

# Government In Yahweh's Congregation



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## *Yahweh's Philadelphia Truth Congregation*

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*Sanctify them in the truth. Your word is truth. - John 17:17*

As an apostle and an evangelist of the truth, Paul understood the governmental structure that needed to be in place to give support and direction to Yahweh's flock. In his work as a missionary, he established congregations in numerous locations. Before leaving those congregations and moving on to the next, he put capable men in charge of teaching the truth of the word of Yahweh and regulating the congregation. He used his authority to ordain elders as a means of establishing Yahweh's righteous government within the various congregations (Acts 14:23). He declared that this governmental structure was ordained by Yahshua the Messiah, who is the head of the Body of the Messiah. *"It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare Yahweh's people for works of service, so that the body of Messiah may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of Yahweh and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Messiah. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Messiah. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."* (Ephesians 4:11-16)

As sincere seekers of truth, we must recognize that Yahshua has established a rule of government within His spiritual body of believers. That government is based upon Yahweh's Law. It was given to bring stability and strength to the members. The proper function of government within the congregation is an important doctrine that has a direct bearing on our salvation. In this article we will examine the subject of government in Yahweh's congregation and learn how this governmental and judicial system is to work within the Body of the Messiah.

### The System of Judges

It first must be understood that Yahweh's government within the congregation has its roots in His Law. We find that Almighty Yahweh ordained that a system of judges be established within the tribes of Israel. That government was established as a means to teach and enforce the precepts and commandments that Yahweh has proclaimed to His people. This system of judges is found in Deuteronomy 1:13-18. *"Choose some wise, understanding and respected men from each of your tribes, and I will set them over you." You answered me, "What you propose to do is good." So I took the leading men of your tribes, wise and respected men, and appointed them to have authority over you — as commanders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens and as tribal officials. And I charged your judges at that time: Hear the disputes between your brothers and judge fairly, whether the case is between brother Israelites or between one of them and an alien. Do not show partiality in judging; hear both small and great alike. Do not be afraid of any man, for judgment belongs to Yahweh. Bring me any case too hard for you, and I will hear it. And at that time I told you everything you were to do."*

Take notice that the chosen officials were respected, wise and understanding men. They were chosen to function as Yahweh's representatives to the people. We can extrapolate from this that these officials would be well versed in Yahweh's Law and capable of making the right decisions in the matters that were brought before them. The level of judgment given was dependent upon the seriousness of the case. Ultimately, Moses acted as the "supreme court" where the most difficult cases were decided. However, it should be pointed out that when faced with serious situations of judgment, Moses went to Yahweh for the decision (See Numbers 15:32-36). In actuality, Yahweh is the supreme judge of His people.

Judges were appointed to preside over groups ranging from large (thousands) all the way down to groups of ten individuals. That way, this system functioned down to the family level. This judicial system can be applied to all people, first as individuals, and secondly, as members of a family unit. We are each the judge of one (our self). Those who have children are responsible as a parent, to teach their children the Law of Yahweh and judge properly within the family (Deuteronomy 6:6-7).

Almighty Yahweh was concerned that justice would be served properly and that there would be no partiality shown in any decisions rendered by the judges. It was His wish that justice would begin on the local level and continue further up the judicial chain of command. *"Appoint judges and officials for each of your tribes in every town Yahweh your Elohim is giving you, and they shall judge the people fairly. Do not pervert justice or show partiality. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous. Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land Yahweh your Elohim is giving you."* (Deuteronomy 16:18-20) As a judge of one, each of us must follow after justice in every situation and circumstance if we are to gain entrance into the Promised Land of Yahweh's Kingdom. Almighty Yahweh has ordained a judicial system based upon His Torah Law that His people are to follow as converted believers.

