

Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Wisdom From The Witch of Endor: Four Rules For Living* (Chicago: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2024); 96 pp.; ISBN 9780802883537 (pbk).

The *midrashic* tradition is renowned for its extrapolative methodology. In *Wisdom From The Witch of Endor: Four Rules For Living* the late biblical scholar Tikva Frymer-Kensky has returned to Samuel I in order unearthen valuable life lessons from what she positions as a neglected, poignant interaction between the first Israelite king Saul and a woman who can converse with the dead. Connected to kabbalah and its mystic-linguistic approach to the Hebrew language, *midrashic* text study enables rabbis and scholars both secular and theological to conjure interpretations that can ultimately provide new lenses through which to look at Jewish thought and the human condition. On the surface, Frymer-Kensky has done just this with her proclamation of four rules for life epitomized by Saul's encounter with the 'witch' – The *Ov* Mistress (*Ba'alat Ov*) – of Ein Dor found in Samuel I 28:3-26. However, outside of the title's stated intent, this miniature volume does a disservice to the esteemed feminist biblical scholar. If seeking a feel good, pocket pamphlet, *Wisdom From The Witch of Endor* is just right. As a work of scholarship or even a scholarly polemic, this book is little more than a loose collection of milquetoast inspirational blurbs; a homily that tries to do too much with too little.

Frymer-Kensky offers us 12 pages of *midrash* on Saul's visit to the *Ov* Mistress, however even for *midrash* she lacks substantial biblical and linguistic evidence for interpretation outside of her own past interpretation. Ironically discarding the title's translation 'witch,' which might appeal to readers interested in paganism, feminist revisionism, or both, Frymer-Kensky's brief meditation on the term *Ba'alat Ov* is the linchpin of her book. Connecting her Assyriological linguistic knowledge with textual analysis, she distinguishes the *Ov* as a specialised divining or necromancy device. More importantly, the woman at Ein Dor is therefore not a sorcerer, as condemned in Leviticus, but as a woman with a rare, forbidden skill, which is called upon in a time of great crisis. With no other scholarly nor rabbinic discourse worked in, Frymer-Kensky's reframing of the *Ov* Mistress as a role model feels forced. Through a clunky patchwork of unrelated pop culture and historical references the majority of the 78 large-print pages is populated with rousing encouragement for embracing one's own talents just like the *Ov* Mistress in Samuel I. The absence of added context is a handy omission to paint the *Ov* Mistress as helpful to Saul, and the lack of other primary and secondary sources further casts this interpretation into doubt.

And yet, though the execution of the book is weak, its underlying message, while hackneyed, remains uplifting. In a way, the text is an unconscious reflection of Frymer-Kensky's own life path. As a female biblical scholar in the 1980s and 1990s she was a trailblazer, and contributions like *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories* (Schocken Books, 2002) show the intellectual power she wielded. Considering the gatekeeping and male-dominated environment of the period in which she established herself in American academia, we can read *Wisdom of the Witch of Endor* as something of an autobiographic foil. The lessons of the *Ov* Mistress become Frymer-Kensky's reflection on her own experience of honing a craft against prescribed norms. She writes then as the *Ov* Mistress herself, providing

wisdom from personal experience of successfully – but humbly – challenging the status quo. If only it weren't hidden underneath the rabbinic equivalent of a novelty "Hang In There" cat poster, *Wisdom of the Witch of Endor* might be profound. It is not an academic work, but with a *midrashic* approach: Frymer-Kensky's words are serve as a uniquely personal testament to self-belief.

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