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Necromancy in the Hebrew Bible and Its Ancient near Eastern Context: Composition, Ritual Knowledge, and Religious Authority

David Villar Vegas

Department of Hebrew and Aramaic Studies, Complutense University of Madrid, 28040 Madrid, Spain; dvillar@ucm.es

Abstract

Necromancy is consistently condemned in the received form of the Hebrew Bible, yet the same corpus preserves ritual knowledge and conceptual frameworks that are difficult to reconcile with the idea that consultation of the dead was always foreign to Israelite religion. This article re-examines necromantic practices diachronically and comparatively, distinguishing necromancy from the broader care and veneration of the dead and assessing the archaeological evidence for continued relations with deceased kin. Particular attention is given to Deuteronomy 18:9–14 and 1 Samuel 28 as literary witnesses to changing strategies of religious authorization. The comparison with West Semitic and wider Ancient Near Eastern evidence is used cautiously, to establish cultural plausibility rather than direct dependence. The analysis suggests that the biblical rejection of necromancy is better understood as a process of progressive delegitimation of a competing channel of privileged knowledge than as proof that the practice was originally foreign to Israel. At the same time, the evidence does not justify reconstructing a single, uniform Israelite cult of the dead. Composition, redaction, archaeological continuity, and ritual knowledge together provide a more secure basis for historical reconstruction.

Keywords: necromancy; Hebrew Bible; Ancient Israel; Ancient Near East; divination; cult of the dead; 1 Samuel 28; Deuteronomy 18; ritual knowledge

1. Introduction

Necromancy occupies an uncomfortable position in the study of ancient Israelite religion. In the received biblical text, consultation of the dead belongs to a group of practices that are rejected with unusual clarity. Deuteronomy 18:9–14 places the consulter of ghosts and spirits and the seeker of the dead among the practices that Israel is not to learn from the nations. Leviticus likewise condemns recourse to the *ʾôbôt* and *yiddeʿonîm*, and the Deuteronomistic and Chronistic presentations of Saul associate his visit to the woman of En-Dor with the collapse of his kingship (Lev 19:31; 20:6, 27; Deut 18:10–11; 1 Sam 28:3–19; 1 Chr 10:13–14). Read synchronically, the conclusion seems straightforward: necromancy is a prohibited, non-Yahwistic mode of divination.

The historical problem begins when these prohibitions are read against the evidence that the texts themselves preserve. A prohibition demonstrates that a practice was regarded as unacceptable by the author or redactor who formulated the prohibition; it does not demonstrate that the practice was absent from the society being addressed. This distinction is especially important in a corpus whose legal, prophetic, and narrative materials were

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composed and revised over long periods. My earlier analysis of Deuteronomy 18 argued that the list of condemned practices cannot simply be treated as an ethnographic catalogue of foreign customs. The terminology is technical, the list is neither fully consistent nor exhaustive, and several activities presented as foreign are elsewhere embedded in Israelite narratives and institutions (Villar Vegas 2018, pp. 36–39). The same caution applies in the opposite direction to positive retrospective claims. Genesis 26:5, for example, portrays Abraham as having kept YHWH's 'commandments, statutes, and laws'; this literary-theological characterization cannot by itself establish the historical practice of the period in which Abraham is set. Normative approval and normative prohibition must therefore be distinguished from historical reconstruction in the same way.

The same methodological problem affects the study of death. Archaeological evidence from Judahite tombs indicates persistent provisioning of the dead throughout the Iron Age, while biblical texts preserve memories of feeding, naming, protecting, and consulting deceased persons. Bloch-Smith therefore argued that the material and textual evidence must be read together rather than allowing the prohibitions to define the entire religious landscape (E. M. Bloch-Smith 1992, pp. 213–14). More recently, I have stressed that care for dead kin and necromancy should not be collapsed into a single phenomenon. The former is organized around continuing relations with deceased family members; the latter is directed toward the acquisition of information from the dead for the benefit of the living (Villar Vegas 2025, pp. 53–57).