### **Moses' Seat**

In Exodus chapter 18, we learn more about the system of judges that was established by Moses. We find that Moses was spending most of his time sitting and judging the cases that were brought before him as he taught the people the Law of Yahweh. Upon arriving and taking note of this situation, Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, advised him to establish a system of judges to help him in judging Israel (Exodus 18:13-23). These were to be men of the highest moral and ethical standard, educated by Moses in the law. They would help bear his burden so that he would not become over worked and worn out. The weightier matters alone were to be brought to Moses and he would bring those difficult cases to Elohim (Exodus 18:19). Moses followed Jethro's advice and established this judicial system.

We can conclude from this, (Exodus 18:13-23) that Yahweh intended for there to be a system of judges functioning within the community of Israel and not just one man as the judge of all matters. That system was to function at the lowest level of ten people, up to the highest level of thousands. As the chief judge, Moses would deal only with the very difficult cases. He would bring those cases before Elohim for an answer. It was his responsibility to oversee the judicial system and educate those who functioned as judges. The ultimate judge in Israel was in fact Yahweh. Moses was His representative to the people (Exodus 18:19). All judgments were to be based upon the Law of Yahweh. Therefore, Yahweh was the actual judge of Israel in every case.

The term "Moses' seat" refers to the act of judging the people with the Law of Yahweh. This is clearly seen when we consider what our Savior said in Matthew 23:1-2; *"Then Yahshua said to the crowds and to his disciples: 'The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat.'"* Notice that Yahshua did not refer to Himself or a single individual person as sitting in Moses' seat. He said that the teachers of the law (plural) and the Pharisees (plural) are the ones who judge according to the law. The reason He said this was because of the role these people played in teaching the law. At this period of time the scrolls of scripture that were used to teach the law were not a common possession of the people. These documents were laboriously produced by hand and thus were too expensive and precious for the average Israelite. In order for the common people to be taught the Law of Yahweh they had to go to the teachers of the law (the scribes) and the Pharisees. They were the ones who were in charge of the local synagogues where the law was read and studied, (See Luke 4:16-21).

Moses' seat reflects Yahweh's judgment of the people through His Law. Due to the ready availability of Bibles in our present day, there is no one person who sits in Moses' seat. Those who read the Word of Yahweh and seek to follow its commandments and precepts are sitting in Moses' seat as they judge their own lives. This is what the Apostle Paul referred to in Philippians 2:12-13. *"Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is Yahweh who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose."* The Law of Yahweh is there as a witness, giving us the directives that we need in order to find salvation through Yahshua.

It is Yahweh's will and purpose for us to read, study, and obey His Law. His Word, as manifested in the life of His Son, is able to bring us salvation. *"Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does."* (James 1:21-25) We must judge ourselves and be doers of the Word of Yahweh. Thereby, we fulfill the reason for Moses' seat and the law brings us freedom now.

### The Judges

As we have seen, the ultimate judge in Israel was Almighty Yahweh. He was the one who commanded the establishment of the system of the judges. It was His Torah, containing laws, statutes, ordinances, and judgments, that was used to make decisions in all cases. In Deuteronomy chapter 17, we find two examples of how Yahweh's Law was to be implemented. Verses 2-7 of this chapter show how the serious violation of idolatry was to be dealt with. The first step was to have a thorough investigation in which there were at least two and preferably three witnesses to establish the violation. Once the violation was confirmed, the violator was taken outside the city where they were to be put to death by stoning. The witnesses were the first to throw stones at them. This is a very clear case which was handled on the local level with the local judges.

