

The Witch at the Navel of the World

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The story of the encounter of King Saul with the »witch« at Endor in 1 Sam 28 has received much attention over the centuries. Modern scholarship, however, has neglected examining why the episode is placed at Endor specifically. This brief note argues that the motivation is the proximity of Endor to Mount Tabor and the importance of this mountain.

Endor is 5 km from the base of Mount Tabor. The site stands in the shadow of the mountain, which dominates its view to the west. Regardless of whether the witch at Endor episode is historical or not, the author clearly chose the foot of Mt. Tabor as the most logical place for one to conjure up the spirits of the dead. In fact, the location does not really make much sense in the topography of the surrounding text, which should place Saul quite a bit further east at this point.¹ Instead, the witch is found at the »En-Dor«, the »Spring of Eternity«² or »Fountain of Fertility«³ – unless perhaps the name comes from the Hurrian, *emma durina*, »ancient gods«⁴.

The so-called »witch« of Endor is a אשת בעלת אוב (1 Sam 28:7), conflating the two terms אשת אוב and בעלת אוב. The Septuagint suggests that אשת אוב is the original.⁵ Interpretation of the term, אוב, has been either as spirits of the dead, perhaps related to אב if they are »fathers« or ancestor spirits (Lust, Lewis), or an instrument for communion with the dead, such as a ritual pit (Hoffner).⁶ The latter reflects Mesopotamian, especially Hurrian etymology (cf. KUB 29.4.2.19–21), while former would fit the description of necromancy in Deut 18 as שאל אוב. In this case, it is a synonym for Rephaim, and the witch is a Rephaim-Master.⁷ What the witch sees rising up is an אלוהים, but this term is used for ancestors in Isa 8:19–20 and for the spirits of tombs in Job 12:6.⁸

1 Erasmus Gaß, »Saul in En-Dor (1 Sam 28),« *Welt des Orients* 42 (2012): 157; 153–185; and already Samuel R. Driver, *Books of Samuel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1913), 213 f.

2 Gaß, »Saul in En-Dor«: 161.

3 Robert Couffignal, »Le Roi, le Prophete et la Necromancienne,« *ZAW* 121 (2009): 21 f.; 19–30.

4 Gaß, »Saul in En-Dor«: 162. The place name is here עין דאר in Ps 83:11, it is עין דור. The place עין דר in Josh 7:11 and Judg 1:27 is distinct, being in Manasseh.

5 P. Kyle McCarter, *1 Samuel*, AB (Garden City: Doubleday, 1980), 418.

6 André Caquot and Philippe de Robert, *Les Livres de Samuel*, Commentaire de l'Ancien Testament (Geneva: Labor et Fides 1994), 6, 334; Stefan Fischer, »1 Samuel 28: The Woman of Endor,« *OTE* 14 (2001): 29 f.; 26–46. The Israelites camp at a place called Oboth just prior to engaging Og in battle (Num 21:10).

7 Couffignal, »Le Roi«: 21.

8 McCarter, *1 Samuel*, 421. Schmidt argues that the *elohim* accompany Samuel and assist the witch in retrieving the ghosts, but he ignores the use of *Elohim* in parallel with »the dead« in Isa

Why would Tabor exude a »Rephaim-raising« influence on this location? Remains for the summit of Mount Tabor include Persian, Iron I, a small amount of Middle Bronze IIb, and Early Bronze I,⁹ and extensive Roman occupation.¹⁰ A set of fortifications dates to 242–187 BC, a fortress named Atabyrion. Polybius (*Hist.* 5.70) reports a 218 BC destruction, as well.¹¹ Roman remains include the fortifications constructed by Josephus, named Itabyrion (*Jos. Ant.* 5§ 84.203; 8§ 37; 13§ 396; *War* 2§ 573; 4§ 1.54.61)¹², which is the Septuagint's substitute for Tabor at Hos 5:1 and Jer 26:18.¹³ Atabyrion Itabyrion likely reflects an adaptation of the Hebrew name, Tabor, based on the Zeus Atabyrios of Rhodes.¹⁴ There is a church of St. Elijah, the mountain being connected with Elijah because of the New Testament story of the Transfiguration (Mt 17 and pars.). The Transfiguration includes as well a theophany both of the divine voice of Yahweh and of the »transfigured« Christ.¹⁵ Origen, Jerome, and Cyril of Jerusalem place the Transfiguration at Tabor.¹⁶ Some Orthodox place the event on Hermon, which Eusebius also considered,¹⁷ and Tabor does raise the problem of there being a fortified city on top of the mountain in Jesus' day that seems strangely absent from the Gospel accounts. Petr 1:18 refers to the mountain of the Transfiguration (Tabor or Hermon) as »the sacred mountain«. A Byzantine Christian shrine was constructed in the 4th century.¹⁸ The summit was later re-fortified by the Crusaders, with the name Bourie, and then by the Ayyubids.