This article develops that distinction and asks a more specific question: how did a practice that could function as a means of obtaining divine or privileged knowledge come to be represented as an illegitimate alternative to prophecy and other authorized forms of divination? The answer cannot be obtained by collecting every biblical reference to the dead and arranging them as if they belonged to one moment. Nor can it be obtained by treating every similarity with Ugaritic or Mesopotamian evidence as proof of direct borrowing. What is required is a diachronic reading in which legal formulations, narrative reworking, archaeological continuities, and comparative evidence are allowed to remain different kinds of evidence.

The argument advanced here is that the most economical explanation of the evidence is not that necromancy was imported into an otherwise insulated Yahwistic system and then rejected. Rather, the biblical record is compatible with a longer process in which consultation of the dead formed part of a broader repertoire of divinatory practices and was progressively delegitimized as particular priestly, prophetic, and Deuteronomistic conceptions of authorized mediation gained prominence. This does not mean that every Israelite accepted necromancy, that it was practiced everywhere, or that a single institution controlled it. It means only that the later categorical opposition between Yahwistic revelation and consultation of the dead should not be projected uncritically into earlier periods.

2. Materials and Methods

The study combines literary, redaction-critical, archaeological, and comparative analysis. The primary biblical passages are Deuteronomy 18:9–14, 1 Samuel 28:3–25, 2 Kings 21:6 and 23:24, Isaiah 8:19–20, and 1 Chronicles 10:13–14, with additional references where they clarify the relation between the dead, divination, and funerary practice. The analysis also takes into account the broader social location of religious specialists and the compositional complexity of the legal and narrative materials (García López 1984, pp. 289–308; Grabbe 1995, pp. 128–40). Biblical references are given by book, chapter, and verse; translations of Hebrew expressions are my own unless otherwise indicated.

The comparative evidence selected here concentrates on the materials most directly relevant to the historical problem. Archaeological arguments are taken principally from

Bloch-Smith's study of Judahite burials and her later methodological discussion of the 'cult of the dead' (E. M. Bloch-Smith 1992; E. Bloch-Smith 2002), together with Sonia's reassessment of ritual care for dead kin and its relationship to necromancy (Sonia 2020, pp. 25–128). The relation between Ugaritic evidence and Israelite conceptions is evaluated through the critical review by Smith and Bloch-Smith (1988), precisely because that study exposes the danger of constructing historical continuity from parallels whose chronological, geographical, or semantic connection has not been demonstrated. The literary and redactional analysis of 1 Samuel 28 is compared with Arnold's reconstruction of a pre-Deuteronomistic narrative subsequently reshaped by Deuteronomistic terminology (Arnold 2004, pp. 205–7), Gass's literary-critical analysis of the chapter (Gass 2012, pp. 153–85), Schmidt's comparison with Ancient Near Eastern necromantic traditions (Schmidt 1995, pp. 111–29), and Uusimäki's recent reading of Saul's journey as a search for specialized knowledge (Uusimäki 2025, pp. 155–65).

Three criteria govern the evaluation of scholarly claims. First, a prohibition is treated as evidence for the position of the prohibiting voice, not automatically as evidence for the origin, frequency, or social location of the prohibited practice. Second, a parallel is not treated as a genealogy unless the proposed transmission can be supported independently. Third, arguments are assessed diachronically: a later redactional judgment cannot be assumed to describe the religious meaning of an earlier narrative or practice. These criteria are particularly important in a field in which circular reasoning can arise easily, for example when a practice is called 'Canaanite' because a biblical polemic calls it foreign and the same polemic is then used as evidence that the practice must have originated outside Israel.

3. Results

3.1. Necromancy and the Cult of the Dead: A Necessary Distinction

The first result of the comparison is terminological. 'Cult of the dead' is often used so broadly that it ceases to distinguish between burial, commemoration, offerings, ancestor veneration, and necromancy. Bloch-Smith noted the instability of modern definitions and preferred a practical description centered on ritual activities associated with the dead, while also observing that the older anthropological category could carry assumptions about what counts as religion (E. Bloch-Smith 2002, pp. 139–41). This warning remains useful. The existence of food vessels in tombs, memorial inscriptions, or care for ancestral bones does not by itself prove that the deceased were consulted for information.

