

THE WITCH OF ENDOR

AND

MODERN SPIRITUALISM.

A SERMON

PREACHED IN ST. PAUL'S, MELBOURNE, ON SUNDAY, 10TH
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BY

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S E R M O N .

“For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.”—*EPH. vi. 12.*

ON the southern slopes of Hermon, and on the opposite range of Mount Gilboa, the watchfires of the rival armies of Israel and Philistia flamed and flickered. There was to be a pitched battle on the morrow, and the camps were buried in profound repose, when three men, one disguised (as far as he could be disguised, for his gigantic stature would almost ensure his recognition), three men—Saul and two faithful adherents—toiled through the darkness and silence to a cavern at Endor.

Saul was reduced to the last extremity. The end was very near now.

The massacre of Abimelech and the community of Nob had been closely followed by that of the Gibeonites. In vain had the king inquired of God. There was no response. “The Lord answered him not, neither by dreams, nor by urim, nor by prophets.” The high priest, on whose breastplate the mystic jewels of Urim and Thummim glittered and sparkled, was murdered. Samuel the Prophet was dead. There was no one to

tell him the interpretation of his dreams, which were as weird and troubled as those of Richard III. on the eve of the fatal field of Bosworth. Like another murderous king, Saul might have said—

“I am in blood
Stepp’d in so far that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o’er.”*

Saul, “bent to know by the worst means the worst,” determined to hear his fate from the lips of the Witch of Endor. He who had driven the possessors of familiar spirits and wizards out of the kingdom, in his terror and desolation was guilty of a strange inconsistency, for he tried to learn by the arts of magic, which he affected to disbelieve and to despise, that which the oracles of God refused to tell him.

In the dead of night he and his two companions reached the witch’s cavern.

There is a striking similarity, in many points, between Saul’s midnight interview with the Witch of Endor, and Macbeth’s second meeting with the Weird Sisters, whose fatal prophecy had lured him to his sin.

Observe, first, that both kings wanted to hear their fate, not from the witches, but from the spirits, whom the witches were supposed to be able to bring up. “I pray thee,” said Saul to the witch, “I pray thee, divine unto me by the familiar spirit, and bring him up whom I shall name unto thee.”

Macbeth, in reply to the first witch, who asks, “Say, if thou’dst rather hear it from our mouths, or from our masters?”† answers, with a mixture of terror and curiosity, “Call ’em. Let me see ’em.”

Saul, in reply to the Witch of Endor’s question, “Whom shall I bring up unto thee?” answers, “Bring me up Samuel,” and the sacred narrative continues, “And when the woman saw Samuel she cried with a loud voice.” At the same instant she seems to

* *Macbeth*, Act III., Scene 4.

† *Macbeth*, Act IV., Scene 5.

have penetrated Saul's disguise, for she asks him, "Why hast thou deceived me, for thou art Saul."

In that supreme moment, Saul's curiosity overpowers his fear of what was about to happen, and his hatred and distrust of the witch, for he said unto her, "Be not afraid, for what sawest thou?" And the woman said unto Saul, "I see gods ascending out of the earth."

If you will take the trouble to compare this description with that of Shakespeare, you will see that, answering to the majestic shapes evoked by the Witch of Endor, there arose at the call of the weird sisters, first the armed head, then the child crowned, and then the show of kings, followed by the ghost of Banquo.

Macbeth learns his doom from the crowned child—Saul his, from an old man "covered with a mantle."

When the King of Israel heard the awful doom that should fall on his kingdom and his house—when to shameful defeat was added this terrible prophecy of his death, issuing from the lips of the apparition, "To-morrow shalt thou and thy sons be with me"—the fated king, suffering the last extremity of horror and despair, faint with fasting (for he had eaten no bread all the day nor all the night), "fell straightway all along on the earth."

The giant form was prostrate now—the strayed and erring spirit was in its helplessness at rest—the chill shadow of death had fallen on him already. He knew and felt that the ghosts of those he had slain

"Would sit heavy on his soul to-morrow,"

and that there was nothing left for him but to go into the battle and die.

