Notes related to 1 Samuel 28 from Janet Reinke, Feb. 14, 2021

Is there anything else in scripture like the story of the Medium of Endor in 1 Samuel 28?

The gospels have well-known stories about people being brought back from the dead, including Lazarus of Bethany, the daughter of Jairus, and Jesus himself. These stories are different from 1 Samuel in that the resurrected people return to bodily life.

The Hebrew scriptures take a dim view of necromancy, that is, communicating with the dead. Lev 20:6 is typical: “’I will set my face against anyone who turns to mediums and spiritists to prostitute themselves by following them, and I will cut them off from their people...” It’s interesting that the attitude is not that this is ineffective nonsense. Necromancy is compared to prostitution – by engaging in this activity, one is being unfaithful to the LORD, the one God.

Given the prohibition, the Hebrew Bible doesn’t say much about what communication with the dead involved. These passages from First Isaiah shed some light on people’s beliefs at the time they were written, probably around 700 BCE:

1. In Isaiah 19:3, the prophet describes how the enemy will turn to necromancy in despair: “The Egyptians will lose heart, and I will bring their plans to nothing; they will consult the idols and the spirits of the dead, the mediums and the spiritists.”
2. Isaiah 8: 19 advises people to communicate with God, not the dead: “When someone tells you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living?”
3. Isaiah 14: 9-10 imagines a greeting by the shades when a powerful tyrant is killed: “Sheol beneath is stirred up to meet you when you come, it rouses the shades to greet you, all who were leaders of the earth; it raises from their thrones all who were kings of the nations. All of them will speak and say to you: 'You too have become as weak as we! You have become like us!'”
4. In Isaiah 29:4, in a prophecy against David’s city, its future is compared to a ghost called up by a medium: “Brought low, you will speak from the ground; your speech will mumble out of the dust. Your voice will come ghostlike from the earth; out of the dust your speech will whisper.”

Jesus is an exception to the rule against communication with the dead. He spoke with Moses and Elijah. Nonetheless, in the story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16: 29-31), Jesus speaks of the futility of communication with the dead from Abraham’s (and Jesus’?) point of view: “But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.' And he said, 'No, father Abraham; but if some one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead.'"

Leaving aside the spirit world, I find an affinity between the stories of the Medium of Endor and the Woman with Ointment.

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|  | The Medium of Endor | The Woman with Ointment |
| Scripture reference | 1 Samuel 28: 5-25 | Matthew 26: 6-8, Mark 14: 1-9 |
| Town | Endor | Bethany |
| Place | The medium’s house | Simon the Leper’s house |
| Setting | Night, in disguise | At the table |
| Unrecognized king | Saul | Jesus |
| Woman | Unnamed medium | Unnamed woman |
| Others present | Two of Saul’s men | Jesus’ disciples |
| Woman’s gift | Killed the fatted calf | Poured out an expensive alabaster jar of ointment |
| Reproach | Saul had cut off the mediums and spiritists from the land. The medium: “Why have you set a trap for my life to bring about my death?” | Disciples: Why this waste? The ointment might have been sold and money given to the poor. |
| Reassurance | Saul: “As surely as the LORD lives, you will not be punished for this.” | Jesus: “Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me.” |
| Foreshadowing | Ghost of Samuel: “Tomorrow you and your sons will be with me.” | Jesus: “She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burying.” |
| Resolution | Saul and his men ate. That same night they got up and left. | Wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her. |

All scripture quotes are taken from the Revised Standard Version.