The next section in this chapter, verses 8-13, shows how to deal with difficult judgments. It should be noted that this section repeatedly shows that there was more than one official involved in the case and that the decision making process was that of a council and not a singular person. Let us consider these verses with emphasis being put on the plurality of those who were to be involved in the judgment. *"If cases come before your courts that are too difficult for you to judge — whether bloodshed, lawsuits or assaults — take them to the place Yahweh your Elohim will choose. Go to **the priests**, who are **Levites**, and to the judge who is in office at that time. **Inquire of them** and **they** will give you the verdict. You must act according to the decisions **they** give you at the place Yahweh will choose. Be careful to do everything **they** direct you to do. Act according to the law **they** teach you and the decisions **they** give you. Do not turn aside from what **they** tell you, to the right or to the left. The man who shows contempt for the judge or for the priest who stands ministering there to Yahweh your Elohim must be put to death. You must purge the evil from Israel. All the people will hear and be afraid, and will not be contemptuous again."* Take notice that the bold words are all the instances where the plurality of a council of judges is shown. Eight times it shows priests, Levites, and those who were functioning in the judicial system. The judge or priest, (singular), would refer to the one who established the decision in a difficult case. No single individual is designated as being "the judge" in all of these serious cases.

The terms "the judge" or "the priest" shows the involvement of different individuals in various cases. Decisions arrived at were not those of only one person. Those rulings or verdicts were the decision of a council which was confirmed by a judge or a priest who acted as the head of that judicial council and thus was its spokesman.

### The Council of Yahweh

The system of judges described in Deuteronomy 17 is the model for the decision arrived at in Acts 15. At the heart of this controversy was the question of physical circumcision for gentile converts. This was a serious matter since there were those who taught that without physical circumcision a person could not be saved. Paul and Barnabas were selected to go up to Jerusalem to discuss the question with the apostles and elders. Let's take a look at this passage and once again use emphasis to show that there was a council at Jerusalem that would hear and decide this case. *"Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: 'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.' This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the **apostles and elders** about this question. The congregation sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the congregation and **the apostles and elders**, to whom they reported everything Yahweh had done through them. Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, 'The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.'"* (Acts 15:1-5)

We see next how the council was convened and the opposing views were aired. *"The **apostles and elders** met to consider this question. After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: 'Brothers, you know that some time ago Yahweh made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the good news and believe. Yahweh, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test Yahweh by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Master Yahshua that we are saved, just as they are.'"* The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders Yahweh had done among the Gentiles through them." (Acts 15:6-12) After hearing the testimony of Peter, and then Paul and Barnabas, the decision was obvious. Just read through Acts chapters 10 and 11 and you will be moved by the way Almighty Yahweh proved to Peter that he should not call any man common or unclean. There we see the miracle of the Holy Spirit given to the gentile Cornelius and his household as sincere worshipers of Yahweh and followers of the Messiah even though they were not yet baptized. This sign came through the power of the Holy Spirit of Yahweh as given through Yahshua the Messiah. Almighty Yahweh had already made the decision in this matter. His Word and Holy Spirit confirmed that the gentile converts need not be physically circumcised before baptism. The council of apostles and elders recognized these things and gave their support to the decision.

As the leading elder in Jerusalem, James, the brother of Yahshua, reiterated the Holy Spirit decision. He followed the example set by Moses when he recognized that Yahweh had already given a decision in the Word. He quotes from Amos 9:11-12 as the answer to the perplexing question concerning circumcision. *"When they finished, James spoke up: 'Brothers, listen to me. Simon has described to us how Yahweh at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself.*

**The words of the prophets are in agreement with this**, as it is written: *"After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the remnant of men may seek Yahweh, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says Yahweh, who does these things' that have been known for ages. **"It is my judgment**, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to Yahweh. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."* (Acts 15:13-21) The judgment arrived at by James was the decision that Yahweh had already made and established by His Holy Spirit. James, as the leader of the council of apostles and elders, was confirming that decision according to the testimony that was given to them and by the Word of Yahweh.

This decision is always described as that of the apostles and elders and not as the decision of James. As it says in Acts 15:22, *"Then **the apostles and elders**, with the whole congregation, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers."* These men were sent out to inform the brethren in out lying congregations of the decision that was made by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. This is further substantiated in Acts 16:4, *"As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by **the apostles and elders** in Jerusalem for the people to obey."*

These scriptures prove that the apostolic congregation was operating under a judicial system of judges that functioned within a council. The decisions rendered were that of the council as a whole and not one man acting alone. This council followed the leading of the Holy Spirit and the Word of Yahweh in arriving at their decisions.