There may have been a Hellenistic temple on Tabor. From the late 3rd-century BC remains came a Doric capital, in the correct proportions for a Hellenistic temple, inscribed »... *enikēs ... ton naon ... ate.*«¹⁹ It is possible that the first word is a broken-off form of the aorist of *nikēō*. The

8:19, Brian B. Schmidt, »The »Witch« of En-Dor, 1 Samuel 28, and Ancient Near Eastern Necromancy,« in *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, ed. M. Meyer and P. Mirecki, Religions in the Graeco-Roman World (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 129; 126; André Caquot and Philippe de Robert, *Les Livres de Samuel*, vi, 336 n. 11 and in KTU 1.6 vi.46–48 (where Schmidt reads *mtm* as »men«); The Rephaim are called *ilm* and *ilnym* in KTU 1.20 ii.1–2; 1.21 ii.3–4, 11–12; 1.22 ii.5–6, 10–11, 13–14, 18–21, 25–26. The **נִיחַ** is clearly not an additional intermediary; S. Fischer, »The Woman of Endor«: 30. 9 Zvi Gal, *Lower Galilee during the Iron Age* (Winona Lake: American Schools of Oriental Research 1992), 8, 14; Zvi Gal, *Map of Har Tavor: Archaeological Survey of Israel* (Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority, 1998), 41; 39*.

10 Gal, *Map of Har Tavor*, 41; 39*.

11 Yoel Elitzur, *Ancient Place Names in the Holy Land* (Winona Lake: Magnes Press, 2004), 386.

12 *Ibid.*, 92.

13 The Oaks of Tabor mentioned in 1Sam 10:3 must be another location, near Bethel in the land of Benjamin.

14 Elitzur, *Ancient Place Names*, 227. See below.

15 P. Exupère, »Césarée de Philippe et le Thabor,« *Etudes Franciscaines* (1909): 530.

16 B. Simon, »To Mount Tabor Thirty Years Ago,« *Review of Terra Sancta College* 8 (1938): 60.

17 Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *The Holy Land: An Oxford Archaeology Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); 366.

18 Mordechai Aviam, *Jews, Pagans and Christians in the Galilee* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2004); 181.

19 E. Alliata, »Elementi del culto pagano sur Monte della Transfiguratione,« in *Memoriam Sanctorum venerantes* (Rome: Vatican Press, 1992): 4. There is another Greek inscription, from north of the modern church, of which the only readable portion is *ho graphas*, along with a series of

inscription could thus read »I/you/he/we/you/they won/conquered [and built?] this temple ... ate.«

This seems scant evidence for pre-Christian »sanctity« of the mountain, but for additional pieces of evidence. One is the possible mention of this mountain in connection with Mount Zaphon (and Mount Hermon) in the *Phoenician History* of Philo of Byblos.²⁰ In a portion of Eusebius' quotation from Philo, the sons of Phos, Pyr, and Phlox are listed, and they are four mountains, each ruled by a giant. The mountains are Kassios, Lebanon, Anti-Lebanon, and Brathys (*Phoenician History* 808.5–7). They are the parents of Samemroumos/Hypsouranios (perhaps Anat) and Ousoos, who did not know their fathers.²¹ Mount Kassios is Mount Zaphon, the mythical home of Baal in the Ugaritic texts. Anti-Lebanon is probably Hermon. Albert Baumgarten concluded that each of these mountains had its own Baal.²² Baal Zaphon or Zeus Kassios is well known (not only from Ugarit, but also from the Saqqara papyrus letter *KAI* 50.2–3, 6th century BC). Baal Lebanon is known from the 8th-century B.C. bronze bowl inscriptions from Limassol, Cyprus (*KAI* 31). Baal Hermon or Baal of Sirion is known from the Bible (Judg 3:3; LXX Joshua 11:3,17).

