

Ancient Biblical Anarchy In The Law Of Moses

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A few weeks back I wrote an article using a recent address by President Dallin H. Oaks wherein he lays out five principles of government which he teaches are inspired of God. Building on his argument in my article I explain how consensual governments such as anarchist, libertarian, or voluntaryist governments better follow the inspired principles of good government than statist governments like that established by the U.S. Constitution do. I have had people respond saying if this is true, if consensual government are more in line with God's will we should see them in the scriptures when the people follow God, but what we actually see are kings. Therefore, these responders conclude, it is monarchy, or at least centralized government, that is blessed by God as His form of government upon the Earth. In this article I will demonstrate that this argument is severely flawed because it ignores a great deal of scriptural history before the inauguration of the Israelite monarchy and at the same time explore the anarchist society established by God in the Law of Moses. Finally, I will conclude by arguing that God has always established an anarchist society wherever He has a people who are willing to follow His will and that the establishment of a centralized state – whether that be a monarchy, a democracy, or anything else – is an inferior form of government that God concedes to because His people are unable or unwilling to accept the society He would build for them.

What Do We Mean By Government?

Now, before we go any further we need to establish what terms mean. Most people today equate “state” and “government” as being the same thing. This is not so. “Government,” in its basest terms, means a set of rules and social norms that guide behavior and communal action. Government then is an umbrella word and there are many types of governments. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, for example, is by a type of government with its own laws, judges, legal system, and welfare system. But it is not a state. The “State” is a particular type of government. The esteemed sociologist Max Weber defined the state as, “a human community that claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force with a given territory,” or, in short, the organization with the monopoly on violence in a given area. The foundation of the state is the ability of the government to compel obedience through violence or the threat of it.

On the other hand, consensual governments such as those in anarchist, libertarian, and voluntaryist societies eschew violence as the way to organize society. In these governments all relationships between individuals, groups, and political entities is entirely voluntary, based on explicit consent which can be extended or contracted without penalty or punishment. Anarchy is not chaos. Those terms are often used as synonyms, but that is not necessarily so. Anarchy argues that social order can and should be based on voluntary self-governing associations and rejection of violence and compulsion as not just a means of achieving social unity but as antithetical to social unity. Anarchists form societies or join societies where they all agree to what principles are correct and then live according to those principles. They teach just principles as they understand them and govern themselves. People are bound together by their customs and culture, not by arbitrary lines and politically motivated violence. For a more thorough exploration of these terms and ideas I suggest you read this article about what a government is and how they function.

Anarchist Israel

Knowing the definition of the above terms will help us to understand the following quote from biblical scholar Dr. Norman Gottwald. Speaking of the social and political structure of Israel from Moses up to 1 Samuel 9, Dr Gottwald says:

Early Israel rose as an antihierarchical movement, socially in its formation by tribes and politically in its opposition to payment of tribute, military draft, and state corvée. This means that early Israel not only renounced the right of outside tribes and empires to rule over it but also refused to set up a state structure of its own. Its form of self-rule would be what some anthropologists have called “regulated anarchy,” there being no single center of power but numerous power interests negotiating a tenuous unity. ...There is evidence that some, but not all, of the tribes had chiefs, which made them ranked communities but the chiefs were not yet possessed of coercive power.

In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance, pgs. pages 17-18

You can of course see this throughout the Bible from the very start all the way down to Saul. There are of course no formal political organizations through Genesis, not ones Abraham and his children belonged to anyway. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were all leaders of a group of nomads who migrated across Mesopotamia, down into Palestine, and finally into Egypt. During this time they do not rule through force as modern governments do but because their followers believe they have the skill to lead with those who disagreed being able to leave at any time. In Egypt we see the powers of the state in full force as the Israelites begin to grow until Pharaoh, seeing them as a threat to his power, uses his power to force the Israelite people into total subservience. Here it is worth noting that what we typically refer to as the Israelite slavery in Egypt was most likely corvée labor, though to the modern mind there is not likely to be much a difference between corvée and actual slavery as corvée labor was usually justified by the government forcing people to pay off their taxes through physical labor. Someone coming along and demanding you to give them money and then forcing you to work for them until you “pay” them the money they demand sounds a lot like slavery, especially given the way corvée could become permanent as the worker might have to pay off the cost of food and housing, costs which accumulated each day while he or she was working off the previous “debt,” thus becoming an unending source of compelled labor. The differences between this and slavery have to do mostly with when work was expected. Slavery was every day all year while corvée could often be seasonal in nature. In either case the story damns the state for its power to force people to work for it or serve it against their will.