### **The Sanhedrin**

The judicial system followed by the apostles and elders was not something that was new to them. This was undoubtedly patterned after the Jewish Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was composed of seventy elders who were from the major religious parties of the Sadducees and Pharisees, along with scribes. The president was the high priest. Since Judah and Jerusalem along with Galilee were under Roman domination the Sanhedrin functioned as representation of the Jewish people and handled religious matters.

We can see how this judicial body functioned when Yahshua was brought before the council (Sanhedrin) in Mark 14:53-55, *"They took Yahshua to the high priest, and all the chief priests, elders and teachers of the law came together. Peter followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. There he sat with the guards and warmed himself at the fire. The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for evidence against Yahshua so that they could put him to death, but they did not find any."*

Collectively, the members of the Sanhedrin functioned to find evidence against Yahshua. Their powers were limited by the Roman government so that they had to use their influence on Pilate to have Yahshua put to death. Because of a lack of credible evidence, they were unable to prove their case against Yahshua and so they sent Him to Pilate. *"Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, reached a decision. They bound Yahshua, led him away and handed him over to Pilate."* (Mark 15:1) This verse makes it clear that the decision they arrived at was the decision of the council and not just the High Priest (one man).

The Sanhedrin itself was patterned after the judicial government described in the Torah. The fact that the Law of Yahweh requires at least two credible witnesses against someone in order to put them to death stopped them from making a decision against Yahshua. They functioned as a council hearing evidence and making decisions.

On numerous occasions the apostles, especially Peter and Paul, were brought before the Jewish Sanhedrin. All of this is recorded in the book of Acts. In particular we can see how Peter and the other apostles were spared from death because an honored member of the Sanhedrin named Gamaliel spoke up for justice to be properly served, Acts 5:33-40. His speech influenced the members of the Sanhedrin to spare the lives of the apostles. This was not the decision of one man, it was the decision of the council.

### **Qualifications for the Council**

We see in Yahweh's Law that there are certain qualifications that a person who is acting as a judge must meet. The judges and officials were to be wise and understanding men who would not accept a bribe, but would make their decisions according to Yahweh's Law without partiality. The same is true for those who function in positions of authority in the council established within the congregation. The Apostle Paul lists these qualifications for us in 1Timothy 3:1-13. He begins with the qualifications for bishops or overseers and then gives the qualifications for deacons. It should be noted that the word deacon means a servant and would in fact apply to all who function as elders in the various congregations. Let's look at that passage. *"Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of Yahweh's congregation?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap. Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. In the same way, their wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything. A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well. Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Yahshua Messiah."* These qualifications must be met by all those who would function in these positions. Since the elders of a congregation would comprise the local council, these qualifications apply to Yahweh's council.

Paul gives further information in regard to the qualifications of elders and overseers in Titus 1: 5-9, *"The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you. An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer is entrusted with Yahweh's work, he must be blameless-not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it."* Again it is noted that these men were the ones who functioned on the governmental council that existed in the various congregations. Paul was very clear in showing that these men must be above reproach. A converted attitude had to be reflected in all aspects of their lives. Only those who met these qualifications could function as elders on the congregation's council.

## Rule by Council

The passages of Scripture that we have examined show time and time again that the commanded government within Yahweh's congregation is that of a council of elders and it is not one man ruling over the people. These men meet all of the scriptural requirements. As elders in charge of the congregation, they are not to abuse or take advantage of those they have authority over. The Apostle Peter emphasizes that the elders must lead the people by example and not to domineer over them. He stresses humility and condemns pride and arrogance. *"So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Messiah as well as a partaker in the glory that is to be revealed. Tend the flock of Yahweh that is your charge, not by constraint but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly, not as domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd is manifested you will obtain the unfading crown of glory. Likewise you that are younger be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for 'Yahweh opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.' Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of Yahweh, that in due time he may exalt you."* (1 Peter 5:1-6; RSV) Yahweh's true shepherds of the flock have humility. They lead with love and compassion for others. On the contrary, those who dominate the flock do so through fear. They abuse the flock of Yahweh by threatening them with disfellowshipment. Abusive leaders are overbearing and controlling. They are full of arrogance and lack a true concern for Yahweh's flock. (See Ezekiel 34)

