

Deuteronomy 17:14-17

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Moses instructs the Israelites concerning kingship once they have settled in the Promised Land. That king should be chosen by God Himself from among the Israelites and should not be self-centric.

Moses then turned his attention to another form of authority—a king. Throughout the book of Deuteronomy, Moses is addressing Israelites who are gathered to hear him give this last speech prior to entering the Promised Land. He alludes to *when they will enter the land which the LORD your God gives you, and possess it and live in it* (v. 14). This obviously refers to the Israelites' entrance, conquest, and settling of Canaan, the Promised Land. There was no uncertainty of the Israelites' taking over the land of Canaan.

The land was granted to Abraham by the LORD as a reward for faithful service ([Genesis 15](#)). And according to the covenant the people had agreed to enter with Him, the LORD would be the ultimate Ruler of the land and His people. Israel possessing the land would fulfill one of the promises God made to Abraham long ago, saying, *To your descendants I have given this land* ([Genesis 15:18](#)), and "I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God" ([Genesis 17:8](#)). This shows that God had granted the land as a reward for Abraham's obedience as a current promise, but the possession of the land was yet a future promise. Now that promise is about to be realized as well, when Israel goes in to possess the land.

But the LORD also knew that at some future time, His people might say, *'I will set a king over me like all the nations who are around me...'* Note that setting a king over Israel was not required by the LORD; He only required that judges govern the people ([Deuteronomy 16:18](#)), but He stated that the people would eventually want a king just like the peoples around them. This would happen toward the end of Samuel's judgeship after 450 years of governance without a human king ([1 Samuel 8:4 – 9](#), [Acts 13:20](#)). In the [1 Samuel 8](#) passage, God told Samuel that the people had not rejected Samuel as judge, rather they had rejected God as King over them. When they governed themselves according to God's ways, they lived with God as their king.

The human king that was to rule over the LORD's people had to qualify for the position. Therefore, the law made provisions for kingship in Israel. Such provisions are both negative (vv. 16-17) and positive (vv. 18-20). The negative instructions limit the power of the Israelite king.

First, they were to *surely set a king over Israel whom the LORD your God chooses*. The requirement here is that the king could not be the choice of the people. Instead, the king had to be chosen by *the LORD your God*. The phrase *surely set* is quite emphatic in the Hebrew text. It could be translated "by all means you should set." The king would be chosen by the LORD (Yahweh), the greatest King of kings and Lord of lords. In other words, Yahweh would be the greatest king, the High King through whom the human Israelite king ruled.

The king had to be *one from among your countrymen* that the Israelites were to *set as king over* them. To emphasize this restriction, the LORD told them again that they could *not put a foreigner over yourselves who is not your countryman*. The word translated as *countryman* (Heb. "āḥ") is literally "brother" in the Hebrew language. The Suzerain God had adopted the Israelites as His own children ([Deuteronomy 14:1](#)). Therefore, the Israelites were brothers, having the same God as their spiritual father. The term *foreigner* (Heb. "nokrî") refers to someone who was not an Israelite. Since foreigners were not part of the Israelite community, they were not allowed to become king over Israel. Only someone who was a part of the covenant community could be king.

This strongly implies that the king was to serve under the covenant, that he was to be under God's law, and not to be one who would place himself above the law. Scripture seems to go out of its way to note that there are a number of foreigners in the lineage of Jesus. Rahab and Tamar were Canaanites, and Ruth was a Moabite ([Matthew 1:3,5](#)). These women came under the covenant.

In [Deuteronomy 32:43](#), *Rejoice, O nations, with His people*, the word translated "nations" means Gentiles, or foreigners. This verse is quoted in [Romans 15:10](#):

"REJOICE, O GENTILES, WITH HIS PEOPLE."

This verse is used to bolster Paul's argument that:

“Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God. For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers, and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy”
([Romans 15:7-8](#))

A king was not supposed to use his power and authority to elevate his own prestige. He was not to *multiply horses for himself, nor shall he cause the people to return to Egypt to multiply horses*. In the ancient Near Eastern societies, kings acquired multiple horses and wealth for themselves ([Deuteronomy 20:1](#); [Psalms 20:7](#)) because they were a sign of power and superiority. Horses were used in military operations, and the acquisition of horses implied that the king was depending on his military resources rather than standing in the faith that the LORD would fight their battles and win the victory.