The archaeological record nevertheless matters because it demonstrates that the dead remained socially and ritually significant. Bloch-Smith's survey of more than three hundred Judahite interments identified provisions for food and drink, lamps, jewelry, tools, personal objects, and amuletic items. The pattern continues through the period of the monarchy and does not display the abrupt break that would be expected if official prohibitions had immediately transformed mortuary behavior (E. M. Bloch-Smith 1992, pp. 214–16, 222–24). The most cautious inference is therefore that relations between living families and deceased members were persistent, diversified, and not reducible to the later legal rhetoric.

This background is important for necromancy, but it should not be confused with it. The biblical necromantic texts are not primarily concerned with feeding or remembering kin. Their central problem is access to knowledge. In my previous discussion, I defined necromancy as the acquisition of privileged information from the dead for the benefit of the living and noted that the relevant passages lack the familial concerns characteristic of care for deceased kin (Villar Vegas 2025, p. 55). The distinction helps explain why the earliest concentrated opposition may have targeted consultation before it targeted other forms of ritual care for the dead.

The distinction also prevents a second error. If all practices involving the dead are grouped together, the prohibition of one can be made to stand for the rejection of all. Yet the biblical evidence does not support such a simple development. Smith and Bloch-Smith argued that explicit criticism of necromancy emerges earlier than criticism of feeding the dead and that other forms of care remained visible even after legal opposition had developed (Smith and Bloch-Smith 1988, pp. 281–82). Whether every detail of their chronology is accepted or not, the sequence is methodologically significant: the object of the earliest polemic appears to be a channel of inquiry.

3.2. Deuteronomy 18:9–14: Prohibition and the Reorganization of Mediation

Deuteronomy 18:9–14 is frequently treated as the starting point for a definition of biblical necromancy, but it is better read as part of a larger argument about legitimate mediation. The passage stands within Deuteronomy 16:18–18:22, a section that regulates judges, kings, priests and Levites, and prophets. O'Brien has emphasized how this block addresses the organization of authority in the new social setting envisaged by Deuteronomy, while García López's redaction-critical analysis illustrates the compositional complexity of the prophetic section (O'Brien 2008, pp. 155–72; García López 1984, pp. 289–308). In this setting, the list of prohibited specialists is immediately followed by the promise of a prophet like Moses. The contrast is structural. The problem is not simply that certain techniques are irrational or ineffective; it is that they represent unauthorized routes to knowledge (Villar Vegas 2018, pp. 37–38).

This context complicates the common claim that Deuteronomy merely excludes foreign magic. The list contains a series of technical expressions whose exact referents remain debated, including *qōsēm qĕsāmîm*, *mĕʿōnēn*, *mĕnaḥēš*, *mĕkaššēp*, *ḥōbēr ḥāber*, *šo͗ʾēl ʾôb wĕ-yidde͗ʿonî*, and *dōrēš ʾel-hammētîm*. The uncertainty is not incidental: even terms conventionally grouped together may preserve different semantic histories. The association of *yidde͗ʿonî* with *ʾôb*, for example, has generated proposals connecting the term with the ancestral dead or with a designation of the dead more generally (Van der Toorn et al. 1999, p. 907; Villar Vegas 2018, p. 42). The density of specialized vocabulary shows that the author knew a differentiated ritual field. At the same time, the list does not offer a neutral classification. Its arrangement is polemical, and its framing assigns the whole complex to the 'abominations' of the nations (Deut 18:9–12).

In my earlier study I argued that this rhetoric of foreignness should not be mistaken for proof of foreign origin. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, comparable ritual acts can be performed by Israelite figures or can be narrated positively when subordinated to YHWH. The contrast between the Egyptian ritual specialists and Aaron in Exodus is a particularly clear example: formally comparable acts are named and evaluated differently according to the authority under which they are performed (Villar Vegas 2018, pp. 39–41). The point is not that all ritual practices are equivalent, but that the biblical categories themselves participate in the construction of legitimacy.