Then Moses comes along and the Israelites are freed from the Egyptian state through God’s power, from the centralized figure who believes he has the power of a god to demand and be obeyed. Though one might reasonably expect Moses to establish something of a desert kingdom for himself, Moses did not rule because he had no authority to do so. People came to Moses because God chose him. By approaching Moses, they were really approaching God. And it is really God, not Moses, who ruled wandering Israel. It was God who gave the Law, God who performed the miracles, and God who provided for the people. Here we have another important but ignored teaching: God’s power can truly deliver us from the State and those who honestly serve God will never act as kings and rulers over those whom they are called to lead. In God’s system of government it is always as Jesus taught the Apostles:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Matthew 20: 25-28

Moses himself sought to decentralize his authority as much as possible. At first he assumed the responsibility to act as the inspired judge in every case the Israelites would ask him to judge (notice there that they asked him, he didn't not claim exclusive power to do so and did not insert himself into places he was not asked to be), but this quickly became exhausting. So, under the inspired advice of his father-in-law Jethro, Moses creating a series of lesser judges to do the work that had formerly solely been his (Exodus 18:13-27). Even after that he wished all of God's people would become prophets (Numbers 11:29) and thereby put him out of a job. He was never one to grasp for power. After the translation of Moses, Joshua the Son of Nun, not any of Moses's family, became the leader of Israel next exactly because he was the prophet and God spoke through him. Among other reasons, one purpose for this seems to clearly be to avoid a Mosaic Dynasty with leadership of Israel passing down through the family of Moses. The same proves true of Joshua despite him being a conquering general, something that has often led to the establishment of dictatorships and kings throughout history. Though Israelite structured during the Exodus, all the structure is given by God and no power is centralized in Moses or Joshua or their "rule" but rather the people obey them because the people want to obey God. Once they're both dead then that is it. Moses is not a king and neither is Joshua. They're both Judges and this model of leadership – voluntary service rendered to one inspired by God for as long as they continue in the Lord's service – is what continues not only from the Pentateuch into the book of Joshua, but on from Joshua through the book of Judges as well. This was the exact form of government established under the inspired direction and commandments of God and through which God asserted His right to rule as King of Israel.

It is in the Book of Judges that we get to see the kind of government designed by the Law of Moses fully in action as the people settle down to live their lives in the Promised Land. Something that immediately stands out is that there is no centralized structure at all, no prophet or central religious figure on Earth. God rules and when He needs someone to lead the Israelites He raises up Judges the people can choose to follow when He chooses to do so. In contrast the Book of Judges gives us multiple examples of men who try to centralize power and rule through force. Each time they are described as wicked and evil men. Take for example Abimelech. He wanted to use that the prestige of being the son of Gideon the Judge in order to establish himself as the king of the Israelites. This touches off a civil war when he tries to use the same methods that all other governments use to rule, violent force as agents of the state (police or military, in that era there was no distinction) beat, cage, or kill those who refused to obey the person claiming the right to rule. For his efforts Abimelech gets a millstone dropped on his head and that ends his seizure of power.

Here we are given two vital lessons about the urge for political centralization. First, that it leads to corruption and is evil because it seeks to replace the rule of God with the rule of man. The Israelites had offered kingship to Gideon after his decades of leadership and refused, denouncing the whole idea of having a king by saying, "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule

over you; the Lord will rule over you.” (Judges 8:23) You can either have the Lord as your ruler or you can have some many in place of authority and power. You cannot follow both. This is shown when Gideon’s son, Abimelech tries to become king anyway. Getting and maintaining centralized state power required atrocity after atrocity and only culminated in war and death. This is the true nature of statist governments revealed for what they truly are. Secondly, centralization of power always leads to civil strife and violence as it arrays the people against one another as both sides struggle to get what they want. It never brings peace because it is founded on rule through violence. When everyone who disagrees with you becomes a threat because they could seize power and force their ideas and ways of living upon you it is only natural that you would resist this, including meeting their violence with your own. Instead of people being unified it sets them at odds with one another as they separate into oppositional parties looking to gain, maintain, and use the means of power to achieve their goals.

All through Judges we see how many of the tribes choose NOT to follow God, emphasizing the voluntary nature of the entire system. They repeatedly follow false gods and idols without any kind of state or governmental response. Not all tribes are always represented when they go out to war against their invading enemies. During all this time the thing which regulates human behavior, that all Israelites choose to follow, is the Law of Moses. But that Law is not administered from any centralized source, not even the temple, which is never mentioned (neither is the tabernacle). Rather it is administered and judged locally by judges (small j) who are respected community leaders that the people trust to make wise decisions. (Deut. 16:18) You can see this same system in the annals of European history and it is still active in many traditional Middle Eastern and Central Asian communities today. This is the height of when the people of Israel followed the Law of Moses, a religiously anarchist system that provided no central ruler but through which God directed His children. There are no kings, no queens, no standing armies, no taxes of any sort. There is no state or kingdom if Israel. Israel is the Kingdom of Jehovah and would not actually become a state until the inauguration of King Saul. And when it became a state it abandoned the ruler ship and Law of Gods for the ruler ship and laws of man.

The Sin of Statehood

The last few chapters of the book of Judges is filled with violence and civil war, which a later Deuteronomist redactor (or redactors) alters to say occurred because of “there was no king in Israel,” (ex: Judges 18:1) but this is pure propaganda from a “designing and corrupt priest” (pg. 327) to try and portray the later kings of Israel as necessary and good by projecting them backwards into the scriptural history. The irony (or perhaps the evidence that these alterations were carried out in an indirect way over a longer period of time as opposed to all at once) is that 1 Samuel 8 survived the Purge of Josiah and his like-minded successors. Why? Because, building on the anti-monarchist ideals of Judges, especially in the contrasting stories of Gideon and Abimelech, 1 Samuel 8 is a masterstroke in destroying everything the state is built upon.