What mountain is Brathy, then? Lagrange, Albright, Cross, and Lipiński held that Brathy was not a geographic name at all, but a word for »cypress«, either correcting Greek *brathy* to *debratho* after Nolte²³ or from the Hebrew *bērūš*, again meaning »cypress«, and that the mountain in question was Amanus in Anatolia, a mountain often paired with Zaphon and having its own Baal (Baal Hamon) in the Kilamuwa Inscription from Jenjirli.²⁴ The difficulty with this is both the requirement that the geography of Philo's list now jump around, and the fact that Baal Hamon was well known and venerated as Hamon in the Punic world, and it would be unlikely that the name would have been omitted.²⁵ Alternatively, Brathy could be a metathesized form of *bērūt*, indicating the location of Beirut.²⁶ This makes little sense, however, since Beirut is mentioned regularly in the text as »Berytus«. The other option is that Brathy is Tabor, a suggestion first raised by Ernest Renan. If the scribe of the Phoenician History knew Tabor only by the name *Itabyrion*, then the name could have undergone metathesis from *Thabyr* to *Brathy*.²⁷ The linkage of Tabor to Carmel in Jer 46:18 and to Hermon in Ps 89:13 thus makes more sense.

monograms, one of them Constantinian; Bellarmino Bagatti, »Una Grotta Bizantina Sul Monte Tabor,« *Liber Annuus* 27 (1977): 119–122.

20 Otto Eissfeldt, »Der Gott Tabor und seine Verbreitung,« *ARW* 31 (1934): 16; 14–41.

21 The story bears many similarities to Gen 6 and other Watchers stories, as discussed above; Charles S. Clermont-Ganneau, »Mount Hermon and its God in an Inedited Greek Inscription,« *Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly Statement* (1903): 233.

22 Albert Baumgarten, *The Phoenician History of Philo of Byblos*, *Études Préliminaires aux Religions Orientales dans l'Empire Romain* (Leiden: Brill, 1981), LXIX; 153.

23 Gaston Maspero, A. H. Sayce, ed., *The Struggle of the Nations: Egypt, Syria and Assyria* transl. M.L. McClure (London: SPCK, 1896), 183.

24 Baumgarten, *Phoenician History*, 154.

25 *Ibid.*, 155.

26 Georg B. Winer, *Biblisches Realwörterbuch zum Handgebrauch für Studierende, Candidaten, Gymnasiallehrer und Prediger* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1847–1848), 563 f.

27 Baumgarten, *Phoenician History*, 155; J. B. Livio, »Le Tabor a l'Aube de l'Histoire,« *Le Monde de la Bible* 23 (1982): 5; 4 f.; Otto Eissfeldt, »Der Gott Tabor«: 29.

Another reason to consider Tabor is the obscure meaning of the Hebrew name itself.²⁸ תָּבוֹר has been variously parsed. Hugo Winckler connected it with Ethiopic *dabr*, »mountain«.²⁹ That the mountain could thus be called »Mount Mountain«, is supported by the equivalent Jebel et-Tur, ascribed to Tabor by Baha ed-Din in the 12th century, as well as to Sinai, Gerizim, and the Mount of Olives.³⁰ D. Winton Thomas suggested it was derived from the room נֹבֵר, »elevated« (as in *minbar*).³¹ He further suggested that the earliest form of the mountain name derived from this root would have been תְּבוֹר, along the lines of נֹפֵחַ תְּנִינִיחַ.³² But Thomas also believes there could be a connection between תְּבוֹר and תְּבוֹר or תְּבוֹר »navel« (as the Judg 9:37 location at Shechem), since the root נֹבֵר occurs in the Ethiopic *henbert*, glossed in Greek as *omphalos*.³³ Most have dismissed any link between Tabor and תְּבוֹר as folk etymology,³⁴ related to the symbolic value of the mountain.³⁵ Talmon doubts that even תְּבוֹר has anything to do with navels, and that the Septuagint was merely the first to make this error.³⁶ The Targum of the Prophets and the Peshitta interpret תְּבוֹר as »strong point«.³⁷ Nevertheless, the phonetic similarity would have been obvious to any Hebrew writer, and likely an intended paronomasia. The oracle of Apollo at Didyma, the Didymaion, was also held to be an »omphalos«.³⁸

The »mountain« in Deut 33:19, where worship of God will take place, is likely Tabor (cf. Judg 4:6,12), given the geography required in the passage.³⁹ Hos 5:1 suggests some idolatrous cult on Mount Tabor. The text is vague about the sins of Tabor and the other locations mentioned, but given the context of chapter 4 and 5:3–7, it must be cultic sin.⁴⁰

