

Dear all, greetings.

Traditionally, rulers have claimed that their authority is derived from a variety of sources:

- 1) Martial skill – the heroes of ancient times, and feudal lords in the Middle Ages.
- 2) Expert knowledge – for consultant surgeons.
- 3) Divine right – monarchs in the late Middle-Ages.
- 4) Primogeniture – the right of the first born – monarchs throughout history.
- 5) Popular democratic mandate at the ballot box – in modern liberal democracies.
- 6) Election by the faithful – the early Caliphs.
- 7) Anointing by God – kings in ancient Israel.
- 8) Popular tribal acclaim – Native American chiefs.
- 9) Military conquest – the House of Tudor.

All of these claims to authority and legitimacy have some resonance within their own societies and contexts. Clearly, throughout history there has been no “1 way” to leadership legitimacy. Each leader in history, whether among the bands of Native Americans on the plains of North America, or the Stuarts of England, or the early Caliphs, or the modern-day Prime Ministers and Presidents, has a clearly defined legitimizing rationale for their role as leaders. Likewise, every society has a way of recognizing illegitimate leaders, often known as “usurpers.” Disputes over who are the legitimate leaders of a faith group / modern democracy / historical kingdom etc. have often led to conflict.

In light of these human ways of affirming authority, what does Deuteronomy have to say about the legitimacy of a ruler?

“When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, “I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me,”¹⁵ you may indeed set over you a king whom the LORD your God will choose. One of your own community you may set as king over you; you are not permitted to put a foreigner over you, who is not of your own community.¹⁶ Even so, he must not acquire many horses for himself, or return the people to Egypt in order to acquire more horses, since the LORD has said to you, “You must never return that way again.”¹⁷ And he must not acquire many wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; also silver and gold he must not acquire in great quantity for himself.¹⁸ When he has taken the throne of his kingdom, he shall have a copy of this law written for him in the presence of the levitical priests.¹⁹ It shall remain with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes,²⁰ neither exalting himself above other members of the community nor turning aside from the commandment, either to the right or to the left, so that he and his descendants may reign long over his kingdom in Israel”
(Deuteronomy 17:14-20).

In this passage, God reveals how He wishes the leaders of His people to rule. They are not to seek for the means of gaining massive military might – chariot horses, for then they would be tempted to the ways of thinking and operation of the nations around. Nor are they to acquire wealth or wives, for then their hearts would be turned away from God. Rather, they were to have a personal copy of the *Torah* prepared for them. They were to keep this personal copy of the *Torah* with them, so that they may read it every day throughout their life and leadership, in order that the leader may be faithful in observing all

that God had commanded. The leader was not to exalt himself above the community, or the people of Israel, and he was not to turn aside from God's commandments, to the right or to the left. The rationale was then given – so that the leader and his descendants would reign long over Israel.

These instructions clearly reveal what makes a legitimate ruler in the eyes of God: fidelity to His revealed will as found in Scripture. While the people of Israel may have looked to visibles to provide legitimacy for leadership, such as the election of a king via the casting of lots (as in the case of Saul) or the anointing of a man by a prophet (as in the case of Jehu), or to the God-given military success of a leader-in-waiting (as in the case of David, who had slain his tens of thousands), God was looking for leaders “after His own heart” (as in the case of David). He was looking for leaders who would live humble lives and faithfully uphold His revealed will. Whose hearts were open to rebuke and willing to repent when they strayed (as in the case of David). As the kings went, so did the people of Israel. A God-fearing leader, such as Hezekiah or Josiah, inspired national revival. A leader who did not seek to follow and obey God led to national destruction. What mattered to God was not so much the manner by which one was chosen as a leader, e.g. anointing or popular acclaim or the casting of lots, but how a leader led from that day on. Therein lay the legitimacy of a leader in God's eyes.

Hence, leadership among God's people is first and foremost a spiritual matter. Whether one is appointed by a Board, elected by a constituency, endowed with unique knowledge and skills that make your leadership seemingly inevitable, leaders among God's people are legitimate to the extent that they chew over and reflect on and faithfully and humbly seek to follow God's revealed will. When mistakes happen, as they do and will and have done throughout history, God is seeking for leaders who will honestly repent and chart a path of renewed fidelity to the Word of God. When things appear to be going well, such leaders remain humble, giving the glory to God. When things appear to be going badly, such leaders turn to God in humble supplication, asking for His wisdom and His leadership and His guidance and His protection.

I want to challenge all of us today – and this starts with myself – to personally chew over the Word of God each and every day, to seek understanding and fidelity to His Word as our highest purpose, and to make decisions that honor Him and His revealed will. There is a side-benefit to all of this. We are made holy “by the washing of water by the word” (Eph. 5.26), so in seeking to be such leaders, we gain legitimacy and we experience sanctification.

Each one of us is a leader within our own spheres of influence. May God continue to fashion us into the leaders He wishes each of us to be today.

Kind regards,

Conrad.