Necromancy fits this pattern closely. The Deuteronomic sequence first denies legitimacy to a plurality of mediators and then establishes the prophet as Israel's proper source of revelation. The logic is therefore institutional as well as theological. To consult the dead is to obtain knowledge outside the authorized prophetic channel. This does not prove that the prohibition was created solely for professional competition; legal and theological concerns cannot be reduced to economics or institutional rivalry. It does show, however, why the question of mediation is central to the form in which the prohibition has been preserved.

3.3. 1 Samuel 28: Ritual Knowledge Preserved Inside a Polemical Narrative

The narrative of Saul at En-Dor remains the clearest biblical description of necromantic consultation. It is also the text in which the tension between practice and prohibition is most visible. The narrator begins by stating that Samuel is dead and that Saul had removed the *ʾôbôt* and *yiddeʿonîm* from the land. Faced with the Philistine threat, Saul inquires of YHWH, but receives no answer through dreams, Urim, or prophets. He then asks his attendants to locate a woman who possesses an *ʾôb* so that he may go to her and inquire (1 Sam 28:3–7). The narrative thus places necromancy within a sequence of failed and alternative information channels.

Arnold correctly emphasizes the technical vocabulary of inquiry. The woman is never simply called a 'witch' in the Hebrew text, and Saul's request employs divinatory terminology. Arnold understands *qāsam* in 1 Samuel 28:8 as a general term for divination specified by the following reference to the *ʾôb*, and he notes the repeated language of 'bringing up' the deceased from the ground (Arnold 2004, pp. 200–2). Uusimäki reaches a compatible conclusion from a different direction: the episode is fundamentally about the acquisition of inaccessible knowledge, and the woman should be read as a competent divinatory specialist rather than being reduced to a stereotyped witch, that is, a generalized figure of illicit sorcery detached from the specific divinatory competence assigned to her by the narrative (Uusimäki 2025, pp. 156–60).

What is striking is that the ritual works within the narrative. The woman perceives the deceased Samuel; Saul receives the information he seeks; and the message corresponds to the prophetic judgment already associated with his rejection. The story does not undermine necromancy by portraying it as empty fraud. It delegitimizes the act through narrative and redactional framing. This distinction is crucial. A practice can be condemned precisely because it is perceived as efficacious or socially credible. The text's theological problem is not resolved by saying that nothing happened at En-Dor.

The episode also preserves details that complicate the social picture within the final polemical frame. Saul's attendants know where a practitioner can be found despite the reported expulsion. This does not weaken the narrative's negative judgment; the detail may equally underscore the persistence and availability of a prohibited practice. The woman fears prosecution, which presupposes both prohibition and continued practice. Her role extends beyond the ritual itself: after Saul collapses, she prepares food and cares for him. Uusimäki has rightly drawn attention to this narrative competence and hospitality, which are obscured when the character is approached only through the later category of witchcraft (Uusimäki 2025, pp. 157–60). Earlier comparative discussions likewise noted that the story shares functional features with first-millennium Near Eastern divinatory settings, particularly consultation in moments of dynastic or military crisis (Schmidt 1995, pp. 113–18; Villar Vegas 2018, pp. 42–44). None of these details proves the date of the underlying tradition, but together they make the story more intelligible as a narrative built from knowledge of a recognizable practice rather than as a purely literary invention.

The compositional history strengthens this observation. Arnold follows the view that 1 Samuel 28:3–19 is based on an older pre-Deuteronomistic source that was subsequently reworked. Gass, from a literary-critical perspective, likewise isolates tensions within the chapter and argues for compositional development rather than a completely uniform account (Gass 2012, pp. 153–85). On this reconstruction, Deuteronomistic terminology, especially the emphasis on the expulsion of mediums and spiritists and the echoes of Deuteronomy 18, gives an older narrative a new function within the characterization of Saul (Arnold 2004, pp. 205–7). The hypothesis cannot be demonstrated in every detail, and reconstructions of an unattested earlier text must remain provisional. Nevertheless, the chapter's chronological

and geographical displacement and the concentration of Deuteronomic vocabulary make redactional activity a serious explanation rather than an ad hoc escape from the final form.

