JUSTICE THE RIGHT WAY
A Devotional Meditation from
Luke 18:1-8; Philippians 2:5-11
Albert J. McCarn
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The King Arthur legends have been a Hollywood favorite for decades. One of the most memorable interpretations is the 1981 movie Excalibur. At the climax of the story, when Arthur’s realm is prosperous and peaceful, there is only one cause for complaint: that Sir Lancelot is perpetually absent. He has exiled himself from court because he is attracted to Queen Guenevere and wants to avoid temptation. Everyone except King Arthur seems to understand this, but no one speaks of it until one day when Sir Gawain publicly accuses the queen of driving Lancelot from the company of Arthur’s knights. Stung at the assault on her honor, Guenevere cries out to Arthur, “Will you not champion me?” He replies, “I cannot! I am your King, and I must be your judge in this.”

Arthur’s declaration contains an important biblical principal which we find in Deuteronomy 16:18-20 –

Judges and officers you are to appoint within all your gates that ADONAI your God is giving you, according to your tribes; and they are to judge the people with righteous judgment. You are not to twist justice—you must not show partiality or take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and distorts the words of the righteous. Justice, justice you must pursue, so that you may live and possess the land that ADONAI your God is giving you. (Deuteronomy 16:18-20 TLV)

This is the beginning of the Torah portion called Shoftim, or Judges. The key point is in the phrase, “Justice, justice you must pursue.” Another way to say this is, “Pursue justice the right way, with proper motives and methods.”

Our Creator intends that we deal with infractions of His commandments, but if we do it the wrong way, we become guilty of further, and perhaps worse, infractions. This happens every day. People cry out for justice because all too often justice is abused and miscarried. It may be a corrupt judge issuing an improper ruling, or a hasty and regrettable action by law enforcement in the heat of the moment, or even a conspiracy to defraud someone through the courts, but every misapplication of the tools of justice brings grief to the heart of our Eternal Judge.

So how do we carry out “just justice”? One way is by going through due process of law as specified in Torah. We are to investigate matters thoroughly before rendering judgment, confirm matters through multiple witnesses, and render appropriate corrective measures when required. That’s the meaning of Deuteronomy 19:21 –

Your eye must not show pity—life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot. (Deuteronomy 19:21 TLV)
When read in context, we see that this is not a harsh, uncompromising injunction to deprive wrongdoers of life and limb, but a statement of legal principal: each case is unique and is to be decided by well-qualified, honest judges who have weighed the facts carefully. Any sentence of punishment must fit the circumstances. It doesn’t call for the judges to have people’s eyes put out, but rather for proper compensation to the victims. What is the value of an eye? The accused will find out, not by having his own eye removed, but by paying compensation, or by doing work for the one he has harmed. That is just justice.

Pursuing justice the right way also means sharing power among the different parts of the justice system—something our western law codes have inherited from the Torah. In establishing His principles of government, God created the roles of priest, prophet, and king. The priests and Levites serve as national judges, and elders of each community serve as local judges. The people of the community appoint judges from among the wise, righteous members of society. They rule on local matters, but on issues beyond their jurisdiction they defer to the Levitical courts (Deuteronomy 17:8-9). That’s because the Levites are God’s chosen judges. They have no inheritance in the land, but instead have God Himself as their inheritance (Deuteronomy 18:2). If God alone is their benefactor, and if the people support the priests and Levites with their tithes and offerings according to God’s established order, then these judges are must less susceptible to corruption by bribes, or by other influences that might distract them from righteous pursuit of justice.

Prophets proclaim the word of the Lord, which might mean words of correction to those who are falling away from His righteous standards. That’s one thing Messiah is supposed to do. Deuteronomy 18:15-19 tells of the prophet like Moses whom God will raise up one day. The apostles testified that Yeshua is the prophet like Moses, the one whom we should obey (Acts 3:17-26; 7:37). Such is the proclamation of Christians, and so I believe. However, there are many prophecies about Messiah Son of David yet to be fulfilled. Yeshua has come as the suffering Messiah, but He has not yet come as the Messiah Who brings peace and order to the whole earth.

Which brings us to the next point regarding God’s divine government: kingship. Deuteronomy 17 gives the requirements for Israel’s kings: they must be native Israelites, they must not amass an offensive army, nor acquire too much money, or multiple wives, they must not turn back to Egypt, and they must write a copy of the Torah for themselves so they can study it daily. The reason for these requirements is in Deuteronomy 17:20 –

Then his heart will not be exalted above his brothers, and he will not turn from the commandment to the right or to the left—so that he may prolong his days in his kingship, he and his sons, in the midst of Israel. (Deuteronomy 17:20 TLV)

This is the irony of Israel’s king: he is to be the highest authority in the land, but he is not to consider himself better than his people, or above the law. That’s the principle King Arthur upheld when he declared, “I am your King, and I must be your judge in this.”

This is the principle Yeshua taught to His disciples in Matthew 25, when He said: “You know that the rulers of the nations lord it over them, and their great ones play the tyrant over them. It shall not be this way among you. But whoever wants to be great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you
shall be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many." (Matthew 25:25-28 TLV)

And here is yet more irony. Messiah Son of David is to be King of Kings and Lord of Lords, yet Yeshua is saying His disciples should be like Him: serving one another even to the point of laying down their lives for each other. How can this be? Paul explains in Philippians 2:5-11 —

Have this attitude in yourselves, which also was in Messiah Yeshua, Who, though existing in the form of God, did not consider being equal to God a thing to be grasped. But He emptied Himself—taking on the form of a slave, becoming the likeness of men and being found in appearance as a man. He humbled Himself—becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason God highly exalted Him and gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Yeshua every knee should bow, in heaven and on the earth and under the earth, and every tongue profess that Yeshua the Messiah is Lord—to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:5-11 TLV)

How beautiful. To gain the honor of holding all power in the consolidated offices of prophet, priest, and king, our humble Savior had to subject Himself to the lowest status of all: servant to all mankind, bearing the just and righteousness punishment for our crimes, and doing so without screaming for justice for Himself. Because He has suffered the worst miscarriage of justice that anyone could possibly suffer, He knows how to wield the power of God’s government with the compassion and mercy that must temper the righteous judgment our Creator requires. That is what we learn in Isaiah’s prophecy of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53. And that is what He wants us to live out as we demonstrate our love for Him by keeping His commandments.

Yeshua once asked, “When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith in the earth?”

The answer to that comes not in words, but in the testimony of our lives.

What answer will you give him?