

Benjamin Franklin: "K", Baltimore *Maryland Gazette*, 11 April 1788

"K" was written by Benjamin Franklin. A manuscript of this essay, in Franklin's handwriting, is in the Franklin Papers at the Library of Congress. Moreover, an annotation in that library's file of the Philadelphia *Federal Gazette*, where the essay first appeared on 8 April, identifies Franklin as "K"; and Franklin himself took credit for writing the article in several letters that he wrote in October 1788.

To the Editor of the Federal Gazette.

Sir, A zealous advocate for the proposed Federal Constitution, in a certain public assembly, said, that *the repugnance of a great part of mankind to good government was such, that he believed, that if an angel from heaven was to bring down a constitution formed there for our use, it would nevertheless meet with violent opposition*. He was reproved for the supposed extravagance of the sentiment; and he did not justify it. Probably it might not have immediately occur[r]ed to him that the experiment had been tried, and that the event was recorded in the most faithful of all histories, the Holy Bible; otherwise he might, as it seems to me, have supported his opinion by that unexceptionable authority.

The Supreme Being had been pleased to nourish up a single family, by continued acts of his attentive providence, 'till it became a great people; and having rescued them from bondage by many miracles performed by his servant Moses, he personally delivered to that chosen servant, in presence of the whole nation, a *constitution* and code of laws for their observance, accompanied and sanctioned with promises of great rewards, and threats of severe punishments, as the consequence of their obedience or disobedience.

This constitution, though the Deity himself was to be at its head, and it is therefore called by political writers a *Theocracy*, could not be carried into execution but by the means of his ministers; Aaron and his sons were therefore commissioned to be, with Moses, the first established ministry of the new government.

One would have thought, that the appointment of men who had distinguished themselves in procuring the liberty of their nation, and had hazarded their lives in openly opposing the will of a powerful monarch, who would have retained that nation in slavery, might have been an appointment acceptable to a grateful people; and that a constitution fram'd for them by the Deity himself, might, on that account, have been secure of an universal welcome reception; yet there were in every one of the *thirteen tribes*, some discontented restless spirits, who were continually exciting them to reject the proposed new government, and this from various motives.

Many still retained an affection for Egypt, the land of their nativity; and these, whenever they felt any inconvenience or hardship, though the natural and unavoidable effect of their change of situation, exclaimed against their leaders as the authors of their trouble, and were not only for returning into Egypt, but for stoning their deliverers. Those inclined to idolatry were displeased that their *golden calf* was destroyed. Many of the chiefs thought the new constitution might be injurious to their particular interests,

that the *profitable places* would be *engrossed by the families and friends of Moses and Aaron*, and others equally well-born excluded. In Josephus, and the Talmud we learn some particulars, not so fully narrated in the scripture. We are there told, that Corah was ambitious of the priesthood, and offended that it was conferred on Aaron, and this, as he said, by the authority of Moses only, *without the consent of the people*. He accused Moses of having by various artifices fraudulently obtained the government, and deprived the people of *their liberties*; and of CONSPIRING with Aaron to perpetuate the tyranny in their family. Thus though Corah's real motive was the supplanting of Aaron, he persuaded the people that he meant only the *public good*; and they, mov'd by his insinuations, began to cry out, "Let us maintain the *common liberty* of our *respective tribes*; we have freed ourselves from the slavery imposed upon us by the Egyptians, and shall we suffer ourselves to be made slaves by Moses? If we must have a master, it were better to return to Pharaoh, who at least fed us with bread and onions, than to serve this new tyrant, who by his operations has brought us into danger of famine." Then they called in question the reality of his conferences with God, and objected [to] the *privacy of the meetings*, and the *preventing any of the people from being present* at the colloquies, or even approaching the place, as grounds of great suspicion. They accused Moses also of *peculation*, as embezzling part of the golden spoons and the silver chargers, that the princes had offered at the dedication of the altar, and the offerings of gold by the common people, as well as most of the poll tax; and Aaron they accused of pocketing much of the gold of which he pretended to have made a molten calf. Besides *peculation*, they charged Moses with *ambition*; to gratify which passion, he had, they said, deceived the people, by promising to bring them *to* a land flowing with milk and honey; instead of doing which, he had brought them *from* such a land; and that he thought light of all this mischief, provided he could make himself an *absolute prince*. That to support the new dignity with splendor in his family, the partial poll-tax already levied and given to Aaron was to be followed by a general one, which would probably be augmented from time to time, if he were suffered to go on promulgating new laws, on pretence of new occasional revelations of the divine will, 'till their whole fortunes were devoured by that aristocracy.

Moses denied the charge of *peculation*; and his accusers were destitute of proofs to support it; though *facts*, if real, are in their nature capable of proof. "I have not," said he (with holy confidence in the presence of God,) "I have not taken from this people the value of an ass, nor done them any other injury." But his enemies had made the charge, and with some success among the populace, for *no kind of accusation is so readily made, or easily believed, by KNAVES, as the accusation of knavery*.

In fine, no less than two hundred and fifty of the principal men "famous in the congregation, men of renown," heading and exciting the mob, worked them up to such a pitch of phrensy, that they called out, Stone 'em, stone 'em, and thereby *secure our liberties*; and let us chuse other captains that may lead us back into Egypt, in case we do not succeed in reducing the Canaanites.

On the whole it appears, that the Israelites were a people jealous of their newly acquired liberty, which jealousy was in itself no fault; but, that when they suffered it to be worked upon by artful men, pretending public good, with nothing really in view but

private interest, they were led to oppose the establishment of the *new constitution*, whereby they brought upon themselves much inconvenience and misfortune. It farther appears from the same inestimable history, that when, after many ages, that constitution was become old and much abused, and an amendment of it was proposed, the populace as they had accused Moses of the ambition of making himself a *prince*, and cried out *stone him, stone him*; so excited by their high priests and SCRIBES, they exclaimed against the Messiah, that he aimed at becoming *king* of the Jews, and cried out *crucify him, crucify him*. From all which we may gather, that popular opposition to a public measure is no proof of its impropriety, even though the opposition be excited and headed by men of distinction.

To conclude, I beg I may not be understood to infer, that our general convention was divinely inspired when it formed the new federal constitution, merely because that constitution has been unreasonably and vehemently opposed; yet I must own, I have so much faith in the general government of the world by PROVIDENCE, that I can hardly conceive a transaction of such momentous importance to the welfare of millions now existing, and to exist in the posterity of a great nation, should be suffered to pass without being in some degree influenced, guided, and governed by that omnipotent, omnipresent and beneficent Ruler, in whom all inferior spirits live and move and have their being.

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