The decisive point is therefore not whether one can recover the exact wording of a pre-Deuteronomistic En-Dor story. One need not do so. It is enough to recognize that the final narrative contains two analytically distinct layers of evidence: knowledge of a necromantic procedure and a literary-theological judgment that defines recourse to that procedure as self-condemnatory. Treating the second as if it were the original meaning of the first collapses the compositional history that the text itself invites us to consider.

3.4. The Dead as Sources of Power and Knowledge in the Wider Context

Comparison with the Ancient Near East is indispensable, but it must be controlled. The West Semitic evidence shows that deceased figures could remain active within the conceptual world of the living. Ugaritic texts concerning the Rephaim, funerary ritual, and royal dead have often been used to reconstruct a direct Canaanite background for Israelite beliefs. Yet Smith and Bloch-Smith's critique of Spronk remains a salutary warning: similar motifs do not automatically establish a single ritual system, and speculative links become especially fragile when they bridge large chronological and geographical gaps (Smith and Bloch-Smith 1988, pp. 278–80).

The strongest comparative use of Ugaritic evidence is consequently structural rather than genealogical. It demonstrates that the idea of powerful dead, ritual meals, and post-mortem agency belonged to the religious possibilities of the broader West Semitic environment. It does not establish that any specific Israelite practice is a direct survival of a particular Ugaritic rite. This is important because biblical polemic itself can tempt the historian to imagine a sharp ethnic boundary between 'Israelite' and 'Canaanite' religion. Smith and Bloch-Smith pointed out that such categories become unstable in the Iron Age, when Yahwistic practice itself could include patterns later writers wished to classify as non-Yahwistic or foreign (Smith and Bloch-Smith 1988, pp. 280–81).

The same caution applies to the terminology of *ʾôb* and *yidde'onî*. Arnold notes that *ʾôb* may refer to a deceased ancestral entity and, by extension or metonymy, to the specialist or apparatus associated with consultation (Arnold 2004, pp. 200–1). The semantic problem is reflected more broadly in lexicographical discussions of the paired terms (Van der Toorn et al. 1999, p. 907). Malul has proposed, from later Jewish and Near Eastern analogies, that some biblical terms connected with necromancy and *teraphim* may preserve a material dimension involving representations of dead ancestors made from, or associated with, human remains (Malul 2011, pp. 53–90). The proposal is suggestive, but the available evidence does not allow it to be treated as established fact. Later ritual analogies can illuminate possibilities; they cannot by themselves determine the material form of an Iron Age Israelite practice.

First-millennium Assyrian evidence allows the comparison to be stated more concretely. A letter from the reign of Esarhaddon, dated to 672 BCE, concerns the future status of the crown prince and makes the king's recently deceased wife the object of consultation; divinatory inquiries from the reign of Ashurbanipal likewise address the outcome of military action. These materials do not reproduce the En-Dor scene, but they show that communication with the dead could belong to a wider royal divinatory environment concerned with dynastic succession and warfare (Schmidt 1995, pp. 113–18; Villar Vegas 2018, pp. 42–44). Nissinen's broader treatment of ancient divination is relevant here: royal decision-making in the Ancient Near East drew on multiple channels of privileged knowledge, especially in periods of crisis, while biblical historiography increasingly presents prophecy as the normatively authorized channel (Nissinen 2026, pp. 195, 295–98). The value of the comparison is therefore functional rather than genealogical.

This distinction between possibility and demonstration is particularly important for the present argument. The wider Near Eastern context makes necromantic consultation historically plausible and conceptually intelligible. It does not relieve us of the need to establish the function of each biblical passage on its own terms. Comparative evidence should widen the range of historically plausible interpretations, not predetermine the interpretation before the biblical evidence is examined.