The chapter begins with Samuel, the Last Judge of Israel, growing old. He has led the tribes of Israel for “all the days of his life” (Judges 7:15) and his sons are corrupt. As in the story of Gideon, the leaders of Israel come together and demand that the judge, here Samuel, appoint a king over them before he dies. Samuel goes to the Lord in prayer and the Lord tells Samuel:

Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. According to all the deeds that they have done, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also doing to you. Now then, obey their voice; only you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.

1 Samuel 8:7-9

This is the message of 1 Samuel 8, the word of the Lord to Samuel and to all those who would follow God – embracing the rule of the centralized authority and following his rules and laws is a rejection of God. God would be our ruler, and king and in His rule we would find safety and peace. But when we embrace worldly forms of government led by men and not by the Lord then we are abandoning Him for the ways and things of this world which will only bring us suffering and death. Whether the centralized ruler be stylized as king, emperor, president or potentate makes little difference, the end is the same as you replace the wisdom and rule of God with the foolishness and domination (not to mention damnation) of men. Through the mouth of Samuel, the Lord warns the people what will happen if they embrace the rule of man and centralized power over their lives, saying:

These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen and to run before his chariots. And he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. He will take your male servants and female servants and the best of your young men and your donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the Lord will not answer you in that day.

1 Samuel 8:11-18

Isn't that just the most damning denunciation of taxation that you've ever heard? God Himself just told you that taxation is theft! The best of food of the fields will be taken to feed him and his cronies, a perpetual bribe for their loyalty paid for by the blood, sweat, and tears of the working poor and enforced upon them by the might of the military. Their children will be taken to serve him, the daughters to be his cooks and bakers (and concubines and prostitutes as well) and the sons to be cannon fodder in his wars of conquest and to enforce his rule by killing and dying for him. The king will even pervert the law of tithing to fill his coffers with their goods, all of which will reduce them to the status of slaves in comparison to the king. And isn't that the truth? The state by always seeking to expand the wealth and power of those in command ever seeks to reduce those not in power to the status of slaves the machine of state and those who pull its levers. Yet, the mob, in all its infinite wisdom, still demands a king. And so they get one. This of course is a disaster for the people as every king they have makes things worse and worse for

them socially, embroiling them in endless fratricidal civil wars (first between David and Saul, then between David and two separate wars against two of his sons, finally Solomon's purge when he comes to power) and multiple wars of conquest, leaving all of the people with a lower standard of living than ever before.

The existence of a king was automatically a rejection of one of the central tenets of the Law of Moses, that God is King and what we call the Law of Moses was His Law. By demanding a tenth of all their flocks the king is setting himself up as a god as the only being that Israelites had paid tithes to before was God. Notice that if the king is demanding a tenth of their flocks then that is automatically interfering with God's Law which says He gets a tenth of the flock in tithing. We see the final culmination of this current in the New Testament where the Pharisees and Sadducees warp the Law of Moses to justify their positions of power and as a tool to murder Christ, but the roots of this Golgothan tree lay here and it grows across the pages of the Old Testament as the people adore their king and care more for the divisiveness of politics and power instead of serving the Lord, finally culminating on Calvary's hill.

The Kingdom of God or Nothing

All of this is true today. The existence of the state is the embrace of man as God, which is why people look to those in power to do everything, even the impossible such as eliminating all bigotry, all hate, all poverty, and deliver paradise. Embracing the rule of the State can only come by rejecting God as your rightful king and His Law (the Law of Christ) for the laws of men, which command us to do many things in direct violation of God's will, such as kill. The powers of the world seek to take the place of God in the hearts of men and women everywhere. I suspect, as in the case of case of divorce (Matt. 19:7-8) where God has allowed it because the people were not ready to accept what they could have had, he allowed the ancient Israelites also to have their king and He allows us to have our modern states. Not because they are His will, but because we are too fearful and stupid to embrace what He would give us if we would but accept it. But situation need not continue. There is no excuse for continuing to hold onto these tumorous carcasses of violence, greed, idolatry, and evil. Instead we must not be faithless, but believing, trusting in God and His power to do what Babylon never has and never will – provide us a society built on peace, liberty, and prosperity.

We already have everything we need to establish this kind of society. We have His law and the foundation for a just and merciful society in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Though seemingly idyllic, it is possible to build a society of liberty, peace, and prosperity for all, but only through the Gospel of Jesus Christ and only if we stop justifying and indulging everything else. All that we are lacking is the courage and the faith to renounce the ways of the world and embrace Christ. Christianity, truly lived without compromise to the ways of the world, is the most powerful and radical force for change on the planet in all of its history. Let us renounce the sinful states of the world, let us renounce the loyalties and lies that justify them let us live solely according to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, let us love and serve one another, let us embrace consensual government, and we will be on the high road of salvation and peace as we follow the Prince of Peace. The world needs it now more than ever. Time to be the salt of the Earth.

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