Peter's concern for the flock of Yahweh was well founded. Historically, it appears that there were elders who were guilty of abusing Yahweh's people. One such individual was Diotrephes. He is mentioned in the epistle of 3<sup>rd</sup> John. He had taken full control of a congregation and was dominating them to the point of spiritual abuse. He was an arrogant and controlling person who was guilty of speaking malicious gossip about Peter and the other brethren. He refused to have anything to do with specific brethren and disfellowshipped any member of the congregation who did not comply with his domination. Let's consider this passage. *"I wrote to the congregation, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us. So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, gossiping maliciously about us. Not satisfied with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the Congregation. Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from Yahweh. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen Yahweh. Demetrius is well spoken of by everyone-and even by the truth itself. We also speak well of him, and you know that our testimony is true."* (3 John 9-12)

Yahweh's congregation is to exhibit love and compassion for the brethren and does not use fear and threats against them. The love of Yahweh must be evident at all times, especially from those who are the leaders. Remember, perfect love casts out all fear (1 John 4:18). Corrupt leaders like Diotrephes must be removed from their office of terror against Yahweh's people.

In the book *New Testament History*, by F. F. Bruce, the author refers to Diotrephes as a monarchical bishop. Bruce defines this as one bishop in control of the administration of the congregation of a city. He makes the case that this type of assembly government led to the corruption described in 3<sup>rd</sup> John. He points out that Diotrephes as a monarchical bishop replaced the original body of elders or bishops that had previously existed. Historically, he shows how at the beginning of the second century, monarchical bishops began to take control of various assemblies. This ultimately led to the bishop of Rome being designated as pope. The old adage, "Absolute power corrupts absolutely" comes to mind. The domination of the monarchical bishops was a defection from the true government established by Almighty Yahweh and certified by Yahshua and the apostles. As we have seen previously, government within the congregation is conducted by a council of ordained elders. Such a council prevents domination by one individual and thereby protects the congregation from abuse and corruption.



## **Conclusion**

On the subject of government in Yahweh's congregation the scriptures are very clear. Yahweh's government is based upon a system of judges. Those judges are required to meet a high standard of qualifications for their office. These men work together as a council seeking to do the will of Almighty Yahweh as the supreme judge in all matters. They examine the scriptures and rely upon the Holy Spirit in the decision making process. These leaders are not overbearing and domineering over Yahweh's flock. Instead, they lead by setting a good example to the people. Humility is a key ingredient to their success as leaders of the people of Yahweh.

Because of their care and genuine concern for the flock these leaders are respected within the congregation. Yahweh's people willingly submit to good leaders who rule with love for Yahweh and for all people, especially the brethren. *"Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of Yahweh to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith."* (Hebrews 13:7) *"Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you."* (Hebrews 13:17) The work of those faithful leaders will always bring them respect from the people and joy for their labors.

As we establish Yahweh's government in our lives and within His congregation we can anticipate with great joy the second coming of our Savior Yahshua the Messiah and the establishment of Yahweh's Kingdom upon the earth. All authority to judge shall be given to Yahshua when He comes. *"I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of Yahweh and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man."*

*"Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned."* (John 5:25-29) *"Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of Yahweh and of Messiah and will reign with him for a thousand years."* (Revelation 20:6) *"Then the sovereignty, power and greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be handed over to the saints, the people of the Most High. His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him."* (Daniel 7:27) As Yahweh's people, let us look forward to that time when Yahshua shall be the judge and we shall rule with Him.

*All Bible quotes are from the New International Version unless noted otherwise.  
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