3.5. From Tolerated Practice to Illicit Knowledge: A Diachronic Reconstruction

A diachronic reading provides a more coherent explanation of the distribution of the evidence than a timeless opposition between 'Yahwism' and necromancy. Smith and Bloch-Smith proposed that explicit negative criticism of practices involving the dead first becomes visible around the middle of the eighth century BCE, with necromancy targeted before some other forms of care and veneration. They connect Isaiah 8:19 and the later legal prohibitions with an emerging effort to define acceptable sources of revelation (Smith and Bloch-Smith 1988, pp. 281–82). Sonia's later synthesis reaches the problem from the distinction between ritual care and necromantic inquiry, and likewise treats the biblical condemnations as historically situated rather than as a transparent description of all Israelite practice (Sonia 2020, pp. 65–128). In my earlier work I reached a similar conclusion: the evidence is compatible with a situation in which necromancy was practiced before the prohibitions that now frame it and continued after them (Villar Vegas 2018, pp. 44–47; Villar Vegas 2025, pp. 56–57).

Bloch-Smith's archaeological reconstruction gives this proposal an important material control. If mortuary provisioning continues without a clear interruption, then the legal opposition cannot be read as evidence for an immediate disappearance of practices concerning the dead. She associates the more explicit late monarchic legislation with centralizing reforms and the increasing claim that legitimate priests and prophets had privileged access to YHWH, while acknowledging that motives need not be reduced to economics (E. M. Bloch-Smith 1992, pp. 222–24). The argument is persuasive insofar as it explains why the target of regulation is not 'death' in general but particular forms of mediation and the diversion of resources.

This reconstruction should still be expressed with caution. The dating of biblical legal collections remains debated, and a first preserved prohibition is not necessarily the first historical objection. Nor does the absence of an earlier condemnation prove universal acceptance. What can be said more securely is that the surviving record does not support the claim that necromancy was uniformly and consistently excluded from Israelite religion from the beginning. Such a claim depends on reading later normative formulations back into periods for which the evidence is more ambiguous.

The late reception of Saul makes the process visible. In 1 Chronicles 10:13–14, the Chronicler reduces Saul's end to a theological judgment: he died because of his unfaithfulness, including his inquiry of a medium instead of inquiry of YHWH. Arnold shows that this formulation sharpens a contrast already developed in Samuel between Saul's necromancy and David's authorized means of seeking divine guidance (Arnold 2004, pp. 211–13). The Chronicler therefore supplies an instructive endpoint. What had once been narratively complex becomes a concise explanation of guilt. The history of the tradition is, in this respect, also a history of increasing interpretive control.

4. Discussion

The evidence considered above permits a reconstruction that is more cautious than some older syntheses and better differentiated according to the kind of evidence involved. Necromancy in the Hebrew Bible is neither adequately described as a foreign superstition

imported into Israel nor safely reconstructed as one element of a homogeneous ancestor cult practiced by all Israelites. Both models overstate what the sources can prove. The first repeats the rhetoric of the prohibiting texts as history; the second risks turning diverse ritual, archaeological, and literary data into a single system.

A more plausible model begins with plurality. Iron Age Israel and Judah contained overlapping practices of burial, commemoration, care for deceased kin, divination, prophecy, and household religion. Some of these practices could coexist with devotion to YHWH. The evidence from Judahite burials is especially difficult to reconcile with a model in which contact with the dead was simply external to Israelite religion. Yet the same archaeological evidence cannot tell us how frequently the dead were interrogated for information. That conclusion belongs to a different evidentiary category.

Necromancy becomes historically distinctive when it is treated as a technology of knowledge. This is where Deuteronomy 18, Isaiah 8, 1 Samuel 28, and 1 Chronicles 10 converge despite their different dates and literary functions. Each text is concerned, in one way or another, with the question of where reliable information about divine intention may be obtained. The Deuteronomic law opposes a list of specialists to the prophet like Moses. Isaiah asks whether a people should inquire of its god rather than the dead. Samuel narrates the failure of authorized channels and Saul's turn to an excluded specialist. Chronicles transforms the episode into a concise statement that Saul inquired of a medium rather than of YHWH. The repeated axis is not life versus death but authorized versus unauthorized mediation.

This reading also explains why the efficacy of the En-Dor consultation is not a contradiction within the final narrative. The polemic does not require the woman to be fraudulent. On the contrary, the narrative can concede that Saul receives true information and still condemn the route by which he obtains it. The theological claim is therefore stronger than a rationalistic dismissal: truth acquired through an illegitimate channel remains illegitimate. The final form of the story thereby subordinates ritual efficacy to institutional and theological authorization.