Because Egypt was a major supplier of horses in the Ancient Near East, it would be tempting to conduct business with them. But they were strictly forbidden to do this *since the LORD has said to you, ‘You shall never again return that way.’* The Israelites never were to depend on Egypt. They were to maintain their independence from Egypt. The LORD did not want them to become dependent on Egypt. He Himself would take care of His people.

The king was also to *not multiply wives for himself*. It was common for a king to marry a foreign wife in order to make political alliances with other nations. A foreign wife would bring influences from other cultures into the household of Israel’s king, including pagan gods. Because of this possible temptation to turn from the LORD, foreign wives were not allowed *or else his heart will turn away*. King Solomon ignored this admonition, and his heart was turned away from the LORD by his wives, just as this passage predicted ([1 Kings 11:1 – 13](#)).

The human king was forbidden to *greatly increase silver and gold for himself*. The accumulation of wealth could cause the king to have a false sense of security and rely on his riches instead of the LORD ([Deuteronomy 6:11-12](#)). This strongly implies that the king’s job was to serve the people rather than to exploit the people. High taxation shifts economic power from the people, who produce wealth, to the king. In this case, the king’s rationale for the taxes is to *increase gold and silver for himself*. He is not taxing the people in order to benefit the people. Thus, this taxation harms the nation by suppressing productivity. This can lead to impoverishment.

Later revelations point us to one Israelite king whose reign echoes the prohibitions of [Deuteronomy 17](#)—Solomon, David’s son. According to 1 Kings, Solomon *gathered chariots and horsemen; and he had 1400 chariots and 12000 horsemen* ([1 Kings 10:26](#)). He also had great power and wealth ([1 Kings 4:21-28](#)) and many wives ([1 Kings 11:1-3](#)) who ultimately led Solomon into idolatry. These are the exact things forbidden by the Suzerain God in Deuteronomy. Solomon validated these prohibitions when Solomon abandoned God’s righteous ways later in his life.

God wanted Israel to be a self-governing nation, even if it ended up having its own king. The king was to know and follow the law, as verses 18-20 will command. Through this earthly king, God Himself would lead the Israelites in all righteousness and truth. The earthly king would thus abide by God’s principles and would represent God before the people.

These three things that the Israelite kings were to avoid (horses, wives, and wealth) are similar to what John warned New Testament believers about in [1 John 2:15–16](#). We (His people of the new covenant) are not to allow the world to have controlling influence over our lives, including *the lust of the flesh* (wives) *and the lust of the eyes* (wealth) *and the boastful pride of life* (horses),

Ultimately, God established a kingly lineage through King David. David’s great grandson Jesus lived the perfect servant life, and thereby earned the name above all names, and was rewarded the entire earth as His reward ([Philippians 2:8-11](#); [Revelation 3:21](#); [Matthew 28:18](#)). Jesus fulfilled the spirit of this passage completely. He did not accumulate earthly power (horses) or earthly wealth. He did not even own a house ([Luke 9:58](#)). Yet He was the King above all Kings. Jesus came out of Egypt, even as Israel came out of Egypt, that the scripture might be fulfilled which said “OUT OF EGYPT I CALLED MY SON” ([Matthew 2:15](#), quoting [Hosea 11:1](#)). Jesus did not return to or seek refuge in Egypt, but trusted in His Father, and was resurrected from death.

Biblical Text:

¹⁴ When you enter the land which the Lord your God gives you, and you possess it and live in it, and you say, ‘I will set a king over me like all the nations who are around me,’ ¹⁵ you shall surely set a king over you whom the Lord your God chooses, *one* from among your countrymen you shall set as king over yourselves; you may not put a foreigner over yourselves who is not your countryman. ¹⁶ Moreover, he shall not multiply horses for himself, nor shall he cause the people to return to

Egypt to multiply horses, since the Lord has said to you, 'You shall never again return that way.' ¹⁷ He shall not multiply wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; nor shall he greatly increase silver and gold for himself.