

## The 'Sin' of Speaking with Spirits

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Some people have concerns about sitting with a medium or consulting a psychic because they think that doing so puts them at odds with certain teachings in the Bible.

The main support for this belief in the Old Testament is from the book known as Leviticus. The key verse (generally labeled 19:31) says, "Do not turn to mediums or wizards, do not seek them out to be defiled by them."

There is another verse in Leviticus and one in Deuteronomy that clearly judge those who make a practice of talking to dead people: "A man or woman who is a medium or a wizard shall be put to death;" and "There shall not be found among you any one who ... is a medium [for they are] an abomination to the Lord."<sup>1</sup>

There can be no doubt that these statements are in the Bible and that they distinctly prohibit consultations with the spirit world. If you accept Leviticus and Deuteronomy as the inerrant word of the Almighty, then you would be wise to avoid any contact with mediums or psychics. But, before you make such a decision, you might want to know what else you are signing on for. There are numerous other things that are likewise prohibited by these ancient writings.

Have you ever eaten a rare steak? Or a fatty hamburger? Have you ever trimmed your hair or beard? Did you ever get a tattoo; peek at your

brother in the nude; fail to stand when an old man enters the room? Have you ever worn a shirt of cotton and polyester blend? Perhaps you have been upset with the government and cursed a politician? According to the Old Testament,<sup>2</sup> all of these acts and many others are sins against the Lord and are condemned just as strongly as consulting a medium.

And if you actually *are* a medium, do you deserve to die? These books say you do. But they also condemn you to immediate execution if you ever had an affair with a neighbor, or used withdrawal as a form of birth control, or had a homosexual encounter.<sup>3</sup> Think you're safe because you never went in for such hanky-panky? Well did you ever happen to get angry with mom or dad and curse them or disobey them?<sup>4</sup> According to the Old Testament, if you've done any of these things, you are already just as doomed as you would be if you helped someone converse with their dear departed grandmother.

Still think you should follow the dictates of the ancient Hebrew tribesmen? Well then, perhaps you would be interested in learning the proper procedure for selling your daughter into slavery; that's covered in Exodus 21:7-11.

Why and how the Old Testament came to have such pernicious laws is too long a story to

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<sup>1</sup> Lev 20:27 and Deut 18:10.

<sup>2</sup> Lev 19:26, 3:17, 19:27, 19:28, 20:17, 19:32; 19:19; Ex 22:28.

<sup>3</sup> Lev 20:10; Gen 38:9; Lev 20:13.

<sup>4</sup> Levi 20:9; Deut 21:18.

tell here. Suffice it to say that it is a tale of nepotism and greed beyond what any big-city politician would dare emulate today. No matter the rationale, though, there is no authority in selectively citing passages that support your point of view while blatantly violating or completely ignoring scores of other definite rules clearly laid down by the same priesthood.

For the sake of this article, I am going to assume that the reader would agree with me that being stoned to death is not an appropriate penalty for disobeying one's parents. (Although as a parent I have sometimes wavered in that view, I admit that I wouldn't be here to write this if such a law had been in force during my own teenage rebellions.) Most reasonable people will likewise find the bulk of these Old Testament strictures to be overly harsh, if not abhorrent. If you can be comfortable getting your hair cut, then you should have no qualms about visiting a medium.

Another, less direct, argument against mediumship is that dead people cannot talk, therefore all communications are actually with demons who are trying to deceive the living and lead them away from God's word. The verses most often cited are these from Psalms: "For in death there is no remembrance of thee; in Sheol who can give thee praise?" and "The dead do not praise the Lord nor do any that go down into silence."<sup>5</sup>

In truth, these are the words of a poet addressing his Creator and imploring Him to "Help me now; Don't wait 'til I'm dead." The author clearly is not God (Would He be composing pleas to Himself?) and is not claiming any special knowledge beyond the rather primitive be-

liefs of his fellow tribesmen. Besides, these exhortations could just as easily be read to imply that spirits *do* still exist and *are* capable of receiving favors.

Also note that the writers of the Old Testament did not connect the idea of mediums or spirits with either demons or the devil; that idea came along much later. The serpent in the Garden of Eden represented wisdom and is not linked to the devil or even to evil. The Satan so prominent in the book of Job is more of a prosecuting attorney charged with testing God's creations, he is given no power to wreak havoc on his own. Satan is mentioned, without description or comment, only two other times (Chronicles 21:1 and Zechariah 3:1-2). The term "demons" likewise only appears twice (Deut 32:17 and Psalms 106:37) and each time seems to be simply another term for "false" gods that the fickle Hebrews were punished for worshiping.

And then there is the matter of "by their fruits you shall know them." If the results of a spirit communication are alleviation of grief, enhanced compassion, reduction of anxiety, a feeling of being closer to God, and other such positive feelings and actions, then what role could the devil be playing? What sort of demon goes around encouraging folks to love one another?

Now, this is not to say that all dead people are good people. Experience teaches the opposite; people don't tend to change very much when they die. Nasty folks can thus become nasty spirits. So, it's wise to be cautious, especially when attempting contact on one's own. In more succinct terms: "Test the spirits."

Which leads us to the New Testament.

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<sup>5</sup>. Psalms 6:5 and 115:17.

Nothing in the New Testament admonishes us not to visit mediums or speak with the spirits of departed friends and relatives.

The earliest writings in this collection are seven letters written by Paul. (Another seven letters are commonly titled as being Paul's writing, but were likely written by others.<sup>6</sup>) The earliest of these, and thus the earliest known document referencing Jesus, is *First Thessalonians*. In this letter, Paul encourages his readers, "Do not despise prophetic utterances, but bring them all to the test and keep what is good in them and avoid the bad."<sup>7</sup> Paul's next surviving missive is *First Corinthians*, wherein he claims: "In each of us the Spirit is manifested in one particular way, for some useful purpose. One man, through the Spirit has ... gifts of healing, and another miraculous powers; another has the gift of prophecy, and another the ability to distinguish true spirits from false."<sup>8</sup> And in *1 John*, we are advised, "Do not trust any and every spirit, test the spirits to see whether they are from God."<sup>9</sup>

Such admonishments seem to indicate that early Christians spent much of their time in their meetings making ecstatic utterances and prophesying. The only concern that the apostles had is that their followers may be listening to the wrong spirits. This is a most significant shift from the attitudes expressed in the Old Testament. Previously, anyone who approached the tabernacle without specific authorization would be struck dead by Jehovah Himself. Although a prophet's voice would occasionally be recognized as legitimate – so long as he concentrated

on warning the Israelites to obey Jehovah or face terrible retribution – that's a far cry from encouraging everyman to converse directly with the Almighty. This change of attitude is likely because the early Christians had no entrenched priesthood that jealously guarded their exclusive (and highly profitable) rights to divine contact.

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<sup>6</sup>. These are not exactly examples of plagiarism, but rather have been labeled as letters written "in the tradition of Paul" by early scribes. See *From Jesus to Christ* by Paula Fredriksen, Ph.D., 1988.

<sup>7</sup>. I Thessalonians 5:19-20.

<sup>8</sup>. I Corinthians 12:8-10.

<sup>9</sup>. 1 John 4:1.