The redactional hypothesis offers a further implication. If an older account of consultation was reworked through Deuteronomistic language, then the process of composition did more than preserve a prohibition alongside an old story. It actively reclassified inherited ritual knowledge. Terms of inquiry, expulsion, and condemnation transform the meaning of the scene without necessarily erasing the procedural knowledge on which the scene depends. In that sense, 1 Samuel 28 is evidence not only for necromancy but for the literary management of necromancy.

The comparative material reinforces this conclusion when used negatively as well as positively. Ugaritic and broader Near Eastern evidence shows that powerful dead, funerary offerings, and communication across the boundary of death were not anomalous ideas in the region. Yet Smith and Bloch-Smith's critique of overly ambitious Ugaritic reconstructions demonstrates how quickly comparison can become circular. If every shared motif is treated as survival and every difference as polemic, the hypothesis becomes impossible to falsify. The better procedure is to use comparison to establish cultural plausibility and then allow the biblical evidence to determine the specific literary and historical argument.

Finally, the distinction between what is known and what remains hypothetical should be made explicit. We know that the final biblical texts prohibit necromancy; we know that 1 Samuel 28 represents a successful consultation of the dead; we know that archaeological evidence indicates sustained ritual care for the dead in Judah; and we know that later biblical authors intensify the negative theological evaluation of Saul's consultation. We can infer, with reasonable probability, that the prohibition responded to practices that were socially intelligible and available. We can further propose that competition over privileged

knowledge contributed to their delegitimation. What we cannot demonstrate from the present evidence is the exact institutional organization of necromancers, the frequency of consultation in every period, or a direct line of descent from any single Ugaritic or Mesopotamian ritual.

5. Conclusions

Necromancy in the Hebrew Bible is best understood as a historical problem created by the tension between ritual memory and normative rewriting. The received texts speak with a strongly prohibitive voice, but they also preserve enough ritual and narrative knowledge to show that consultation of the dead belonged to the range of practices with which Israelite authors and audiences were familiar. The existence of prohibition and the existence of practice are therefore not mutually exclusive; in several passages the former is intelligible precisely because of the latter.

The most important distinction is between necromancy and the broader care or veneration of the dead. Archaeological provisioning, memorial practices, and continuing obligations toward deceased kin establish the social presence of the dead but do not automatically demonstrate divinatory consultation. Necromancy is more narrowly concerned with knowledge. Once the evidence is organized around that function, the legal and narrative polemics become more coherent: the dead constitute an alternative source of information in a religious system increasingly concerned with defining who may legitimately mediate access to YHWH.

Deuteronomy 18 and the final form of 1 Samuel 28 participate in that redefinition. The former reorganizes a plurality of ritual specialists around the privileged figure of the prophet. The latter preserves a narrative in which necromancy is effective while simultaneously reframing the act as a sign of Saul's failure. The Chronicler then makes explicit what the Deuteronomistic narrative had already encouraged the reader to conclude. This development is more plausibly read as progressive delegitimation than as evidence for an unchanging prohibition extending unchanged into Israel's earliest history.

The comparative Ancient Near Eastern evidence supports the plausibility of this reconstruction, but it should not be made to prove more than it can. Similarity does not establish direct transmission, and later analogies do not reconstruct lost rituals automatically. The strongest argument therefore remains compositional and redactional: biblical authors and editors preserved ritual knowledge while progressively redefining the legitimacy of the channels through which privileged information could be sought.

What emerges, therefore, is not a simple history in which 'magic' is replaced by 'religion,' nor one in which an originally unified ancestor cult survives unchanged beneath official Yahwism. The evidence points instead to competition, reclassification, and selective suppression within a shared ritual world. Necromancy became unacceptable not because the dead suddenly ceased to matter, but because the authority to obtain and interpret privileged knowledge was being redrawn. That conclusion remains provisional where the evidence is provisional, but it accounts for the legal, narrative, archaeological, and comparative data without requiring the later polemical categories to describe the whole history of ancient Israelite religion.

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