Mention has been made above of Zeus Atabyrios of Rhodes. The cult of Zeus Atabyrios »of Rhodes« was established in 580 BC at Akragas in Sicily (Polybius, *Histor.* 9.27.7)⁴¹; the Rhodian

28 Livio, »Le Tabor«: 4.

29 Ibid.: 4 f. This would bring in, therefore, ancient and modern places around the base of the mountain with names like Haddaberath (Josh 19:12), Daberath (1Chron 6:57), Dabaritta (Jos. *Life*, 62.318; 26.126; *War* 2.21.3), Daburi and Daburiyya; Julius Boehmer, »Der Name Tabor,« *ZS* 7 (1929): 165; 161–169. The Hebrew *dalet* often appears as *taw* in Aramaic.

30 Livio, »Le Tabor,« 4 f.

31 D. Winton Thomas, »Mount Tabor: The Meaning of the Name,« *VT* 1 (1951): 229 f.

32 Ibid.: 230.

33 Ibid.: 229 f.

34 The link is explicitly made by Paul Simpson-Housley, Daniel Freeman and Jamie Scott, »The Highest Holy Ground: Mountains as Metaphors and Symbols in Western Religious and Secular Literature,« *The National Geographical Journal of India* 36 (1990): 65–72.

35 Davide Astori, »Rumanian Tabără and »Aegean-(Pre)Philistine«,« *Journal of Linguistic Studies* 105/106 (2010): 114; 113–118.

36 Shemaryahu Talmon, »The »Navel of the Earth« and the Comparative Method,« in *Literary Studies in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. S. Talmon (Jerusalem/Leiden: The Magnes Press/Brill, 1993): 52. He believes the entire notion of a navel of the world is Hellenistic in origin: 54; 58; 75.

37 Ibid.: 59.

38 Nicholas D. Cahill, *The Lydians and their World* (Istanbul: Millî Egitim Basımevi, 2010), 492 f.

39 A. D. H. Mays, *Deuteronomy*, NCBC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 479; Gerhard von Rad, *Deuteronomy*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), 207.

40 James L. Mays, *Hosea*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 80; Eberhard Bons, *Das Buch Hosea*, NSK.AT (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1996), 81.

41 Eissfeldt, »Der Gott Tabor«: 17.

shrine must therefore have been even older.⁴² The Rhodian shrine was famous for its bronze bulls (Pindar, *Olympian* 7, 160 f.),⁴³ although even the 7th century BC would be far too late for these to be Minoan holdovers.⁴⁴ Is it possible, as first suggested by Gesenius (and later Gressmann and Eissfeldt) that the cult moved from Syria-Palestine to Rhodes, and that Mount Tabor's Baal Tabor is the original Zeus Atabyrios?⁴⁵ If so, perhaps the *At-* or *It-* of Atabyrios and Itabyrion represents merely the definite direct object marker τῷ.⁴⁶

Given the references to worship, both licet and illicit, on Tabor in Deut 33 and Hos 5, the possible identification of Tabor with the Baal mountain of Brathy, the homophony with »Navel [of the Earth]«, the cult of Zeus Atabyrios, and the possibility of a Hellenistic temple on the mountain, it is very likely that the choice of Endor for the story of the raising of Samuel's ghost was made because of the site's situation at the base of the overshadowing mountain.

Abstract: This essay argues that Saul's encounter with the medium was located by the author at Endor because of the place's proximity to Mount Tabor. In addition to allusions to Tabor's sanctity in the Hebrew Bible, the etymology of »Tabor,« the Phoenician History, and the Rhodian cult of Zeus Atabyrios are marshalled in support of this argument.

42 Dolores Hegyi, »Greek Cults in Syria in the Archaic Age,« *Proceedings of the First International Congress on the Hellenic Diaspora from Antiquity to Modern Times*, ed. J. M. Fossey McGill, University Monographs in classical Archaeology and History (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1991), 10.1; 379.

43 Arthur Bernard Cook, *Zeus: A Study in Ancient Religion* (Cambridge: University Press, 1941), 1; 643.

44 Hegyi, »Greek Cults in Syria«: 101; 379.

45 Livio, »Le Tabor«: 4 f.; Eissfeldt, »Der Gott Tabor«: 20. The alternative is Sayce's view (1893) that Atabyrios is a Carian name, a suggestion made before Luwian languages were well understood.

46 Boehmer, »Der Name Tabor«: 164.