Two questions of great interest arise out of this strange and terrible incident in Saul's life—first, did Samuel really appear at all? second, if he did, was he called up by the Witch of Endor?

On the first question, I think the narrative makes it clear that Saul did not see the ghost, because he asks the witch, "What form is he of?" and she said, "An old man cometh up, and he is covered with a mantle." "And Saul perceived (from her descrip-

tion) that it was Samuel, and he stooped with his face to the ground, and bowed himself." I venture to submit that this account is quite consistent with Saul's never seeing the ghost at all. Secondly, did the witch see it? Bear in mind that Saul was a persecutor of witches. Bear in mind that Saul had said, "Bring up Samuel." The woman knew, therefore, whom he wanted to see. She had probably frequently seen Samuel alive, and would, of course, be able from memory to describe him as "an old man covered with a mantle," the usual garment of prophets. She would be quite sure that had she admitted her inability to raise the ghost of the man Saul wished to see, she would have admitted that she was an impostor; and that being so, the murderer of the priests would have thought no more of killing her than of crushing a fly. Fear, therefore, may have led her to invent the appearance of the ghost, to retain her power and influence over the king as a witch—as many and many a witch has done since.

The prophecy of the apparition presents a greater difficulty, as, if the ghost didn't come up, where did the prophecy come from? The answer is, may it not have proceeded from the King's overwrought brain? He had been more or less mad all his life, he was weak and exhausted from long fasting, and he was within a few hours of his death. Now it has been said, and by some believed, that the brain of a man who is about to die, when not clouded or obscured by illness, is more susceptible of vivid impressions than when in the midst of life. The diseased and clouded brain of Saul may have cleared and brightened on the threshold of immortality, and the shadow of his approaching end, and of the destruction of his kingdom, may have, as it were, intuitively presented themselves to his mind, without a visitation from the other world at all.

This fact in psychological science, viz., that in men and women of that excitable, nervous temperament which is known as "hysterical," the expectation of a certain result is often sufficient to evoke it, is ably illustrated by Dr. Carpenter in his lectures on mesmerism and spiritualism. Saul had made up his mind—a mind disordered and weakened by intervals of insanity, by misfortune, by watching, over-

fatigue, and long fasting—Saul had made up his mind that he was to hear his fate from the lips of the man whom all his life he had feared and believed in, and he was, in a word, “self-deceived and spell-bound by the predominance of a self-conceived idea.”

This is a view of the subject which may be fairly urged, without putting a forced construction on the Scripture account. But if we take the other view, viz.: That an appearance, or ghost of Samuel, actually rose out of the earth, and prophesied to Saul his death and the destruction of his kingdom, then the question arises—Was this appearance the work of God, or of the witch of Endor? Now, I, for my part, don't believe the witch had anything more to do with it than any one who is sitting in this church. To begin with: If she saw Samuel at all, she didn't expect to see him, for she “cried with a loud voice.” This of itself is conclusive to my mind; but, if it were not, I am unable to find, either in Scripture or out of it, any authenticated instance of power given to man to call back the spirits of the departed from another world.

We are at the present time, or have been till very lately, troubled with persons calling themselves *Spiritualists*, who assert that they have the power of doing this, and to admit that such a power was possessed and exercised by the Witch of Endor would be conceding a point in their favour, which I submit we are not bound to concede, and which, therefore, I should be very sorry to concede, unless I were obliged.

The impression on my mind, after a very careful perusal of the narrative, is that the witch had nothing whatever to do with the appearance of Samuel (if he appeared at all); and whether he appeared or not is a question surrounded with difficulties, and I submit that we are entitled to take either view, without being liable to a charge of scepticism, or being in the slightest degree doubters of the revealed truths of Holy Scripture. There have been shams and impostures in all ages. The “false Christs and false prophets” of whom our blessed Lord speaks abounded when St. Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians, from which our text is taken, and they abound now. I look on Spiritualism (or, as

its professors call it, Spiritism) as an unmitigated sham; but while I so regard it, perhaps it would be considered as savouring of intolerance, were we to ask that its votaries should be placed by the law on the same footing as conjurors and fortune-tellers, who spirit money out of the pockets of the ignorant and foolish.

