

Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa, A Letter concerning the Sorceress, to Bishop Theodosios

[Christ] says to his disciples, "Seek and you will find" (Mt 7.7). That is, he will reveal himself both to persons who are engaged in a diligent search in accord with this command and to those persons who are seeking [faith's] hidden mysteries. He who made this promise does not lie, for he has freely lavished upon us the magnificence of his gifts which transcend all our supplications. Therefore, "Attend to reading, Timothy, my son" (1Tm 4.13). I believe it is appropriate to speak of your goodness using the great Paul's words in order that the Lord may bestow upon you understanding in all things (2Tm 2.7). In this fashion you will be rich in every word and in all knowledge (1Cor 1.5). Now allow me to attend to your request since I have thought of suggesting a few words which pertain to what the Lord had recommended to you. In this way you may learn that we are to serve each other through love and by carrying out each other's will.

Since, a proper understanding of Samuel is at this moment very important, with God's help and to the best of my ability, I will now offer a few words. Some of our predecessors wished to consider as true Samuel's evocation [from the dead]. Furthermore, they offered their opinions on this topic because he had expressed grief over Saul's rejection (1Sam 15.35). Samuel continually besought the Lord saying, "Do you condone the witchcraft which Saul had banished from the people because it had deceived them?" For this reason the prophet was greatly vexed over the fact that the people had preferred a rejected person instead of the Lord. They [i.e., 'some of our predecessors'] claimed that God had allowed the prophet's soul to be conjured up through magic. Thus Samuel might behold the falsehood which God attributed to him because he expressed indignation when the sorcery had conjured up his soul.

I next turn my attention to the chasm [Lk 16.26] mentioned in the Gospel which the patriarch [Abraham] said was established between evil and good persons. More accurately, the Lord of the patriarch said that the damned could not pass over to the repose of the saints, nor could the saints pass over to them. I do not accept opinions with regard to this matter as true; only the Gospel should be trusted. Because Samuel was great among the saints and sorcery is evil, I do not believe that he who was included in [the patriarch's] repose could traverse that chasm which the impious could not bridge whether they willed it or not. Thus 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. For a person established in the good cannot cross over to evil; even though a person might wish to do this, the chasm does not permit it.

What, then, is our opinion of these matters? The common enemy which is hostile to human nature watches man with the utmost attention. What are those occasions where a man can strike some one else, thereby depriving him of the life-giving God and freely abandoning him to destruction? Persons who are pre-occupied with the body and who want knowledge of the future, means by which they hope to escape

evil or follow pleasure, are unmindful of God. In their treachery, demons devise many ways [to thwart such unmindfulness]: omens, divinizations, oracles, rites to conjure up ghosts, ecstasies, possessions, inspirations and many other tricks. Any premonition considered as true but is the result of deception reveals the cunning demon, since this person has mistaken a false opinion for a correct one.

Furthermore, the devil resembles an eagle in flight. He closely watches us in order to frustrate any hope and expectation we may have; he wishes to excite us, make our ears itch, and to divert our attention. The malevolent devil imparts these signs to persons whom he has deceived through close observation. And so, demonic worship is a way of turning men away from God because they believe that demons are responsible for this action.

One such deception is sorcery [eggastromuthos], a form of magic believed to attract departed souls to life on high. Therefore when Saul despaired at being saved from the alien tribes arrayed against him, he sought deliverance from Samuel (1Sam 28.4-5). Once the devil deceived the woman by becoming friendly with her and by using her sorcery, he assumed numerous dark forms. However, he did not manifest himself to Saul; the phantoms which this woman's sorcery conjured up were visible only to her. At first the demon made his appearances believable while concealing (28.12) his true person. This surprised Saul since the woman who had been deceived did not know the true power of sorcery. Because of her ignorance, she claimed to have seen gods ascending (28.13) and a man standing upright clothed with a double cloak.

How can servility to the letter of the text concur with the record of history? If Samuel is truly a vision, the sorcerer indeed sees gods. Scripture says of demons who are gods, "All the gods of the nations are demons" (Ps 96.5). Are we to equate Samuel's soul with the demons? Of course not. But any power obedient to demonic sorcery and other spirits associated with the deceived woman have indeed mislead Saul. However, she conjured up the demons through sorcery, that is, the form which Saul sought had simulated [Samuel's] voice. Also the response which the woman uttered in the spirit of prophecy seemed to be in response to an appearance. The demon rebuked [Saul] and did not want him to know the truth: "Tomorrow you and Jonathan will be with me" (28.19). If this were truly Samuel, how could he be associated with evil? But it is clear that instead of Samuel, the evil demon had appeared and said that Saul would be with him.

If scripture shows that it was Samuel who was speaking, we should not alter the correct understanding of the text; however, keep in mind that scripture intends these words for anyone who believes that Samuel [is speaking]. We have learned that scripture frequently relates something apparent instead of that which is real. For example, refer to Balaam: "I will hear what God will speak in me" (Num 22.19). Later on Balaam knew that he did not please God by cursing the Israelites: "He did not go, as it was his custom, to look for omens" (24.1). For it was presumptuous of Balaam to think that he could speak with the true God. Scripture further shown that Balaam confused the true God with his thoughts about him. Because of this, the demon who appeared as Samuel and simulated his words, had cleverly imitated

prophecy.

Inquiry concerning Elias is unnecessary since you have failed to mention him. God ordered him to drink from the brook (1Kg 17.4), and secretly instructed him to rescind the prophet's sentence against the Israelites. [Elias] alone drank from the brook which later ran dry. He had no other means to slack his thirst because [God] refused his request for rain, yet the brook continued to provide him with water. Ravens also served the prophet by providing food, an example which the true God used to show the trust many persons have in his assistance. These ravens did not bring defiled bread nor meat used for idols. Impious persons employ means as these as we see in the attempt to treacherously persuade Elias, for it is not fair to hold as liable for punishment persons looking to God. If bread is brought to him early in the morning and meat in the evening, this example mysteriously symbolizes enthusiasm for the virtuous life. We should consider early morning as pertaining to the commencement of a life according to virtue. We can thus easily understand Paul when he speaks of something more perfect which is held in store for those who are perfect: "Solid food is for the perfect, or those who have their faculties exercised" (Heb 5.14).

You are not ignorant of Moses' veil, reference to which may be found in Paul's epistle to the Corinthians (1Cor 3.13-18).

As for sacrifices, you may find information by more carefully examining the book of Leviticus in its entirety and by attending to the law contained there. Thus you may comprehend the part [of the text] along with the whole, for a part cannot be clearly distinguished apart from the entire text.

Your questions about the power of evil do not offer a clear solution because the angels do not associate with that archangel who became a deserter. An army in battle array clearly requires leadership. In this manner the question with regard to how the one can participate in the many is solved, for soldiers who have deserted their leader have a certain bearing upon the matter at hand.

Last of all, we send to your reverence, with God's assistance, our conclusion (I mean the manner by which the Spirit is present before baptism) which contains further reflections and thoughts with regard to the text.

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