

The Judicial Authority of King Ahab

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King Ahab was the supreme judge in Northern Israel. The authority of Israelite Kings came from God speaking through his prophet Samuel, the last prophet legitimately to combine the function of priest and king. But, Samuel's sons began taking bribes to pervert judgment in their lower court appointments in Beersheba. And Israel's elders said to Samuel. "Behold, thou art old, and thy sons walk not in thy ways: now make us a king to judge us like all the nations. But the thing displeased Samuel, when they said, Give us a king to judge us. And Samuel prayed unto the LORD. And the LORD said unto Samuel, Hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee: for they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them" (I Sam. 8:5-7).

The Lord directed Samuel to inform Israel of "the manner of the king" including burdensome taxation necessary to support a regal court and a standing army. Samuel duly warned the people of the forthcoming "manner of the king" and he predicted Israel's response to the burdens of their king. "And ye shall cry out in that day because of your king which ye shall have chosen you; and the LORD will not hear you in that day. Nevertheless the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel; and they said, Nay; but we will have a king over us; that we also may be like all the nations; and that our king may judge us, and go out before us, and fight our battles" (I Samuel 8:18-20).

When Saul was finally reconfirmed as King after a rocky start, Samuel convinced Israel of their wickedness by calling down a massive thunderstorm that destroyed their wheat during harvest. The Israelites acknowledged their sin in asking for a king and begged Samuel to pray for them. Samuel replied, "God forbid that I should sin against the LORD in ceasing to pray for you: but I will teach you the good and the right way: Only fear the LORD, and serve him in truth with all your heart; for consider how great things he hath done for you. But if ye shall still do wickedly, ye shall be consumed, both ye and your king" (I Samuel 12:23-25).

Samuel continued his service as a prophet teaching Israel. He provided example and inspiration for the prophets who came after him. His prophetic ministry continued through much of Saul's reign. As God's prophet, he was called to anoint David as Israel's next king when Saul refused to obey the Lord. Israel got the most "bang for their buck" when King Solomon resolved an "impossible" custody dispute involving two harlots. His judicial ruse ordering the division of the living child revealed the true mother "And all Israel heard of the judgment which the king had judged; and they feared the king: for they saw that the wisdom of God was in him, to do judgment" (I Kings 3:28).

He also in one fell swoop relieved lower court judges of frivolous disputes which plague our present adversary system. All too often our present courts clogged with endless appeals offer only as much justice as one can afford. In Israel's judicial system the litigants, whether plaintiff or defendant, could not appeal the decision of a lower court judge. Appeals were made by the judge to a higher court as he deemed necessary (Exodus 18:13-27). During the period of the Judges, that higher judge was usually the military leader raised up by God to deliver Israel from foreign oppression and nullify their imposed, impoverishing taxes.

In response to idolatry under Solomon and his disobedience to God's command not to multiply horses (military) wives (civil bureaucracy) and gold (Deuteronomy 17:16-17), the prophet Ahijah promised Jeroboam that "it shall be, if thou wilt hearken unto all that I command thee, and wilt walk in my ways,

and do that is right in my sight, to keep my statutes and my commandments, as David my servant did; that I will be with thee, and build thee a sure house, as I built for David, and will give Israel unto thee" (I Kings 11:38).

But, Jeroboam's principal objective, as king, was to give the ten tribes of Israel tax relief they demanded from Solomon's excessive taxation which was exacerbated by a rare gold-based inflation (II Chronicles 9:20f; I Kings 10:13,20-22,27). Moreover, he also established a state religion of calf worship at Dan and Bethel to prevent his subjects from going to worship at the temple in Jerusalem as commanded by God. King Ahab for all his failings was still God's highest judge in Northern Israel. His court was Israel's Supreme Court. Elijah's vain effort to turn back the clock proved this.