Don't let me be misunderstood here. I don't deny the existence of supernatural power, and supernatural agency. All I say is, that God has not given us the control or the knowledge of such agency. I think such agency does exist, and our text encourages the belief in such existence; but don't let us, on that account, allow ourselves to become the prey of impostors, who affect the possession of knowledge and power, God has in His wisdom not permitted us to possess. The knowledge and the power may come later. It may be vouchsafed to us in this world, or in another. We may be like children, groping about with our eyes bandaged, groping about on the verge of a very mighty secret, which may one day be revealed to us. But that it has not been revealed yet, I do sincerely believe, and those who believe the contrary, are in danger of falling into this fatal error,—while they are trying, like the Witch of Endor, to bring up gods out of the earth, they ignore or forget the eternal, immortal, invisible God, who dwelleth in the Heavens.

The Ephesians, to whom St. Paul wrote the solemn, somewhat mysterious words of our text, were especially addicted to the practice of the art of magic, and of the worship of Artemis, or, as she is called in the Acts, "The great goddess Diana." Very different from the chaste and beautiful ideal of the Greeks, the Ephesian Artemis was a singular mixture of spiritualism and sensuality. Witchcraft and the worship of the goddess were inextricably interwoven, and the infant church at Ephesus, dwelling under the shadow of the temple of the great goddess Diana, was in especial danger of being lost and destroyed; of being swallowed up in the baneful superstition that prevailed throughout the city. "The prince of the power of the air" had swooped down on Ephesus, and had overshadowed her with his wings; and, fulfilled with this idea, the Apostle wrote, "For we wrestle,

not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (or, to translate his words more literally), "For the adversaries with whom we wrestle, are not flesh and blood, but they are the principalities, the powers, the kings of this present darkness, the company of evil spirits in the heavens."*

No doubt, "there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy." Life and death, and the intermediate state, and the ultimate destination of us all, are mysteries so profound, that to rush in and strive to raise the veil, that God has, in His wisdom, drawn, would be as hopeless as it would be foolish.

We must pray for grace and strength to strive (or, to use the Apostle's phrase, to "wrestle") against this unwholesome longing to penetrate that which is hidden from us, feeling sure that He who came on earth to teach us all things necessary for us to know, would have imparted this knowledge to us, had it been wise or right that we should know it. There was no Spiritualism, no dallying with the powers of darkness, in His pure, plain, practical teaching; and in bequeathing to us His word and His truth—a priceless legacy, guarded with anxious care by a long line of apostles and prophets—He has enabled us to withstand those powers in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

The art of magic entered largely into His temptation. "The prince of the power of the air" urged him to do what witches pretended to do—to create food at will, to sail through the air, and, by the offer of a spell as powerful as Aladdin's lamp, to possess "all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them." And as He was tempted, so are we.

But if we look to Spiritualism to give us our hearts' desire, we shall be grievously disappointed. The spirits never tell us anything we want to know, anything that will be of real use to us. The drivell of an idiot is sound sense as compared with the rubbish

* Conybeare and Howson's Translation.

that their tables and slates profess to reveal to us ; and it is sad and humiliating to think that persons who would be very angry if we were to question their possession of the ordinary faculties of reason and reflection, should be deluded by it. Let us be satisfied—God has bestowed divers good and perfect gifts upon us ; but He has not included in those gifts the power of foretelling the future or calling back the spirits of the past.

God grant that if we are tempted to arrogate this power to ourselves, or are in danger of becoming the dupes of others, we may remember the words of our blessed Lord in the wilderness, " Get thee hence, Satan : for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve."

