ancients did not say this, nor did the patriarchs or the prophets, but we can say it if we live well: "It is far better to depart and be with Christ." So, since we have something more and a great gain in having come at the end of the ages, we receive the denarius first. For you hear in the parable that he began to give out the denarius starting with the last, while the first supposed they would receive more. So you, who came last, are first, and you receive your wages from the master of the house, in Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom be glory and power forever and ever. Amen.

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